

December 24, 2018 • Christmas Eve

“The Light of This Night” – SHINE LIGHT! Sermon Series

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris



Luke 2:1-20

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!” When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Our hearts draw us in to the spirit of worship this holy night. We love this beauty, this sense of promise, expectation in the air that indeed something new is born in our hearts this night. Tonight, in this hushed, calm, united spirit, we sense the coming of the light, light shining in the darkness, light that the darkness can never overcome.

And in this holy night, we pause, stepping aside for a moment from all the crazy bluster and noisiness of this world—to hear the angels singing, to remember God’s promises to us, and to let our hearts and minds be filled anew with the radiance of God’s light and love for each and every one of us.

In a few moments we will stand, holding aloft our lighted candles and sing together one of the most familiar and beloved Christmas Carols, “Silent Night,” the beautiful carol that sings of the awe and wonder of this night.
“Silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright...”

This year marks the 200th anniversary of this carol, composed and first sung in the Christmas Eve service of 1818 in the small church in Oberndorf, Austria. Joseph Mohr had written the lyrics and Franz Gruber the music. Rev. Mohr was an assistant priest at the church. His friend Gruber was the organist at the church.

The legend goes that in the days just prior to Christmas Eve, it was discovered that a hungry mouse had been nibbling on the church bellows, putting it out of commission for the Christmas Eve service. With the organ not working, the carol was first sung to the accompaniment of Rev. Mohr’s guitar.

History doesn’t quite corroborate that version of the story. There’s another story that may or may not bear close resemblance to fact...seems there was an organ, but it was not working properly. And the two friends decided to use the guitar accompaniment, creating a beautiful, gentle, quiet singing of the carol.

Or still others say that the two friends planned to use the quiet guitar in the first place. Though not normally used in church, they wanted this new carol to sound like a soothing lullaby for the newborn king:

“Round yon virgin, mother and child. Holy infant, so tender and mild. Sleep in heavenly peace. Sleep in heavenly peace.”

Whatever the real origins of the carol, what happens next almost sounds like Hollywood. The following year, the church had enough money to bring in an expert organ builder to repair the church organ. Carl Mauracher learned “Silent Night” while working there in Oberndorf. He took the carol home to his village about forty miles away. Two families there had sets of singing siblings who were touring Europe at the time, purportedly singing before the Russian Czar and the Emperor of Austria. “Silent Night” quickly spread across Europe and was first sung in the United States some eighteen years later, at Trinity Church, Episcopal, in New York City.

And thus, “Silent Night,” became one of our favorite and most loved Christmas carols, its words telling the story of that wondrous night when the love of God was born anew on earth.

“Silent night, holy night, shepherds quake at the sight...” Had we been out with the shepherds that night, the dark night sky brimming with stars, would we, too, have been quaking when the heavens suddenly opened to the sound of angel song?

Hear their story in this lovely paraphrased translation of a Welsh Christmas carol:

“Awake were they only,
those shepherds so lonely,
on guard in that silence profound:
When color had faded,
when nighttime had shaded

their senses from sight and from sound,
Lo, then broke a wonder,
then drifted asunder
the veils from the splendor of God,
When light from the Holy
came down to the lowly,
and heaven to the earth that they trod.”

Then as now in the darkness of this holy night, in our galaxy alone, the Milky Way, some hundred thousand million stars are glowing above us this night. The shepherds could have seen them, though it’s hard for us to see them here---too many city lights, too much moisture in the air. But they’re there, and as the Psalmist sang: “God counts the number of the stars; and calls them all by their names. Great is our Lord, and of great power: God’s understanding is infinite.” All this, the shepherds knew.

Our God knows our longing for the stars and their light. And to us God sends a Savior who is Christ the Lord. Christ, the Light of the World, who says to us: ‘I am the light of the world. Whosoever follows me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life.’”

As you come to worship this night, do you not long for the light to shine around and within you? Do you not long for light in the shadow places of your heart? Do you not pray for the light of life to shine on all the hurting and broken places of this world? Do you not yearn to live into a future brimming with the light of God’s hope and peace?

For you, this night, the light shines.
The Welsh carol continues:

“May light now enfold us,
O Lord, for behold us,
like shepherds, from tumult withdrawn,
Nor hearing, nor seeing,
all other cares fleeing,
we wait the ineffable dawn.
O Spirit all-knowing,
Thou source overflowing,
O move in the darkness around,
that sight may be in us,
true hearing to win us
Glad tidings where Christ may be found.”

How we long for the light of this silent night to shine into all the darkened places of our weary world. And when it does, we stand in awe of its power. It can happen!

Towards the beginning of the First World War, British and German soldiers began initiating small cease fires amongst themselves. A few came together and declared a Christmas Truce on Christmas Eve 1914. Ceasing for a time from the mayhem of trench warfare, their hearts united in something deeper than the enmity of that war. And on that holy night, they shared some food, enjoyed a soccer match, and together, in English and German, sang the carol they all knew:

“Silent night, holy night, stille Nacht, heilige Nacht, Son of God, love’s pure light. Radiant beams from thy holy face with the dawn of redeeming grace. Jesus, Lord at thy birth. Jesus, Lord at thy birth.”

Together, for some brief moments enemies no more, they looked to the dawn of redeeming grace. God’s gift of grace, of mercy, of tender compassion, of forgiveness, joy, and hope. For all this dawns in this holy night in the light of the Christ Child.

In the words of poet Emmy Arnold:

“The Christmas Star in the night sky, the shining of the Christmas light in the night – all this is the sign that light breaks into the darkness. Though we see about us the darkness of unrest...of...hatred, the light shall shine and drive it out...The eternal light shall come to earth and give it a new radiance; it shines into the midst of night and makes us children of the light...Wherever the Christmas Child is born in a heart, wherever Jesus begins his earthly life anew – that is where the life of God’s love and of God’s peace dawns again.”

Now, in this silent, holy night, as we pause, may we hear the angels singing, remember God’s promises to us, and let our hearts and minds be filled anew with the radiance of God’s light and love for each and every one of us. May Christ be born in each of us this night and may we become children of the light.

“Silent night, holy night, wondrous star, lend thy light. With the angels let us sing; Alleluia to our King; Christ the Savior is born. Christ the savior is born.”

Amen.

Notes:

“Silent Night, Holy Night.” UMH #239

Text: Joseph Mohr, vs. 1-3 trans. By John F. Young; v. 4 anon.

Music: Franz Gruber

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