

Christmas Eve + Monday, December 24, 2018
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Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Marshall, WI
"Heavenly Peace"

"Silent Night": Two hundred years ago to the night, December 24, 1818, what was to become the world's most beloved Christmas carol was sung for the first time. Its humble birth was much like the circumstances surrounding Jesus' own, in which common people listened to the voice of God calling and responded with all their heart.

The story began in December 1818 as a troupe of actors was touring villages in the Austrian Alps with a re-enactment of the story of Christ's birth. On December 23 they were scheduled to play at St. Nicholas Church in Oberndorf, a picturesque village near Salzburg. But the church organ wasn't working--mice had apparently gotten into the bellows. So the re-enactment took place in a nearby home.

In the audience that night was the church's assistant priest, Josef Mohr. This experience of the story of Jesus' birth put him in a reflective mood. Instead of walking straight home, he took a path that led to the top of a hill. As Father Mohr looked down on the peaceful snow-covered village, he thought of a poem that he'd written a few years before about that first Christmas night. He thought these words might make a good carol for his congregation to sing at their Christmas Eve service the next night.

But he needed music, and all they had was a guitar. So he asked the church organist, Franz Gruber, to come up with a tune and guitar accompaniment. On short notice, Gruber came up with a simple tune that sounded like a gently rocking lullaby. He

hurried to make copies, and a few hours later at their midnight mass the carol “Silent Night” was given birth.

The story might have ended there if it hadn’t been for what can only be divine intervention. A few weeks later, a master organ builder arrived at St. Nicholas Church to repair the organ. To test the repaired instrument, Gruber played his little carol. The organ builder was captivated and begged for copies to take home to his own village. He went on to share them with a well-known family of singers, the Rainers. As they toured the region, the carol grew in popularity. When the King of Prussia first heard it, he ordered that it be sung at the castle cathedral every Christmas Eve from then on. When Rainer family brought the carol to New York City in 1839, its fame spread quickly. Now “Silent Night” is sung in more than 300 languages around the globe every Christmas Eve.

What is it about this simple carol that touches people so deeply? I think it might have to do with the phrase “heavenly peace.” In Father Mohr’s poem, “Sleep in heavenly peace!” is a prayer for the Christ child who is being watched over by his holy parents. But it’s no accident that this phrase comes at the high point of Gruber’s melody, which makes it an especially rich experience for us. For isn’t heavenly peace what we all desire for ourselves, in this life as well as the next? A divine peacefulness amid the hustle and hurry of the world? A peace filled with the presence of God?

This heavenly peace is not a passive state, but an active one brimming with the confidence of hope. Without hope, there can be no peace, for peace can only endure if there is hope taking us from one moment to the next. Hope that God has come to dwell

with us, in a form just like our own, so that we may know him and he us. The confidence of hope that our Savior will never fail us when we call on him. Hope that he will always love us unconditionally for who we are, not for who we or others think we should be. Confidence that death is not the end, that our mortal passing from this earth inaugurates a final baptism in which all will be raised to new life when God's great work of salvation is complete. Hope in the radiant beams of light streaming from the Christ child's face; hope in the dawn of redeeming grace, as we witness God's kingdom breaking into our world.

This hope at the heart of heavenly peace is the hope of faith. God has come down to us to rescue us from death, that thing we fear more than anything else. And the truly great miracle is that even though the world cast Jesus aside, sending him to death on the cross as a common criminal, God did not cast us aside. On the contrary: God performed the greatest act of all in raising his Son as a resurrected body who is with us always. Jesus gave us the means of grace in Holy Communion by which we can renew his presence with us again and again. And the Holy Spirit continues to rain down forgiveness and love upon us in such measure that all we can do is finally turn toward heaven and say, "Yes. I believe you. I accept your love."

This is where we find heavenly peace, in our turn toward God with open arms as we welcome his Son into our world. May the peace of Christ be with you always.

Amen.