

**Chr“SILENT NIGHT”**  
**Luke 2:1-20**  
**A Sermon by John Thomason**  
**Woodbury UMC**  
**December 24, 2020 (Christmas Eve)**

A Methodist colleague tells about a time when his church choir chose to do a Christmas cantata that had been recently written by composers from around the world. They thought it would be good to celebrate Christmas using new, innovative music, some of it with a dissonant sound. As you can imagine, the cantata was a big flop. One church member grumbled to the choir director in a letter: “Nobody wants anything new on Christmas. You shouldn’t be messing with our Christmas music. We love it for the way it was and always has been.”

There are lots of different ways to “mess” with our Christmas music. Earlier this week I listened to a classical radio station that was playing some old holiday favorites. They included a selection from an album by the Hampton Strings Quartet entitled, “What If Mozart Wrote ‘I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus?’” The quartet had taken traditional Christmas songs and imagined what they would sound like if they had been composed by one of the great icons of classical music. The pieces are clever and whimsical, but I’m old-fashioned enough to prefer the familiar versions from Bing Crosby or Perry Como. Of course, some of you have never even heard of those two singers, which demonstrates that I’m not only old-fashioned but old!

In any case, a Christmas Eve service is a time when no one should be messing with our Christmas music. Granted, we heard some new, contemporary numbers during tonight’s Prelude, but they were pleasant to the ear and bore a familiar message. However, in the main body of tonight’s worship service, we’re singing the old Christmas carols that are a part of our spiritual DNA. This is the music that stirs our souls on Christmas Eve. These are the songs we want to hear and sing, and our wise music director has kindly obliged us.

And yet, in spite of our best efforts to revisit these beloved carols, something is still messing with our Christmas music. The culprit is not a promiscuous composer or choir director; the culprit, as we all know, is a dangerous virus – an invisible enemy who has driven us apart, kept many of us from worshiping in our sanctuary on the holiest night of the year, and reduced those of us who are in the sanctuary from being singers to being hummers.

When our Worship team began planning tonight’s service, we had several issues to address. Could we safely provide an in-person service at all? Would we offer one service or two? If we had only one service, how could we make it engaging and meaningful for all ages? But can you guess what issue triggered the longest discussion and the greatest sense of poignancy and perplexity? We realized that we would be unable to end this service in our traditional way, passing real candlelight from one worshiper to another and actually singing “Silent Night.”

Of all the traditions we hold dear on this occasion, this one is the dearest. Singing “Silent Night” is synonymous with Christmas Eve, and now COVID has gone and messed with it. At the appointed time, our choral collage will sing this carol for us; if you’re at home you’ll be able to sing along with them; but those of us here in the sanctuary will only be humming. Either way – whether we’re gathered in this worship space or huddled around a computer at home, “Silent Night” just won’t be the same.

In opinion polls, “Silent Night” has consistently been ranked as the world’s favorite Christmas carol. But have you ever stopped to ask why? Is it just the exquisite melody or the soothing lyrics? It is just that it goes well with candlelight at the climax to a Christmas Eve service?

When I realized that our singing of “Silent Night” was in jeopardy, I got interested in finding out more about this carol – why it was composed two centuries ago and how it has been used ever since. As it turned out, I learned some useful information from our Advent study book, *Almost Christmas*. What I discovered is that “Silent Night” was composed under stressful circumstances and has often been sung under stressful circumstances.

In 1818, a German priest named Joseph Mohr faced a situation similar to ours – where the sound of music might be muted on Christmas Eve. Mohr pastored St. Nicholas parish in Obendorf, a town that had been ravaged by flooding earlier in the year. The high waters had damaged the church’s organ, and his congregation had no way to play music on Christmas Eve. But Father Mohr was undeterred. He pulled out a poem he had written several years before about the birth of Jesus on the first Christmas and took it to Franz Gruber, the schoolmaster and organist of a nearby town. He asked Gruber to write a simple melody for his poem that could be played on a guitar. In just a few hours Gruber had composed the music, and the carol was played for the first time at the Christmas Eve service in Obendorf in 1818. That poem, that carol, was titled “Stille Nacht” – “Silent Night.”

