

## **Christmas, 2018**

Isaiah 52:7-10/Hebrews 1:1-6/Luke 2:1-14

### ***All is Calm... All is Bright***

This Christmas marks the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Christmas carol that has been called "The Song Heard 'Round The World." The beloved hymn, *Silent Night*, was first performed on Christmas Eve, 1818, at St Nicholas parish church in Oberndorf, a village in the Austrian Empire. A young priest, Father Joseph Mohr, had come to Oberndorf the year before. The melody was composed by Franz Gruber, schoolmaster and organist in the nearby village of Arnsdorf. A disaster had hit Fr. Mohr's little parish church; river flooding had damaged the church organ. It wouldn't make a sound; Christmas would be ruined. Before Christmas Eve, Father Mohr brought a text he had written and begged Herr Gruber, the music director, to compose a melody and guitar accompaniment for his text so it could be used at the Christmas Eve Mass.



**Silent-Night-Chapel** in Oberndorf, Austria,  
where the song was first performed

It's unknown what inspired Fr. Mohr to write the lyrics, or what prompted him to

create a new carol. After the first hearing of the hymn, it quickly spread by travelling families of folk singers who included it in their repertoire. From there it spread everywhere. Maybe that's part of the miracle of "Silent Night." The words flowed from the imagination of a modest curate. The music was composed by a musician who was unknown outside his village. There was no celebrity to sing at its world premiere. Yet its powerful message of heavenly peace has crossed all borders and language barriers, conquering the hearts of people everywhere. In the original German its title is *Stille Nacht*, in Spanish - *Noche de paz*, in Italian - *Astro del ciel*, in French - *Douce nuit*, in Polish - *Cicha Noc*, in Tagalog - *Natanaw na*, in Mandarin Chinese - *Píngānyè*, and for us - *Silent Night*. It wouldn't be Christmas without that text and melody.



Currently playing at an off-Broadway theatre in New York is a musical with a title drawn from the second line of the hymn *Silent Night*. The musical is entitled *All is Calm: The Christmas Truce of 1914*, based on a true incident that happened on Christmas Eve at the beginning of World War I. Allied and German soldiers on both sides of the trenches laid down their arms and joined in a spontaneous celebration. Despite orders to continue shooting, the unofficial truce spread across the front lines. Out of the violence came a silence, then a song, when a German soldier

stepped into 'No Man's Land' singing *Stille Nacht*. Germans placed candlelit Christmas trees on trench parapets. The soldiers from both sides climbed from their trenches where they exchanged gifts of tobacco, rum and chocolates, even photographs of loved ones. They played soccer and buried each other's dead. Even the participants found what they were doing incredible. As one soldier wrote in his diary: *The Sergeant Major shouted: "Get down." But we said, "Shut up, Sergeant. It's Christmas!"*



This extraordinary night of camaraderie, music and peace took place during the first year of the war, and was never repeated. Upon orders, both sides resumed fighting the next day, returning to a war that would last four more years. The musical's creator spent two years researching this unique event, traveling to war museums and libraries in Belgium and London to collect the young soldiers' accounts of the truce in their letters and diary entries, official war documents, poetry, gravestone inscriptions, and even an old radio broadcast. The heroes of this story are the lowest of the ranks - the young, the hungry, the cold and the optimistic - those who acted with great courage to put down their guns, overcoming a fear that placed a gun in their hands in the first place. Their story puts a human face on war, and that's the story the musical's creator hoped to tell. That's the

story we seldom hear. The propaganda machine of war is powerful, as we know only too well. News of soldiers fraternizing across enemy lines would put a human face on the enemy and readily undermine public support for the war. So the story got buried, as do so many stories of reconciliation and peace, of the desire for connection and the hungers of the human heart.

Today we hear and tell a different story, the story of God who has offered grace and goodness to all people who can hear and who will embrace his gift. This season of universal goodwill softens our hearts. We greet each other with good wishes and cheer. Because we remember the gift of God's love and receive it anew in our hearts, our interactions are transformed. We come out of our trenches and look at one another with the eyes of faith and love. The limits that we impose on generosity and compassion are expanded. The possibility of a new way of life happens now, and we can look to the future - our own future and the world's future -- with renewed hope. The coming of Christ has transformed us. Ours is not a distant God, but One who has come to dwell among us. The Divine One is present in our struggles and shares our joys, and in all our efforts to transform our world.



Father Mohr's hymn, *Silent Night*, was born out of necessity and desire – the necessity of overcoming the fact of a broken organ, and the desire to sing of the birth of Jesus, the Prince of Peace. The camaraderie of young soldiers in a “No Man's Land” of war was born out of necessity and desire – the necessity of celebrating Christmas in the midst of war, and the desire to believe that in the eyes of God all are one. Our celebration of Christmas is also born out of necessity and desire – necessary because our fragile world is in desperate need of hope and a peace that the world cannot give. Our celebration is born of desire – our desire to live our lives to the full and to make a difference in this world; to respond fully to our baptismal call to be the face of Christ again for one another.



While we celebrate the vision of God's Kingdom that Jesus came to inaugurate, a kingdom where walls are torn down and hatred is replaced by compassion and understanding; a Kingdom where broken hearts are mended and weary limbs are strengthened – we also accept the role that we are to play in making that kingdom come about. We are called to make this world a better and brighter place. It's our privilege and duty to be lights shining in the darkness. We are not only to be embraced by the Light, but to become the light for others. Howard Thurman's poem, *The Work of Christmas*, states it clearly:

*When the song of the angels is stilled,  
When the star in the sky is gone,  
When the kings and princes are home,  
When the shepherds are back  
with their flock,*

*The work of Christmas begins:  
To find the lost,  
To heal the broken,  
To feed the hungry,  
To release the prisoner,  
To rebuild the nations,  
To bring peace among people,  
To make music in the heart.*



*John Kasper, osfs*