

## **The Story of Silent Night** **Christmas Eve 2022, 4 p.m. Service**

Read Luke 2:1-7

In a few minutes, we will sing Silent Night, a carol that is to Christmas as turkey is to Thanksgiving. You have to sing Silent Night on Christmas Eve, a song that has been translated into 175 languages.

There are two stories on how Silent Night was written. There is the legend, and then there is the truer story. But before I tell you the story, open your hymnals to Silent Night #122, and keep it open.

The legend: It was Christmas Eve 1818, and Joseph Mohr, a curate and organist in Oberndorf, Austria was practicing for the Christmas service. But the organ wasn't working because mice had chewed through the bellows. Later that day, as Mohr travelled to visit a family with a sickly baby, he stopped to visit his flock of sheep in the picturesque snowy hills. Overwhelmed by the serenity of the scene, he was inspired by lyrics to a song, which he quickly wrote down when he returned home. He took them over to his friend, Franz Gruber, a schoolteacher and fellow organist in the neighboring village. Gruber composed a simple melody on the spot, one that could be accompanied by guitar instead of organ. The two performed the music that night for the Christmas Eve service, and "Silent Night" was born.

Now, a version that is probably closer to the truth: On Christmas Eve, December 24, 1818, Mohr, a 26-year-old priest of St. Nicholas parish in Oberndorf, Austria brought six stanzas of a poem to his colleague, Franz Gruber. Mohr had written the poem 2 years earlier, but now presented it to Gruber, who composed a melody with guitar accompaniment for the Christmas Eve mass. Together they performed the new carol that night. Not as exciting as mice and a sick baby, snowy hills, flock of sheep, and a broken organ, but still.....

It is a carol that moves our hearts and souls and minds, especially that tune. But tonight, as we sing it, I want you to look closely at the words.

Firstly, I don't think that night was that silent. Any one of you who has been present at the birth of a baby know that it is not a silent time. Even after Jesus was born, the sky was filled with noisy angels, and soon excited shepherds with bleating sheep are visiting the place of Jesus' birth. For as we know, "the cattle are lowing, the poor baby wakes."

So not so silent, but certainly holy. In the presence of holiness, sometimes we are gripped by stunned silence. The scriptures say, "The LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him" (Habakkuk 2:20). So, in the imagination of Joseph Mohr, the night of Jesus' birth was not silent because it was holy. It was set apart from other nights because, for the first time in history, the holy God was physically present on earth in human form.

Take a moment to consider the mystery of what we call the Incarnation. It comes from the French word *Incarne*. You have heard of *chili con carne*, which means chili with meat. *Incarne* means *Flesh*. God in flesh appearing. So instead of the Lord is in his holy temple, it is "The LORD is in his holy feeding trough; let all the earth be silent before him."

In this holy silence, look at some of the words to *Silent Night*. Glories stream from heaven afar. Heavenly hosts sing alleluia. Love's pure light. Radiant beams from thy holy face. And my favorite: Dawn of redeeming grace. What a beautiful phrase: dawn of redeeming grace. For the Jewish people, it meant the dawn of the Promised Messiah. For us today, it is the light of Christ breaking into our lives today.

That word *grace* means God came to us first. *Grace* means God's love is unconditional. God does not consider whether you are worthy enough to receive it. You just do. In fact, there is nothing we can do to make ourselves worthy of it. *Grace* means it is given to us freely. *Grace* means we don't have to strive to get near God. *Grace* means God has already drawn near to us in Jesus Christ. God claims us as his own entirely apart from whether we deserve it or not. We are loved and beloved.

Every morning I remind myself of this. As I get out of bed, I sit on the edge of the bed, and while making the sign of the cross, I say, "I am a beloved child of God."

It is a redeeming grace because of who Jesus is. As the song says: Christ the Savior. Jesus Lord at Thy birth. We are not only offered the presence of God, but forgiveness over and over again. We are made clean and whole because of redeeming grace. We are offered a relationship with God.

If you do not know this Christ, God has already come to you. Receive the Christ child into your life. In the dawn of redeeming grace, a new day comes. See the radiant beams of hope around you.

As we sing song *Silent Night*, what words or phrase do you like? The song calls us to meditate on the scene. It calls us to dwell on Mary and the child. It calls you to quake at the sight as did the shepherds. It calls us to hear the heavenly host singing. And we join them singing Alleluia to the king.

May you know and experience the dawn of redeeming grace....given for you.