

SERMON, CHRISTMAS EVE '08

John 1:1-14 & Titus 3:4-7

Preached at 8 & 11 p.m. services, St. Philip's, Christmas Eve 2008

By RDF

One of my favorite moments of Christmas will happen several minutes from now. At the end of the Eucharist, the ushers will dim the lights, and we will sing one of the most beloved hymns in Christendom:

Silent night, holy night,
Son of God, love's pure light
radiant beams from thy holy face,
with the dawn of redeeming grace,
Jesus, Lord at thy birth.

For me, a lot of things come together in those sublime few minutes: the beauty of this sacred place — decorated in all its glory; the glow of the candles as they illuminate our faces; the reverence of the worshipers as we adore the incarnate Son of God; and the silent stillness as the world seems to stop for an instant. It's as if the Earth itself pauses in orbit while we sing this lovely old hymn and hold our collective breath — for one hushed and shining moment.

Then, all too soon, the liturgy is over. And we trudge out the door, eventually re-entering a world that doesn't seem to have much time for reverence, stillness or even brief moments of adoration.

Here are some things I learned recently about this beloved hymn:

- ◇ The words were composed as a poem in 1816 by an Austrian Catholic priest named Joseph Möhr. Two years later, he paid a visit to his friend, Franz Gruber, who was a school teacher and also served as the church's organist. It was Christmas Eve afternoon, and Möhr was hoping that Gruber might be able to compose a tune to accompany his poem.
- ◇ In a few short hours, Gruber came up with the hauntingly beautiful melody, composed for guitar accompaniment. Hours later, Gruber stood in front of the altar in St. Nicholas parish in Oberndorf, Austria. On that night, he and Joseph Möhr introduced "Stille Nacht" for the first time to the people of a small church in the Austrian Alps.
- ◇ In 1839 the Rainers, a musical family from Austria, traveled to New York City, where they sang the hymn at Trinity Episcopal Church. German immigrants also brought the song with them and sang it in their churches.
- ◇ The version of "Silent Night" sung by most English-speaking people comes from a translation made in 1863 by an Episcopal priest named John Freeman Young — who was elected the second bishop of Florida in 1867. To date, the hymn has been translated into some 300 different languages and dialects, and is sung in all manner of places. As one writer observed, "Its lullaby-like melody and simple message of peace can be heard from small-town street corners in middle America to magnificent cathedrals in Europe, ... from outdoor candlelight concerts in Australia to palm-thatched huts in northern Peru."*

Why do I go on about a 19th Century Christmas carol? Well, I know that I hunger for those rare moments when our feverish and fast-paced world seems to pause, however briefly.

I've come to believe that part of what's wrong with the world is that too many people don't pay attention to our universal yearning for moments like this — moments when we can forget ourselves — and be filled with awe, wonder and simple reverence.

Two thousand years ago, there was the same hunger. Then, as now, the people walked in darkness. Some people knew God; some did not. Some recognized a realm beyond what can be seen and touched; others didn't. Some believed they were masters of their own destinies, while others believed in a divine Creator with different plans. Then, as now, there was too much struggle and strife; too much selfishness; too much hostility between people and nations — and not enough love, justice or peace.

God looked upon the world and longed for things to be different. The patriarchs, matriarchs, prophets and Hebrew leaders laid the groundwork for the Glorious Impossible: when God sent love in a form that we might possibly be able to accept — a tiny, vulnerable baby.

"All things came into being through him," says the Gospel, "What has come into being in him [is] life, ... the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (John 1:3-5). In his Letter to Titus, St. Paul says, "When the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy" (3:4-5). God sent Christ, in other words, as a gift of love.

Today, in this weary and shell-shocked world, can we still recognize it? Can we still be filled with awe at the depths of this great mystery? Many of you know how I often find inspiration in music and song. Recently, I heard for the first time a Christmas song written several decades ago by a rock musician. For me, the words express the tired skepticism that can cast a shadow even at Christmas. (You'd be forgiven for thinking it was written for the weather we're having right now):

They said there'll be snow at Christmas
They said there'll be peace on Earth;
But instead it just keeps on raining,
A veil of tears for the Virgin birth.

I remember on Christmas morning,
A winter's light and a distant choir.
And the peal of a bell and that Christmas Tree smell,
Eyes full of tinsel and fire.

("I Believe In Father Christmas"
by Greg Lake, as sung by Bono of U2)

In these words, you can hear the singer's longing for a more innocent and less commercialized celebration, when the true meaning of the season doesn't get lost in all the trappings. But in the third verse, there's this moment of faith:

They sold me a dream of Christmas,
They sold me a Silent Night,
They sold me a fairy story,
But I believe in the Israelite.

The Israelite — the Messiah, the Christ, the new-born King. This, my friends, is the one eternal still point in our harried and hurting world. Divine love, sent in human form, born in a humble stable.

T.S. Eliot, one of the great writers of the English language, knew the old, old story that we remember tonight. In his poetic eloquence, he expresses how the mystery of the Incarnation is the great hinge of human history — “At the still point of the turning world”:

Neither flesh nor fleshless;
 Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is, ...
 Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards,
 Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,
 There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.

(From “Burnt Norton,” Part II, first of *Four Quartets*.)

Sometimes, these instances of divine stillness come in unlikely places. They can appear when we least expect them. One such moment happened at Christmas in the midst World War I. It took place in the winter of 1914, on the battlefields of Flanders, Belgium. The Germans had been in a fierce battle with the British and French. Both sides were situated in their muddy, man-made trenches six to eight feet deep. All of a sudden, German troops began to put small trees, lit with candles, outside their trenches. Then, they began to sing Christmas songs. Across the way, just beyond the war zone, came songs in response from the British and French troops.

Incredibly, many of the Germans, who’d worked in England before the war, were able to speak good enough English to propose a truce. Many of the British and French troops accepted. According to Stanley Weintraub, who wrote a book about this event, “signboards arose up and down the trenches in a variety of shapes. They were usually in English, or — from the Germans — in fractured English. ‘YOU NO FIGHT, WE NO FIGHT’ was the most frequent message. Some British units improvised ‘MERRY CHRISTMAS’ banners and waited for a response.” More signs on both sides began to appear.**

The result was a spontaneous truce. Soldiers left their trenches, meeting in the middle to shake hands and fraternize. The first order of business was to bury the dead who’d been unreachable because of the fighting. Then, they exchanged gifts from their holiday packages. Chocolate cake, cognac, postcards, newspapers, tobacco. In a few places, soldiers laid down their rifles, picked up soccer balls and began to scrimmage. And among the carols they sang together, the most frequent was “Silent Night,” with each singing in their own language the beloved hymn:

Silent night, holy night,
 shepherds quake at the sight,
 glories stream from heaven afar,
 heavenly hosts sing alleluia;
 Christ, the Savior, is born!
 Christ, the Savior, is born!

My Christmas prayer for you and for this world is that we may all find — and better still, work to create — such moments of peace now and in the coming year.

*Citation lost. Found on the Internet Dec. 2008. **Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce. (New York: The Free Press, 2001.) For more about the World War I Christmas Truce, visit Snopes.Com, En.Wikipedia.Com, and/or christmastruce.co.uk