

Song of Peace©

Luke 2:1-20; Matthew 2:1-18

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As most of you know, I have chosen to focus this Advent on favorite hymns of the season, along with the Advent candle themes of Hope, Peace, Joy and Love. This Sunday's hymn focus is ***Silent Night*** and it certainly goes along with the Advent theme of Peace, doesn't it?

There are so many wonderful memories that come to mind when I hear ***Silent Night***: Christmas Eve candlelight services; all of us gathered 'round, holding a candle that makes everyone's faces glow as we sing "Silent Night, Holy Night, all is calm, all is bright...."

I have celebrated Christmas Eve Services in many different places! They have all meant a great deal to me, but after I became a pastor and had the privilege of standing up in front, watching as all the candles light up, one by one, and being in a position to see all the beloved faces of those whom God has led me to serve as pastor, knowing the joys and the struggles you have shared with me, it is sometimes so overwhelmingly touching that I simply cannot sing!

And, of course, I will always remember Christmas Eve nights as I was growing up. I think my mother tried to raise up the Vonn Trapp Family Singers. She loved singing so much and she taught all of us to sing and harmonize.

On Christmas Eve after going to church, and after going to our grandmother's for dinner, we finally made it home and sat in our pajamas as Mom read one of our favorite Christmas stories to us, watching the glow from the fireplace and the Christmas tree.

Then she would read the nativity story from the Bible and all six of us children would go to our bedrooms singing ***Silent Night***. That was our family tradition.

I would lie in bed and look out at the star-studded sky and think about all the things children dream of on the night before Christmas. There was such a peaceful, calm, joyful feeling in our home, and in every place of my life, as I knew it.

But, what about that night so many Christmas's ago? Do the words "all is calm, all is bright" really reflect how life was on that night that Mary gave birth in the straw, in a strange and dark, chilly place where the animals were kept?

Was not the forced trip from the land of Galilee to Judea, for a young couple – especially a young, teenage woman who was "great" with child – was it not a terrible hardship, a huge discomfort, and a painful, frightening trip?

In both of our Scripture readings today we read of oppression, of the land being occupied by Romans, about forced registration, decreed by Caesar, which is why Joseph had to take Mary and travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem where his ancestors – who were of the line of King David – were from.

The little city of Bethlehem would have been full of chaos, of noise, of smells ... lots of people and animals pouring into a town that was not prepared to accommodate that kind of sudden, large crowd.

It would have been one thing to just have people ... your own people ... crowding in, but there were Roman soldiers too, watching the whole scene, directing and keeping everyone in line ... their kind of line. There was not much peace in that city. There was not much peace to be found anywhere in the land of occupied Galilee or Judah.

And we read of the shepherds who were alone on that dark, chilly night, out in the fields where wild animals or robbers were likely to be on the sidelines, in the shadows, waiting for their opportunity to pounce.

And, our second reading, from Matthew, gives us a very clear view of what kind of danger there really was in those days. When the three men who came from a different land – we call them Wise Men, scholars say they were astrologers – but they were wise too, because they came believing that a king had been born and they traveled the distance looking for him and bearing gifts to lay before him.

But wisdom went only so far because their assumption was that they would find this baby somewhere in the royal palace, or somewhere in Jerusalem. They did not know that their question “Where can we find the King of the Jews” would stir up such fear that it would set off the murder of baby boys all over the country.

King Herod was not about to take any chances on some king rising up and taking over his power. So he slyly found out what the old Jewish Scriptures prophesied, and he directed the three wise men to find the baby and then to come back and tell him where this newborn king is so he too could go and worship him. Of course, they did not follow through with that command, having been warned by an angel.

But Mary and Joseph had to flee to Egypt to save the life of the baby Jesus, though there was loud crying and lamenting as baby boys were slaughtered at the hands of the Roman soldiers.

Peace? Sleep in heavenly peace? It’s easy for us to look at all the beautiful paintings of the Holy Mother and Christ-child – Like Raphael’s *Madonna and Child* or all the beautiful nativities, or listen to the *Messiah* and other Christmas music and to feel a sense of peace. But peace really did not exist in the day, or the surroundings, where the Son of God – Emmanuel – was born.

So ... what was the author who penned these words thinking? Was he delusional? Who was Joseph Mohr, anyway?

Joseph Mohr was an Austrian priest who served as assistant pastor of St. Nicholas Church in the city of Oberndorf. He wrote the words to this hymn in 1816. But it was two years later – the Christmas of 1818, that he asked his organist, Franz Grüber, to compose a tune for the hymn. And people have been singing it for all these years after!

The study resource I'm using for these sermon series titled ***Rejoice! Reflections on Four Seasonal Hymns*** gives us some history of what was going on in the lives of the people on that 1,818th Christmas.

Oberndorf, where Mohr lived and pastored, is about eight miles north of Salzburg in what is now considered Austria. As a result of the Napoleonic wars from 1792-1815 there had been great suffering. Bavarian troops occupied the land. A peace treaty was signed but it resulted in new borders and new boundaries.

Salzburg lost its status as an independent country and was forced to secularize. Its lands had been divided into two sections – one was assigned to Bavaria and the rest to Austria.

That meant that the town of Oberndorf, where Mohr lived, was literally sliced in half. The residences who were still part of Austria were cut off from what had been the town center. That was now a part of Bavaria.

