

Interim Pastor's Newsletter Letter

December 22, 2020

Maybe you have heard this story. It happened over 202 years ago, at the Church of St. Nicholas in Oberndorf, Austria. The organ in that church had been damaged in a recent flood and was in need of tuning and repair. The young priest decided, at the last minute, to take a poem he had written to the church's organist and ask him to set it to simple music he could play on his guitar since the organ was out of commission. Together, they worked out a melody, and then at the midnight mass on Christmas Eve, for the first time, a congregation, accompanied by its priest on his guitar, sang "Silent Night."

It is hard to imagine a Christmas Eve service anywhere without this familiar and beloved carol. Pastor James Henricks of Summer Memorial Lutheran Church in Newberry, SC, pointed out in a recent devotional he wrote for Newberry College, "Just about everyone, Christian or not, can at least sing you the first verse. It's a beautiful hymn, and has become a staple of the church."

But Pr. Henricks sees an important lesson in the carol's origins for those of us who celebrate the Incarnation in this year of quarantine and separation. He writes, "As I think of this story today, I can't help but wonder what is going to come out of this pandemic. After all, we wouldn't have the hymn 'Silent Night' if that Christmas Eve St. Nicholas Parish had a working organ."

"I doubt anyone in that congregation thought to themselves that their organ damage was a good thing to happen. That Christmas Eve, as it was sung for the first time, I imagine there were unhappy congregants who were upset they couldn't sing the usual hymns on the usual instrument, and they might have even been upset at this young pastor because they now had to sing this unfamiliar hymn."

But human extremity is God's opportunity, and Pr. Henricks reminds us that we are still the church and the Holy Spirit is still active among us. He writes, "I believe there is going to be something – musical or otherwise – that we put together in this moment that will be a lasting feature of our church. We don't have to be happy with any of what's going on, and I'm certainly not suggesting we celebrate this moment for the damage that it has done. But in these moments, big or small, when our 'normal' is damaged, the church is at her best when we continue to be creative."

"...The church throughout its many times of crisis, whether they be global or local, has always relied on the work of the Holy Spirit to guide us. In the moments when 'normal' is gone, the church has always found a way to produce something beautiful and meaningful. As long as we are looking for the creative work of the Spirit in these moments, I am sure that God, despite the chaos of this moment, is working wonders among us."

Thank you, Pr. Henricks, for pointing out the opportunities and the gifts that still surround us in these difficult days of pandemic. And thank you, people of St. Andrew, for the many ways you continue to be open to the Spirit's movement and to be the church even in these days.

Julian Gordy +

Pastor H. Julian Gordy