

O HOLY NIGHT
Lamentations 3:22-23; 1 John 4:7-12

(Read 1 John 4:7-12)

Intro: Our song today is O HOLY NIGHT. It's a beloved song and, even though it's rather simple, it's majestic. Not everyone can sing it and it's not exactly a congregational number, although it can be. But as far as it being a solo, it takes a certain amount of gifting to do it well.

Jeffrey began our Advent Series Some Songs We Sing at Christmas with O COME, O COME, EMMANUEL. Two weeks ago, I examined I HEARD THE BELLS ON CHRISTMAS DAY. And last week we looked at JOY TO THE WORLD. O COME, O COME, EMMANUEL, is an ancient song with its seven verses full of a longing for God with Us – which is the actual meaning of the name Immanuel. As a matter of fact, the song has been made into a liturgical devotional for the final seven days leading up to Christmas.

I HEARD THE BELLS ON CHRISTMAS DAY was the creative product of a grieving father who began his song almost sarcastically, and then as it progressed it became deeply pessimistic. But by the end of his poem, author, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, had returned to a steady faith and assurance in a God who is in control and who would ultimately triumph. Last week's song, JOY TO THE WORLD, is a very familiar song that we can sing without a book or the words on a screen (well, at least the first verse, anyway). We learned that it was written by a theologian who based it on Psalm 98, a song of praise to the Creator God, with a promise of a Risen Christ who would return for his church.

My research for the two songs I have preached on, I HEARD THE BELLS... and JOY TO THE WORLD, was a delightful process for me. I was interested then, to find that O HOLY NIGHT was a bit more difficult because even though it is a cherished song, it is nevertheless surrounded by conflicting stories and even controversy.

But first a quick bit of interesting, and fun history concerning O Holy Night:

On Christmas Eve 1906, Reginald Fessenden—a 33-year-old university professor and former chief chemist for Thomas Edison—did something long thought impossible. Using a new type of generator, Fessenden spoke into a microphone and, for the first time in history, a man's voice was broadcast over the airwaves: "And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed," he began in a clear, strong voice, hoping he was reaching across the distances he supposed he would.

Shocked radio operators on ships and astonished wireless owners at newspapers were amazed as their normal, coded impulses, heard over tiny speakers, were interrupted by a professor reading the Christmas story. To those who caught this broadcast, it must have seemed like a miracle to hear a voice somehow transmitted to those far away. Perhaps they may have thought they were hearing the voice of an angel. Fessenden was probably unaware of the sensation he was causing on ships and in offices; he couldn't have known that men and women were rushing to their wireless units to catch this Christmas Eve miracle. After finishing his recitation of the birth of Christ, Fessenden picked up his violin and played "O Holy Night," the first song ever sent through the air via radio waves.

The original song is, and I'm going to butcher it because I'm very unfamiliar with the French language, *Cantique de Noel*, which is, a Christmas Canticle or more easily, a Christmas Carol.

It was written in the 1840s when a parish priest in a small town in southern France with a name that I cannot pronounce, asked a local poet to write a Christmas poem. His choice of poet was interesting because the man he asked, Placide Cappeau, was not known for his church attendance. As a matter of fact, he was a wine merchant or maybe a wine commissioner. He was also a socialist who was interested in the revolutionary thinking that was beginning to take root. As a matter of fact, this song was written in 1847 and Karl Marx's COMMUNIST MANIFESTO was published the very next year. So it was into this milieu that the song we now know as O HOLY NIGHT came about. The priest asked Cappeau to write a poem for midnight mass. Which he did. That's about all we know about the commissioning. We don't know why Cappeau was selected, but he was. And he set to work and his finished product was entitled *Minuit Chrétiens* or, in English, Midnight Christians, the opening words of the poem. It began like this:

Midnight, Christians, is the solemn hour,
 When God as man descended unto us

to erase the stain of original sin
and to end the wrath of his Father.
The entire world thrills with hope
on this night that gives it a Savior.
People, kneel down, await your deliverance,
Christmas, Christmas, here is the Redeemer,
Christmas, Christmas, here is the Redeemer!