The river that had been the way for shipping and trade became the border. Trade suffered a great deal because of the wars, and poverty set in, along with high rates of unemployment. You can imagine the anxiety and frustration, the fear and turmoil they were facing.¹

Now we know that Joseph Mohr was certainly not writing from a peaceful place in his own time, so surely he wasn't looking back through filtered glasses at the time of Jesus' birth either.

Erik Kolbell writes: *"Perhaps Mohr saw the perils of ancient Israel with such vividness that his hymn sought not to capture the fears that gripped so many Israelites that night but to defy them."*²

Perhaps, on that 1,818th Christmas Eve, Pastor Joseph Mohr preached a sermon that compared the lives of the Israelites in those dark and tumultuous times with their own

¹Erik Kolbell, © 2009 www.TheThoughtfulChristian.com, Rejoice! Reflections on Four Seasonal Hymns 2

² Et al

plight, remembering how things had been good at one time; feeling a common bond with the people of Israel who, themselves, had been at war and occupied by intruders.

They too, worried about how they would feed their families, how they would endure and be safe; what the future would look like. I want to read to you what Erik Kolbell wrote in the study about this. I am quoting him now:

*“... perhaps Mohr then switched gears, shifted from the people’s perspective on things to God’s. And if this was the case, perhaps he spoke of how differently **God** saw that first Christmas. Hope was erupting in a place fraught with hopelessness because God’s love was just now entering the world in a way that the world had never seen before.*

*People needn’t be anxious in the dead of night because it is precisely in the dead of night—amid the darkness of fear that so often occludes our hope—that God comes to us. When all seems turbulent and dark, perhaps, through God’s unfolding of human history, **all is calm, all is bright.***

*From here he may have spoken of the horrors of the war just now past, how much there is to be learned from the barbarities of such state-sanctioned fratricide, and how much better we will be as human beings when we find more humane ways to resolve our differences. If this is not vision from God’s perspective, it’s tough to know what is. **Sleep in heavenly peace.***

*Next Mohr may have reminded his listeners that if in the turmoil of life we can stay still and quiet, we just might find God entering the world, not in the obvious places but in the hidden ones. Not in royal palaces or great temples, but where the common folk live; in small towns like Oberndorf where people toil by water’s edge to make their living, or in nondescript villages like Bethlehem, where shepherds, the original night shift, out tending their flocks, in deep stillness, would quake at the sight of **glories streaming from heaven afar.***

*Finally Mohr may have steered his listeners to consider that when God is made known in the face of human struggles, the moment carries a redeeming quality to it, by which I mean the struggles are understood in a new light. There is a purpose, a meaning {attached to those struggles}—though not a justification; God does not want us to suffer but does want us to derive worth from it. **(Brackets indicate my slight change in the sentence structure for preaching.)***

We are always comforted to know that God is with us, (Mohr might have preached,) but never is that comfort more welcomed than in difficult times, and the more difficult the times, the more gratefully we receive the embrace of a comforting God. From God’s perspective, (Mohr may have preached,) it was a dawn of redeeming grace.

Taken together, Mohr might have shown his little congregation that God is easily visible in heavenly moments but crucially visible in hellish ones. It is easy to be thankful to a bounteous God, Mohr might have told them, when we are the recipients of that bounty. It is easy to love God when the night is beautifully silent and serenely calm, when brightness and purity and radiance are in abundance.

But it is crucial to believe in a radiant, loving, redeeming, comforting God when the night is dark, the swaddling rags tattered, the manger dirty, the hopes dim, the wounds fresh, and the obstacles legion.

Perhaps he told them all this, and then perhaps they stood as one, and sang together to Grüber's movingly slow, patient, and irregular tune, this gentle, sweet hymn that had never been sung before but would be sung so many times hence."³

I think that was so beautifully said, I wanted to share it with you exactly as Kolbell wrote it. Today, we too, live in a time that is not that peaceful, don't we? It's true, we are not experiencing war here in our own land and we are not being occupied by foreigners. We still have our liberties and we are able to live, for the most part, as we wish.

Yet, poverty and crime and homelessness is a huge problem and we know from many families who call us needing relief that while the news of the unemployment rate looks better, there are still many people working two or three jobs and not making ends meet. We still have troops in Afghanistan and there is much tension in many places around the world.

So where is the peace? I think Kolbell could be *right on* with what he says about Mohr and his writing of this beautiful hymn. In *spite* of the seemingly lack of peace, we do have a peace that comes right into all the darkness; all the devastations of our lives; all the pain and fear and hopelessness.

It is the "dawn of redeeming grace" when Emmanuel enters into our vulnerable world with us and there is a peace that comes with it in the midst of all the lack of worldly peace that we experience.

As Kolbell wrote: "*... it is crucial to believe in a radiant, loving, redeeming, comforting God when the night is dark, the swaddling rags tattered, the manger dirty, the hopes dim, the wounds fresh, and the obstacles legion.*"

This is what Emmanuel – God with us – came for. The Prince of Peace enters our world and we are changed and our hopes are restored and we know we are not alone, that

³ Et all, p. 2,3

our God is with us in the Christ child who grew up, who died and rose for us; who gives us assurance of his loving, powerful presence always with us.

Sleep. Sleep in heavenly peace. In spite of what you *think* you know, all *is* calm. All *is* bright. Amen.

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