After recounting that story, our Advent study book then has us fast-forward one hundred years later, to 1914. I’ll quote directly from the book:

[It is] “still on Christmas Eve, still in Europe, but this time in a very different setting. In the trenches of World War I, in northern France, stood battalions of British soldiers staring down their German counterparts, engaged in a brutal battle.

“Among them was nineteen-year-old Charles Brewer, a British lieutenant, shivering with his fellow soldiers. They had been at war for five months, one million lives had been taken, and there was no end to the war in sight.

“As Brewer recalled the story, something amazing happened. A British sentry suddenly spied a glistening light on the German [fortification], less than one hundred yards away. Warned that it might be a trap, Brewer slowly raised his head over the soaked sandbags. Through the maze of barbed wire he saw a sparkling Christmas tree.

“Brewer then noticed the rising of a faint sound that he had never before heard on a battlefield. Singing. In German. The words of ‘Stille Nacht.’ The words were unfamiliar to the British soldiers, but the melody certainly wasn’t.

“When the Germans had finished singing, the Brits erupted with applause. And instead of returning fire, they returned in song, singing the English version of that hymn.

“When dawn broke on Christmas morning, something even more remarkable happened. In sporadic pockets along the five-hundred-mile Western Front, unarmed German and Allied soldiers tentatively emerged from the trenches and cautiously crossed no-man’s-land to exchange small gifts and to wish each other a Merry Christmas.

“British corporal John Ferguson said, ‘We shook hands, [offered Christmas greetings], and were soon conversing as if we had known each other for years . . . Here we were laughing and chatting to men whom only a few hours before we were trying to kill!’”

The passage in our Advent study book concludes: “This hymn, and other gestures of goodwill, succeeded where political and military leaders had failed to bring a cease-fire in the war. Likewise, a hymn that speaks about silence amid our noise and busyness, and heavenly peace amid the tumult of war, speaks to all of us today.”

So here we are a century later, at the end of 2020, a year that will live in infamy, enduring the most serious public health crisis since the World War I era, and a host of other crises as well. With apologies to Clement Moore, ‘Twas the night-mare before Christmas, and all through the house, a tiger was prowling, certainly not a mouse. That’s what the prelude to Christmas has been like this year. Well, the good news is that the carol “Silent Night” has spoken to people in stressful circumstances before, and it will do so again in our own stressful circumstances now.

Above all, the carol will speak to us because it points to yet another time, 2000 years ago, when “heavenly peace” was in short supply. Christ was born into a world of *Pax Romana* – “Roman peace” – a peace that was brutally enforced by an occupying army. Christ was born into a world that was anything but silent, a world of noisy open-air markets and crowded living conditions and the sound of soldiers’ boots clattering on cobblestone streets. Christ was born into a world of disease and suffering and short life-expectancy. Christ was born into a world where people were separated from one another by race and creed and status. Christ was born into a world that was separated from God, not only by human sin but by God’s apparent choice to keep a distance from humanity, to remain absent and silent. And, perhaps most significant of all, Christ was born into a world of ordinary mortals, not as a mature adult but as a helpless infant. When Joseph Mohr claimed that “all is calm and all is bright” in Bethlehem, when he imagined the baby Jesus “sleeping in heavenly peace,” he must have forgotten the shrieking of a newborn precipitated by colic or a dirty diaper or a demand to be fed at 3 o’clock in the morning!

In sum, the carol Silent Night seems to cry “Peace, peace, when there is no peace” (Jeremiah 6:14). But still, we sing it, and we sing it sincerely, without our fingers crossed, because it speaks the gospel truth – the truth about God’s peace, about God making peace with us, about the possibility of our making peace with one another, about the peace you and I can know even in the midst of a global pandemic and social unrest and personal isolation. Christmas declares that God does not practice social distancing from suffering humanity. God does not speak to us virtually or remotely. God comes to us in-person, in the person of Jesus Christ.

As one the prophets said, “The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence” (Habakkuk 2:20). But we will break the silence briefly to sing or hum our favorite carol, because it speaks of God’s peace breaking out all over the world in the life of the Christ Child. May you sleep tonight, as he did, in “heavenly peace.”