



I'm sure this is the absolute last thing you want to hear, but perhaps it would be helpful to think about amidst this recent heat wave and all: that five months from today we will gather in the sanctuary amidst candlelight and beautiful music for Christmas Eve. No, this isn't meant as a public service announcement that you have however many hundred shopping days left until then, but when it comes to the Lord's Prayer that we heard in the Gospel, that line about "your kingdom come:" there's something about Christmas Eve that helps us feel a most precious piece of heaven being brought to earth, and into the depths of our soul. That God's kingdom emerges in a most wonderful child, and not only nestles in the outskirts of Bethlehem, but in our very hearts. One of the most serene parts about Christmas Eve is when we draw our time together that evening to a close, and we turn down the lights, and all that is left is the ambiance from candle wicks, and the music that soars so peacefully, yet so powerfully, is none other than "Silent Night."

Supposedly, it so happened that on a Christmas Eve over two hundred years ago, that: *people gathered for...mass in the Church of St Nicholas in...a snow-covered village at the foot of the Austrian Alps near Salzburg. Because the church's organ was not in a playable state, [a local] schoolteacher...composed a special song which could be accompanied on a guitar. The melody of the new song was evocative of a lullaby, as were the words, describing the baby Jesus sleeping peacefully. And so, the churchgoers that night heard the gentle tones of the Christmas carol "Silent night, holy night" for the first time. They had no idea of the success the song would have over the next two centuries. But those present must have been impressed by it. Within a few years, the song had spread from...not just throughout Austria, but...around the world.*

The first time the carol was sung wasn't exactly a most pleasant part of history for the Europeans and beyond. There was a volcano eruption in Indonesia that resulted in massive amounts of crops lost, not to mention the devastating after-effects of Napoleon's wars felt throughout the continent. Millions of people desperately prayed for God's kingdom of hope and mercy and new life to come. "Silent Night" offered its own desperately yearned for taste of that Gospel which further emerged on earth thousands of years before.

And, soon enough, as the song grew in popularity, it reached its most famous rendition not in a church building, but in the hallowed trenches of battle.

Almost 100 years after "Silent Night" was performed for the first time, something as extraordinary as it was moving happened on Christmas Eve 1914...The First World War was mired in the trenches...[O]n both sides the men were sitting in mud and slush, their dead comrades lying in the no man's land between the opposing positions. Christmas seemed a million miles away. And yet, on that starlit night, the magic of Christmas unexpectedly touched the soldiers.

It's not clear exactly where the [famous] truce started. Witnesses reported that candles were lit in the trenches and on Christmas trees. The warring parties were at such a short distance that they were able to talk to each other. A spontaneous ceasefire occurred. British and German soldiers crawled out of their trenches, shook hands and sang Christmas songs together. Along with German and English songs, of course, "Silent Night" ...resounded across the ghostly tranquility of the battlefield.

That even in the depths of a war, which took far too many millions of children of God away, God's kingdom of hope and mercy and new life emerged in the trenches of our humanity. Yes, unfortunately the battles continued on soon enough, as if "Silent Night" is really only meant for one night per year, whether in 1914 or any other time in history. As if the ultimate message of the simple but most beautiful hymn, as if God's kingdom can really only come for the briefest of moments in our life. Except the most breath-taking Gospel brought to life in Bethlehem is definitively not reserved for one "holy night" each year. God insists that every day in this life is holy, because Jesus Christ is as much with us on July 24 as our Lord is on December 24.

After all, as the third verse of the song so goes: "Son of God, love's pure light radiant beams from your holy face, with the dawn of redeeming grace. Jesus, Lord, at your birth. Jesus, Lord, at your birth." Yes, we need reminded on July 24, that Jesus is still Lord, still Emmanuel. Still with love's pure light shining ever so brightly in our very hearts in the thick of summer, still all the redeeming grace for us to celebrate and, still as much God's kingdom in our midst to enjoy not just one night each year, but every day throughout our life. So, for that Greatest News of all to last all of eternity, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!

[The Story of a Christmas Carol - Silent Night, Holy Night - World War I](#)
[Alexander Rechsteiner, Swiss National Museum](#)