

On This Silent, Holy Night
Christmas Eve meditation 2021
Rev. Donna Vuilleumier

Silent Night

*Silent night, holy night
All is calm and all is bright
'Round yon virgin Mother and Child
Holy infant so tender and mild
Sleep in heavenly peace
Sleep in heavenly peace
Silent night, holy night
Shepherds quake at the sight
Glories stream from heaven afar
Heavenly hosts sing
Alleluia
Christ the Savior is born, he's born
Christ the Savior is born
'Round yon virgin, mother and child
Holy infant, so tender and mild
Sleep in heavenly peace
Sleep in heavenly peace*

Just over 200 years ago a roving band of actors was performing in towns throughout the Austrian Alps. On December 23 they arrived at a small village near Salzburg to re-enact the story of Christ's birth in the small Church of St. Nicholas. Unfortunately the church organ wasn't working and could not be repaired before Christmas. Without an organ available, the decision was made to move the event-- a presentation of the first chapters of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke--to a nearby private home. One of the people attending that evening was the assistant pastor, Josef Mohr. Hearing the story, and seeing the presentation, put him into a meditative mood. Instead of walking straight home that night, Mohr chose to take a longer way to his house to reflect on what he had just seen and heard. The longer path led him up on a hill overlooking the village where he looked down on the peaceful snow-covered village.

Contemplating in the silence of the wintry night, Mohr looked down at the Christmas-card like scene. His thoughts about the Christmas play he had just watched reminded him of a poem he had written two years before; a poem was about the night when angels announced the birth of the long-awaited Messiah to shepherds on a hillside.

He wondered if his poem might make a good carol for his congregation for the next day's Christmas Eve service. Not overly deterred by the lack of an organ, he went on Christmas Eve morning to see his friend, composer Franz Gruber. Could he possibly compose a melody for this poem in just a few hours that could be sung with a guitar? We know that the answer was 'yes' as

that 1881 evening, 'Silent Night' was sung by Mohr and Gruber to the accompaniment of Gruber's guitar, as the choir repeated the last two lines of each verse.

A few weeks later the organ was repaired and then tested out with Franz Gruber's simple melody. Truly impressed, the organ mechanic was so taken by it he brought copies of the music and words of 'Silent Night' back to his own Alpine village, and congregations have been welcoming Christmas with the beloved hymn every year since.

What is it about this little poem first written at a time of war and crop failures across Europe that has become world-wide beloved lyrics set to a simple melody? What is it about this hymn that was sung for the Christmas Truce of the First Great War as for two days guns were silent as men who had shot at each other only hours before laid down their weapons to exchange gifts and special holiday traditions?

Josef Mohr's tender, poetic words have always been a hope, a longing for peace, as they touch people from all countries and cultures. They are an expression of the deepest reflection and spiritual longing for peace. They hold for us the hope that was born in a stable 2000 years ago. They paint a picture of the tiny, newborn Prince of Peace radiating God's love and redeeming grace. The Savior is born. There is hope in the world. There is hope for the world.

We are still a turbulent world caught up in disasters and conflict, in a pandemic and politics, in hatred and violence, in disparity and the dismissal of others who are not like us.

All is calm, all is bright, heavenly hosts sing alleluia, Christ the Savior is born, sleep in heavenly peace. This hymn is a prayer that we may not only have heavenly peace, but peace on Earth.

Silent night. Holy night.

What was silenced the night that Jesus was born and swaddled in bands of cloth and laid in a manger, as he was cuddled and cradled by Mary and Joseph, was hopelessness, as for the first time ever, God was physically present on earth in human form.

Silent night. Holy night.

Be still and quiet.....feel the holiness, the love, the presence of the Christ child. Open yourself to these gifts.

All is calm, all is bright

Even in the darkness there shines the Light of Love that radiates peace. Open yourself to the joy it holds.

'Round yon virgin mother and child,

This Love surrounds and embraces every child of God, every person. Open yourself to this grace.

Holy infant so tender and mild.

Rest in the power of Christ asleep as a vulnerable infant. Open yourself to the holiness of this night.

Sleep in heavenly peace,

Quiet your body, quiet your mind. Open yourself to the peace and solace in the stillness and divinity of this moment.

Sleep in heavenly peace. Amen.