

Day 23: Silent Night

Dec. 20

*1 Silent night! Holy night!
All is calm, all is bright
Round yon virgin mother and child;
Holy infant, so tender and mild,
Sleep in heavenly peace,
Sleep in heavenly peace.*

*2 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!*

*3 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,
Jesus, Lord, at thy birth.*

*4 Silent night! Holy night!
Wondrous star, lend your light.
With the angels, let us sing,
Alleluia to our King;
Christ the Savior is born,
Christ the Savior is born!*

But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. (1 Corinthians 1:27-29)

Silent Night, Holy Night is today the best known and most loved Christmas song in the world, but it was not always so. The words were written in 1816 by Joseph Mohr, a young Catholic priest, who at the time was serving as an assistant priest in a small parish in Austria. Two years later, Father Mohr brought the words he'd penned to Franz Gruber, a teacher and organist in a nearby town, requesting that Gruber compose a tune for his poem. It was Christmas Eve, and Mohr wanted the finished carol for that night's worship service. And by the way, we'll need it for organ (which may not work due to flooding) and for guitar accompaniment as a backup. Amazingly, Gruber agreed.

That night became the first Christmas Eve in which *Silent Night* filled a church sanctuary. And yes, it was indeed played on guitar, not organ. The song quickly spread across the German-speaking nations of Europe and into Russia. *Silent Night* was then translated into English and

performed in both England and the US as early as 1839. However, the Christian musical “establishment” discounted it as too “cozy,” too simplistic, and too child-centered; in short, everything a German Christmas was and an English Christmas was not. And thus *Silent Night* was almost never included in English language hymnals until the turn of the 20th century, nearly 100 years after it was written.

Fast forward to today and most church musicians admire *Silent Night* for the very same qualities that formerly seemed to disqualify it. Yes, its message is simple. But that is not to be confused with simplistic.

It is, after all, the biblical story retold of a silent and holy night. It was silent in that the birth of Jesus did not occur in a palace full of wealthy, noble celebrants as most kings are born, but took place in a stable. But it was also a holy night – holy because the one who was born is in fact “Son of God”. He is attended by his virgin mother. And as with every newborn, you wish him to “sleep in heavenly peace.”

But the scene expands in the second verse with the introduction of shepherds who “quake at the sight” as “glories stream from heaven afar, heavenly hosts sing Alleluia!” And the chorus to the angelic hymn is sounded for the first time: “Christ the Savior is born!”

Verse 3 meditates on the babe himself, seeing him as “love’s pure light.” His “holy face” beams “with the dawn of redeeming grace.” And we sing to him, “Jesus, Lord at thy birth.”

The final stanza alludes to the wise men without naming them by asking the Christmas star (which guided the wise men in Matthew 2), to “lend thy light.” And at last, it’s all-sing: “With the angels let us sing, alleluia to our King. Christ the Savior is born.”

The simplicity of this little Christmas carol has certainly been used by God to confound the wise of this world (as 1 Corinthians 1 says) and encourage the weak, the lowly and the despised. Thanks be to God, for Christ the Savior is born!” For us.

Questions

1. What are some simple things surrounding Christmas that have blessed you?
2. If asked to tell the Christmas story in simple terms to someone who’s never heard it before, how would you put it?

Prayer

Jesus, the Christmas message can be phrased in simple terms. But there is nothing simplistic about your coming. It is in fact the most profound of mysteries that you, the Son of God, would localize in a human body, making yourself completely vulnerable to our world. And yet you remain the Lord, even at your birth. We cannot comprehend it all. But what we can do is join the angels, declaring that you are born for us. Thank you, Jesus. Amen.