

Christmas Eve 1818. 201 years ago tonight. St. Nicholas Church, Oberndorf, Austria.

The church organ had been damaged in a recent flood. The young parish priest was scrambling to get ready for Christmas Eve. Fr. Joseph Mohr pulled out a poem he had written 2 years previously. He took it to the church's organist, Franz Gruber. Gruber wrote a simple tune for the poem that could be played on guitar. The two of them sang it as a duet that night at the Christmas Eve service at St. Nicholas.

As the years went by the song gained popularity in Austria, then Germany, then Europe. Two decades later, in 1839, it was first performed in America. It was sung at an outdoor concert by a group of Austrian singers in front of Alexander Hamilton's grave at Trinity Episcopal Church, at the corner of Wall Street and Broadway in New York City.

Two decades later in 1859, it was translated into English. Ironically, it happened at the same place where it was first performed in America, Trinity Episcopal Church in New York. The translator was Fr. John Freeman Young, a priest at Trinity, who later became Bishop of Florida.

The fame of the song continued to grow. It was eventually translated into more than 140 languages. Now it is a beloved Christmas classic around the world. It points us to a baby lying in a manger.

*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.*

I love the fact that that last line is repeated:  
*Sleep in heavenly peace. Sleep in heavenly peace.*

Because there wasn't much earthly peace that first Christmas, about 2,025 years ago. Every Christmas we hear again the description from the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter of Luke. And it's NOT a description of earthly peace.

Caesar was using his earthly political power to force Joseph and his very pregnant fiancée, Mary, to travel several days' journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem for a census.

In Bethlehem, Mary and Joseph encountered crowded and chaotic conditions, and it was difficult to find a place for her to give birth.

The best they could do was a place that sheltered animals. They placed their baby in the animals' manger, their feed trough.

That's pretty chaotic for Mary and Joseph. On the road away from home. Forced to travel by a government edict. Unfamiliar and less than ideal conditions. An animal trough for a cradle for the new baby.

And if that's not chaotic enough, a group of shepherds shows up. Shepherds were thought to be a pretty low and disreputable bunch. And here they are barging in on Mary and Joseph and their new baby.

And there wasn't much earthly peace for the shepherds. They had been minding their own business. They were keeping watch over their flocks by night. Then suddenly out of nowhere an angel appears to them. And Luke tells us the shepherds were terrified. Actually that's not strong enough. Luke uses 3 words. He says, "Ephobéthesan phobon megan."<sup>1</sup> Phobos, the word for fear, related to our English word phobia. Mega, the word for big—a word we use in English still. Luke tells us the shepherds "feared with a great fear." "Ephobéthesan phobon megan." Literally they feared with mega-fear.

That's a very typical and powerful human reaction: fear. Or even fearing with big fear or great fear or mega-fear.

Fear is a powerful emotion.

When we're confronted with something different or unexpected, our response is often fear.

When we're worried that we might be hurt, we often lash out first, in fear.

When we encounter things that try to push us out of our comfort zones, we often put up the walls and shields and hunker down and hide out in fear.

I think we'd often just like to go through our normal routines undisturbed. We'd like to be out like the shepherds doing what's normal. Shepherds keep watch over their flocks at night. And anything that intrudes on that is a cause for fear, or even a cause for mega-fear.

But the angel tells the shepherds not to be afraid. The angel then announces good news of great joy, literally good news of MEGA-joy.

It's a sharp contrast.  
Don't have mega-fear.  
Have mega-joy. Why?

"To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah (the Christ), the Lord."

And then an entire army of angels joins that first angel to sing God's praises:

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<sup>1</sup> Lk 2:9

"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"<sup>2</sup>

It's not a very silent night for the shepherds, at least not in an earthly sense. An army of singing angels filling the sky doesn't make for a silent night. And yet, their message quiets the shepherds' earthly fears. The angelic army offers heavenly good news that bring a heavenly peace, a peace that the world cannot give.

That's the message of the second verse of "Silent Night":

*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!*

Don't quake. Don't have mega-fear. Have mega-joy. Have heavenly peace.

*Christ, the Savior, is born! Christ, the Savior, is born!*

Perhaps that's why "Silent Night" is such a beloved song.

From an earthly standpoint, Bethlehem that first Christmas was anything but silent. It wasn't silent for Mary and Joseph. It wasn't silent for the Shepherds. And yet they were offered good news of mega-joy which can bring true peace, heavenly peace.

In Austria in 1816 when "Silent night" was written and in 1818 when it was first performed, earthly peace was also hard to come by. The Austrians were just digging out from under military occupation in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars.

In New York in 1839, when "Silent night" was first sung in our country, it was sung in front of Alexander Hamilton's monument, a monument to a politician who was killed in a duel with one of his political rivals a few decades earlier.

In New York in 1859 when the text was translated into English, the nation was on the eve of a very divisive presidential election in 1860, followed by Civil War in 1861.

And yet in Bethlehem 2,025 years ago, or in Austria 201 years ago, or in America 180 years ago, or 160 years ago, or in America today in 2019, the angels still announce heavenly peace. There was earthly chaos in the past. We still live in the midst of chaos today. But there is still good news of mega-joy: to you is born a savior, who is Christ, the Lord.

A heavenly peace that transcends earthly chaos.  
A heavenly mega-joy that transcends any earthly mega-fear.

That's why I love the 3<sup>rd</sup> verse of "Silent Night."

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<sup>2</sup> Lk 2:14

*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.*

I love that line:  
*Son of God, love's pure light.*

In Jesus, God's love is made known to us in a powerful and palpable way. In Jesus we have the fullest expression of God's love for us. God so loved the world that he gave us his only begotten Son so that we might have life, abundant life. Life that can be characterized by God's mega-joy rather than our own human mega-fears.

In Jesus, God's light shines in the midst of the darkness of our world.

*Radiant beams from thy holy face,  
with the dawn of redeeming grace.*

His light shines in the darkness. And the darkness cannot overcome his light.

If the problem is a chaotic and fearful world, God offers good news of great joy. He is with us. He loves us. His grace redeems and saves us from death itself. And he creates us to bask in his light and to share his love with others.

On that first Christmas night, the shepherds made a journey into Bethlehem to visit the manger, to see "him whose birth the angels sing."

In just a bit, you will be invited to make a journey to this altar. There you can share in the continuing presence of Jesus Christ, love's pure light. In the bread and wine of Holy Communion, God offers us a continuing reminder of his presence in our midst.

And then, after that sacred meal, we will sing "Silent Night." It is a reminder of the depths and breadth and height of God's love for us and for this chaotic world. It is also an invitation to live in God's love, to live in a different way in the coming year.

In 2020, live into the good news of mega-joy in the midst of a world of chaos and mega-fear.

Bask in the radiant beams of God's face and God's favor. Christ the savior IS born. He is love's pure light.

And tonight... tonight, sleep in heavenly peace. Sleep in HEAVENLY peace.