

a carol of love

Isaiah 60:1-3, 19-20

December 17, 2017

Next Sunday evening, Christmas Eve, at about 11:57 pm, I will be standing in the front of the sanctuary holding a lighted candle and many of you will be sitting there in the pews holding lighted candles and we will be singing together “silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright.” It will be a holy moment.

It will be the last time I will sing “silent night” with you holding a lighted candle, and that makes me sad. But it will be a holy moment, not because it is the last time, but because that moment is always holy, and the memory of that moment and of all the times we have held lighted candles and sung “silent night” will never fade. It will always be a part of me and of you.

What is it that makes that moment holy? What is it that makes that tradition so meaningful year after year after year?

It’s the atmosphere: the lateness of the hour, the darkness pierced only by the flickering flame of the candles, the stillness, the peacefulness.

And, of course, it’s the season, all the feelings and memories and meanings that the celebration of Christmas conjures in us: hopefulness, being with ones we love, feeling God close to us, God’s spirit of self-giving love filling our spirits.

And it’s the carol, this carol: “Silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright.” Would any other carol do? Maybe, but this is the carol we choose, and the carol so many other churches choose too for this special moment. Its melody fits the mood, gentle and flowing like a lullaby, and its lyrics fit the setting, a night silent and holy.

But it’s more than that. “Silent Night” is not merely a sweet lullaby. “Away in a Manger” is a sweet lullaby, but “Silent Night” is no “Away in a Manger.” For me anyway, there is no way “Away in a Manger” would engender the same feelings in that holy moment. “Silent Night” has depth, meaning, gravitas and that is what stirs my mind and heart as I sing.

“Silent Night.” “Stille Nacht.” The carol, of course, was written originally in German. A poem written by Joseph Mohr was set to music by Franz Gruber and was first sung on Christmas Eve in 1818 (one year short of two hundred years ago!) at St. Nicholas Church in Oberndorf, Austria. Do you think they sang it by candlelight?

Mohr’s poem has six verses. We sing a translation of the first, sixth, and second verses in that order. The lyrics we sing are from a translation done by the Episcopal priest, John Young, in 1859 and this English version has a life all its own. Its tone and mood are different from the original German, more solemn, more dignified -- could we say more episcopalian? -- less homey.

Let me illustrate. This is a literal translation of the German verse you heard sung by Siena and Megan:

*Silent night! Holy night!
All are sleeping, only the cozy holy pair are awake.
Lovely boy with curly hair,
Sleep in heavenly peace!
Sleep in heavenly peace!*

But it's the English version we know and these words that stir our minds and hearts.

Silent night, holy night. Each verse in English begins this way, as does the German: "Stille nacht, heilige nacht." The words conjure the scene of a night, silent but not empty, still but full of meaning, an advent that is not hidden, but neither is it conspicuous or overt. It is holy, because God is near. God comes, not trumpeting his presence, but God comes. God is near. God is here. Silent night. Holy night.

The first verse continues: "all is calm, all is bright." Now be sure to pay attention to the punctuation! There is no period or comma after "all is calm, all is bright." It's not "silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright." "Calm" and "bright" do not describe the night or the condition of the world in general, but the space around this mother and her baby: "all is calm, all is bright round yon virgin mother and child." Then we sing to the baby: "holy infant so tender and mild, sleep in heavenly peace."

This first verse is very much a lullaby, but the only one of the three that is. If we were only to sing this one verse, there's not much there except atmosphere. My mother was a church musician and she firmly believed you should always sing all the verses of a hymn, otherwise you miss the story. If we sing only the first verse of this carol, we miss the story.

As the second verse begins, the night is still silent and holy, but the scene is not calm: "shepherds quake." Shepherds are quaking, shaking in fear, at the sight of heavenly glories and the sound of a heavenly multitude singing "alleluia." The scene has changed and the mood has changed and we sing not of an infant tender and mild, but of Christ: Christ, Messiah, the one chosen by God to save God's people, announced, not to the world, but to shepherds, but unmistakably announced by a host of God's messengers bathed in glorious light -- "Christ, the Savior is born!" He may be sleeping now, but we know who he is and what he has come to do.

And the third verse: "Son of God." "Son of God:" the one born on this day bears the likeness, the very being, of God in himself. "Son of God, love's pure light." That's the phrase that stays with me, "love's pure light." This child is tender and mild, like any baby, and he is announced as Messiah, a title that speaks of what he will one day accomplish, but now, even now on the day of his birth, he shines!

Are the radiant beams shining from his face meant literally or metaphorically? Does it matter? He shines! His face, his person, his being, embodies God's light, embodies God's love. His birth heralds the dawn, the coming of the light, the breaking of a new day, the day of redeeming grace. Light is coming. Morning is coming. Night is coming to an end. Your days of grief are coming to an end. Your days of loneliness are coming to an end. Your days of helplessness are coming to an end. The glory of the Lord is shining on you! Love's pure light is shining on you! The glory of the Lord is shining in the darkness. That's what makes the moment holy.

Love is a light. Love shines a light onto the beloved, not just so love can see, but so all can see. Love wants the beloved to be seen and known and valued. Love wants to highlight the humanity of the beloved in all its beauty and frailty and possibility. And love wants the beloved to see -- herself, himself, themselves, yourself. Love wants you to know that you are loved as you are, that you are treasured as you are, that you matter as you are and as you will be. You are not alone. You are not forgotten. You will not be left in the dark. Love's pure light is shining. Love's pure light is shining on you.

On the third Sunday of Advent, we light the third candle on the Advent wreath, the pink candle. It is different from the rest. Why is it a different color? Why is it pink? Because we can't wait!

Blue is the color of hope and expectation, the deep blue of the sky just before dawn. During Advent we wait in expectation for the coming of the dawn, for the coming of the blessings dawn will bring. But pink, the color of joy, breaks in early, because even as we wait for the dawn, something of what we are waiting for is already here.

What is already here? Love. Love is already here. Love is the one thing that is already what it one day shall be. Love is the one thing that is already what it one day shall be. Hope is not yet fulfilled. Peace has not yet come. Joy is not yet full. But love is already all that it one day shall be. Love is eternal, which means that the love you receive and the love you give, right now, is the very presence of God in your life, love's pure light.

The glory of the Lord, love's pure light, is shining on you. Love's pure light IS shining on you!