

Silent Night
Luke 2:1-20
December 24, 2018 – 9:30 PM – Christmas Eve

It was a quiet night in Bethlehem town a little over two thousand years ago. It had been a busy day as travelers from all over the Judean countryside were coming into town to register in a census as required by the Roman magistrate. The streets were packed with people, exchanging greetings, expressing the joys of reacquaintance and perhaps, at the same time the grief over a foreign power requiring this interruption to the everyday routine. But now, night had fallen. Most travelers had found lodging – some with family or friends, and many in the local inn.

And nobody knew. . . Nobody even noticed a young couple that came into town just as the sun was setting. The teenage mother had gone into labor, just on the outskirts of town, and her husband, barely beyond teenage years himself, had carefully and quietly led his wife on their borrowed donkey into the village. Where to go from here? The inn was packed with people. Besides, the couple could not have afforded the lodging, even if there was space available. But labor was ensuing. Soon the baby would be born. So lacking any place else to stay, the couple headed for the stable. It was a place of shelter. They found an empty stall. The man threw down some fresh hay and covered it with a blanket; and there his wife would deliver their first child whom they would name Jesus. It was a quiet night in Bethlehem town. After the chaos of the day, the night seemed to bring peace.

But then. . . Then as the shepherds on the hillside were quietly watching their flocks, the sky suddenly changed. A bright light started to glow – a star, brighter than any star they had ever seen. What was happening? What was this all about? Then there was another appearance – a sort of misty presence. What was happening on this quiet night in Bethlehem town? The shepherds were frightened. In all the time they had spent outdoors, in all the night they had slept under the stars, they had never seen anything like this.

And then. . . Then they heard it. . . a voice, a peaceful voice, a heavenly voice: “Do not be afraid, for I bring you good news of great joy for all people: to is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ, the Lord.” Then this most beautiful voice sang, “Alleluia”; and another voice joined in “Alleluia: and still more voices joined together, as if an entire heavenly chorus sang, “Alleluia, glory to God in the highest, on earth peace and good will to all people.” The silence gave way to a glorious, heavenly sound; and it was a glorious night in Bethlehem town.

Eighteen centuries later, it was a quiet night in Oberndorf, Germany. Earlier that year a young priest named Father Joseph Mohr had been appointed to St. Nicholas' parish church. This was to be his first Christmas Eve; but, the organ in his church was not working, and would not be repaired before Christmas. Some say that mice had chewed through the leather bellows. Others say that rust was the culprit. It matters not. Can you imagine Christmas Eve services without music? A quiet night indeed.

The year was 1818, two hundred years ago, a roving band of actors was traveling through the region re-enacting the story of Christ's birth. On December 23rd, they came to St. Nicholas' parish for their presentation, a show that put Pastor Mohr in a meditative mood. So, instead of walking straight home that evening, he took the longer path up over the hill overlooking the village. From the hilltop, Mohr looked down on the quiet, snow-covered village below, and he thought of those shepherds on the hillside overlooking Bethlehem. Just then, he remembered a poem he had written a couple years earlier, a poem about the night when angels announced the birth of the Christ child.

Early the next morning, manuscript in hand, Mohr arrived at the home of the church organist, Franz Xaver Gruber. "Franz," he said, "I'd like you to write music to this poem. I'd like a new Christmas carol for our services tonight. It needs to be a simple melody, something the congregation can sing without the organ, something that maybe we could sing if you would play it on your guitar." In just a few hours, Franz Gruber penned the music to "Silent Night." It was a quiet night, indeed, and a night filled with heavenly sounds.

Yes, this is the 200th Anniversary of "Silent Night," and what would Christmas be without "Silent Night." I shared my favorite story about "Silent Night" with you four years ago; but tonight, on the 200th Anniversary, I believe it bears repeating.

It was December 1914. The homeland of Joseph Mohr and Franz Gruber was ripped by the ravages of World War I, and the horrors of trench warfare. The fighting had come to a standoff at Flanders Field, German trenches on the east, Allied trenches on the west with about sixty yards of "no-man's-land" in between. Many thousand young soldiers on both sides lost their lives at Flanders Field; but, as Christmas approached, Christians on both sides, against orders from their respective high commands, called a truce. For three days, during the Christmas of 1914, German Christians, and French Christians, and English Christians came together in no-man's-land to worship and to share the love of Christ. As each side returned to their respective trenches that Christmas, their hearts were heavy, for they knew they would soon be again facing each other as enemies. But as night fell, someone started to sing again, "Silent Night, Holy Night. . . ." Soon another soldier joined in, then a third and a fourth. Soon the trench was filled with voices

all singing “Alleluia to our King.” When they finished their song, in the midst of the silence, they heard it from the trench across the battle field. . .

*Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht! Alles schläft, einsam wacht. . .
schlaf in himmlischer Ruh, schlaf in himmlischer Ruh.*

It was a quiet and a holy night on the western front on the Christmas of 1914. For a short time on that night, Christ brought peace to the battlefield.

So tonight, two hundred years after that song was first sung, we will again sing “Silent Night” – in English. Tonight, I invite you to take a quiet time, a time for peace and reflection. Each of us comes to this time from a different place. Some of us have experienced great joys; and some of us have experienced great sorrows. Most of us have experienced a little of both, for such is the way of life. But in the midst of the joy and the sorrows, we hear again the words of the angels, “Be not afraid, for unto you is born this day, a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”

And so tonight, before we sing, we will join in the service of communion, as we are invited to experience the very presence of that baby from Bethlehem among us at this time in this place; indeed, we are invited to come together as one body, one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world. Amen.

Rev. Mark L. Steiger, Pastor
North Olmsted United Methodist Church