

## Christmas Eve

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In the summer of 1818, floodwaters damaged the organ at St. Nicholas Parish in Oberndorf, Austria. The prospect of a Christmas Eve service without music was just too much for the parish's young priest, Father Joseph Mohr, to bear. And so, he collaborated with a schoolmaster by the name of Franz Gruber. Mohr's lyrics and Gruber's melody written for guitar came together to make the Christmas carol we know as "Silent Night." Within 20 years "Silent Night" had made its way into Christmas Eve services around the world and remains one of the most beloved songs of the season.

One of my favorite Christmas moments comes at the end of the Christmas Eve service when the whole body of Christ lifts lighted candles in the darkness and sings those lyrics:

Silent night  
Holy night  
All is calm  
All is bright

So beautiful. So peaceful.

But truth be told, Jesus' birth wasn't like that at all. Not if the biblical story is to be believed. And that's good news. Let me explain.

Israel was an occupied land, held captive by the constant threat of violence by the greatest military power the world had ever known – the Roman Empire. The people were taxed into inescapable poverty. And in order to tax them effectively, the Romans forced every citizen against their will to return to their ancestral home so a census could be taken. That's why Mary and Joseph made the grueling and dangerous 90-mile journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem – a journey they likely made on foot. Oh, and Mary was pregnant.

And when they arrived Mary and Joseph found the tiny town of Bethlehem overrun with people because of the census, so much so that they could not find a

suitable guest room among their relatives. So, they settled for a bed among the livestock. And just when things couldn't get any worse, the time came for Mary to give birth...without the comforts of home...without her mother to hold her hand. Her cries of fear and pain mingled with the sounds and smells of the animals.

Silent night? Holy night? All is calm? All is bright? Not at all.

And yet, that is the setting into which the Son of God came among us. Into the pain and the terror, the Prince of Peace took on human flesh. Into the chaos and inconvenience, the Savior born.

And as much as I love the carol, "Silent Night," I find much more hope in the reality of the biblical story, especially this year. 2020 has been anything but calm and bright. A pandemic that has killed over 1.4 million people around the world. Millions more unemployed and struggling to put food on the table and keep a roof over their heads. Political divisiveness and racial tensions. A healthcare system stretched beyond capacity, staffed by heroes who are stressed beyond reason. Social isolation, coupled with anxiety, that is unraveling the fabric of our mental well-being. All is calm? All is bright? Not at all.

We've lost so much. We're missing so many. There's so much uncertainty. We wish with every fiber of our being that this year was different. We long, especially in this Christmas season, for things to be calm and bright. It's hard to find hope in the darkness that is 2020.

But I wonder if the story we celebrate this night isn't trying to tell us that hope is always born in the darkness. That hope comes in the midst of the fear and uncertainty of life, just as it did for Mary and Joseph and the whole world. That dark and difficult times like this aren't the absence of hope, but the fertile soil out of which it grows. I'm sure that Mary and Joseph wished that things were different, easier on that first Christmas morning, just as we wish that things were different today. And yet it was into the struggles of Mary and Joseph's world that the hope of the world was born. Though many failed to see it. They were looking for a warrior king, but God sent them a baby.

And I wonder, too, if we don't fail to see the hope in our midst, perhaps because we're looking in the wrong place. We're looking for hope to come from outside of

us, but Christmas celebrates that God comes in human flesh, even ours. We are the body of Christ. We are the Light of the World. We are living signs of hope in the darkness of these days. When St. Paul wrote to the Colossians, he said that the secret of our faith is this: Christ in us, the hope and promise of glory.

When we feed hungry people through the Mission Outpost, we are living hope.

When we share the Good News of God's love around the world in online worship, we are living hope.

When support groups and small groups meet on Zoom so that connection isn't lost and encouragement is shared, we are living hope.

When families and students are equipped to grow in faith at home through online WOW, Confirmation and Student Ministry, we are living hope.

When lunches are delivered to isolated seniors so that they know that they are not alone, we are living hope.

When we call a neighbor on the phone or drop a quick note, just to let someone know that we're thinking of them, we are living hope.

It takes the darkness of night to see the millions of stars blazing in the sky. Perhaps it takes the darkness of 2020 to help us to see that we are called and equipped to bear the hope of Christ into the world.

Being hope in this world doesn't require that we are extraordinary. It simply requires a willingness to let the light of Christ shine through us into the dark places of this world.

Retired orchestra teacher, Grover Wilhelmsen, was recently battling Covid-19 in the ICU of an Ogden, Utah hospital. Despite the severity of his condition Wilhelmsen couldn't help but notice the stress that the hospital staff was under. Even while being intubated and unable to speak, Wilhelmsen wanted to express his gratitude to healthcare workers and provide a bit of joy. So, he wrote a note and asked if his wife could bring in his violin. It took some planning and approval by doctors, but eventually Wilhelmsen's wife brought him his violin. And from his hospital bed, Wilhelmsen played songs and hymns for the staff. Watch [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nYNclJpt-Mw>]

That is what hope looks like.

Friends, you and I won't be together in the sanctuary, raising our candles as we sing "Silent Night." I'm really going to miss that. But this year, I think we have a higher calling. A calling to be hope, to be the light of

Christ in the darkness of this world. And that is the Christmas gift our world needs.