

“Silent Night in a World of Clamour”
by Greg Smith-Young (Elora-Bethany Pastoral Charge)
A Reflection for our Christmas Eve Communion
based on the carol, “Silent Night”

Luke 2:1-20

December 24, 2018

He'd barely had time to learn the tune. His friend Franz Gruber had thrown it together earlier that same day. I expect that, as he was teaching his fingers to play it on his guitar, Father Joseph was also thinking, prayerfully of those who'd be singing it that evening. He'd only been their priest for slightly more than a year. He was no stranger, though. St. Nikola parish in Oberndorf was just a half-day's walk from Salzberg where he was from. Yes, they knew *his story!* Would they accept his song?

Father Joseph had written the words a couple years earlier, while serving another parish. This night, though, was the first pairing of Joseph's poem with Franz's hot-off-the-pen tune. Later legend would say that the reason for the guitar was because the organ was broken down. More likely, it was because Father Joseph liked guitar, and it fit the song.

So that night, during the Christmas midnight mass, Joseph Mohr introduced his parish to his *Stille Nacht! Heil'ge Nacht!* From there, it only took a couple decades for it to spread through the world, and be translated into many languages, including English.

It was that night, 200 years ago tonight, that *Silent Night, Holy Night* was born into a world of clamour.

II

The year 1818, or 1816 when he first wrote the words, should, you'd think, have been a year of peace and celebration. The long Napoleonic Wars had torn at Europe for more than a decade. Now, they were finished. The people of Oberndorf and the whole region had been marched over, fought upon, burned, occupied and terrorized. Now, it was time to recover.

Yet the clamour was not quite finished. Oberndorf had functioned as one town with its nearby and larger twin, Laufen (maybe a bit like Elora and Fergus). The peace treaty, though, cut a new international border along the river between the towns. (It's like a border suddenly cut through Aboyne.) Oberndorf was left amputated and poorer.

That same year had also inflicted natural disaster on them. In 1815, on the other side of the world in Indonesia, a massive eruption of the Tambora volcano spewed 10 billion tonnes of ash into the atmosphere. They people in Oberndorf never heard of it. But a year later, the ash cooled the atmosphere enough to change the climate. In Oberndorf and all of Europe, temperatures fell, rains poured, and it snowed in the summer. Crops failed, prices soared and famine threatened. It's still called the “Year Without a Summer.”

Through the clamour of all this — war, and politics of peace, and natural disaster — the

people were wondering if God had left them.

Shortly after, Father Joseph arrived.

I already hinted at his story. To put it plainly:

- his father had been a mercenary, a soldier-for-sale in that violent time;
- he had deserted the battle, and was on the run;
- he arrived in Salzberg, met a woman;
- he left her unmarried and pregnant (as I said, a deserter);
- and Joseph was born.

He was raised by a single mother in poverty. Both lived with the disgrace. It was far from a peaceful life. It was also a testament that some saw his talent and felt compassion enough to fund his education. A special dispensation was required for an “illegitimate” boy to become a priest. Thank God, it was given.

Years later, Father Joseph died nearly penniless. He had always given away most of what he’d earned to the poor. God had taught him to show gratitude with generosity.

And God generously gave us, through Joseph, the gift of *Silent Night*.

III

Joseph wrote it with 6 verses. I’ve included them on an insert as they were recently translated into English.¹ We’re used to singing verses 1, 6 and 2 in that order, and with slightly different words.

It’s the carol we almost have to end a Christmas Eve worship service with; we’ll be closing ours with it tonight, of course. Franz Gruber’s tune is such a plain melody, with nothing fancy, nothing elaborate about it. I’m glad he had no more than a few hours to come up with it; that forced him to be simple. The same with Joseph Mohr’s words; they are simple.

It’s got the feel of a lullaby. It’s peaceful.

That’s it! That’s why it works. Silent night is peaceful!

It’s no wonder that the people in Joseph’s parish held it as they heard it. They needed peace, didn’t they!

We need peace, don’t we!

¹ As translated by Bettina Klein in 1998. See <http://silent-night-museum.org/sounds/lyrics.htm>.

IV

Here's the thing, though. As peaceful as the song is, *Silent Night* only works if we let it draw our attention away from it — away from the song — to focus us on the One about whom it sings.

The "*Holy infant with curly hair*" (as Joseph's original words imagine Jesus) or, as we sing, the "*Holy infant so tender and mild.*"

Jesus, who is the "*Son of God, love's pure light*" . . . "*the dawn of redeeming grace*" . . . "*Lord at thy birth.*"

Jesus, who has "*Brought the world's gracious light*" . . . by becoming "*one of mankind.*"

Jesus, who has "*gently embraced*" . . . "*all nations on earth.*"

Jesus, who "*the world from misery freed*" as God decreed "*all the world redeemed.*"

Jesus the Messiah, the "*Christ, the Saviour [who] is born.*"

The silence of the night . . . peace in us, even in this world which — with wars, international conflicts about changing borders, and climate change disasters — is not much different from the world of the people of Oberndorf . . . we can only know the silence of the night and God's peace for us when we see, and know, and celebrate, and worship with reverence, awe, and above all love, the One about whom Father Joseph taught us to sing.

God loves you. God wants your peace. So God has come to you, all of us, the whole world, in Jesus.

Silent Night! Holy Night!
Christ, the Saviour is born.
Christ, the Saviour is born.

Amen.