There were more words, but they changed over the years, so I'm not going to belabor that. Cappeau was pleased with his work so he asked a friend, Adolphe Adam, who from what I can tell was Jewish, to compose music for the song and it received its new name, *Cantique de Noel*, along with the music.

It became a popular Christmas song in France, and across the world. The Catholic Church was not very happy with it because it was written by a non-churchman, and the music was by a Jewish person – a double whammy. It also seemed to have revolutionary ideas in it which made national and church leaders nervous.

A little more than 10 years later the song had made its way across the ocean, where it was discovered by a former Unitarian minister by the name of John Sullivan Dwight. He was another interesting character. If you know Unitarian theology, they are not trinitarian – you can hear it in the name. Add to that, Dwight had been part of the Brook Farm Commune, a transcendental group in Massachusetts. I need to add here that there was a lot of experimentation going on from the 1820s into the 1860s and beyond that gave us cults like Mormonism, Jehovah's Witnesses, Christians Science, and others in addition to transcendentalism. However, by the time John Dwight heard *CANTIQUE NOEL*, he was moving toward Catholicism and would, eventually, become a priest. Dwight took it upon himself to translate *O HOLY NIGHT* to the song we now have which is the one that Lydia will sing for us at the closing of this service. As you listen to Lydia's lyrics you can hear similarities to the original but you can also hear Dwight's theology and politics coming through as he took some liberties with the words. To be fair, he may have used the words he used to keep a similar thought while making the words in English fit the beautiful French tune. There were three or four verses to the original but I will recite verses one and three to you here:

O Holy night, the stars are brightly shining
It is the night of the dear Savior's birth
Long lay the world in sin and error pining
Till he appeared and the soul felt it's worth
A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices,
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn!
Fall on your knees! O hear the angel voices!
O night divine! O night when Christ was born!
O night divine! O night, o night divine.
Truly, he taught us to love one another;
His law is love and his gospel is peace.
Chains shall he break, for the slave is our brother,
And in his name all oppression shall cease.
Sweet hymns of joy and grateful chorus raise we,
Let all within us praise his holy name.
Christ is the Lord, O praise his name forever!
His power and glory ever more proclaim!
His power and Glory ever more proclaim!

I mentioned earlier that Dwight's politics came through. Let me explain: You see, this was right before the Civil War and Dwight was a staunch abolitionist – that is radically opposed to slavery which, of course, was a major industry in the southern states. I can't help but wonder if he didn't know another strong abolitionist named Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. After all, they were both in the general area of Massachusetts, and there was much abolitionist work being done in that region.

It's interesting to me that Placide Cappeau, a man that some people thought was an atheist, and for sure not someone known for his profession of faith, wrote such a theologically correct song. I mean there's no heresy

there. This song works. It's also interesting that the beautiful tune that we sing with, the original tune it was written for, was composed by a Jewish man and one who did not celebrate the birth of Christ. This shows the redemptive work that the song actually talks about. It actually is a perfect example of Saint Augustine's phrase, "All truth is God's truth."

The world was and is wrapped up in sin and error, and Jesus Christ came and provided the possibility of deliverance for anyone who receives it. Suddenly where there was hopelessness, there was now great and wonderful hope. It was and is exactly what a world exhausted in its sin needs and provides the opportunity to rejoice at the new day. Yes, with the coming of Jesus on that holy night it promised a new and glorious morning. Look further at the other redemptive words:

Truly, He taught us to love one another.

His law is love and his gospel is peace.

Dwight's translation was rendered on the eve of the Civil War – only less than two years away. The saber rattling had already begun and angry words were flying as the South was already threatening to secede. It looked bleak. But Dwight saw that with the coming of Christ, freedom that would come. He actually has the line, the slave is our brother, showing his heart as he translates.

Now, we some would say that slavery was a huge issue that the Civil War settled. But the truth is, it really didn't. Oh, yes, slavery is gone now, officially since Chretien's December of 1865, but we still struggle with the racism that caused it. Also, slavery is still a huge problem around the world. Millions of people are in slavery of varying kinds. So, the words of O HOLY NIGHT are still very, very timely. And it will remain so as long as the world lays in sin and error pining. It's also a call for Christ Followers to be proclaimers of the true freedom that only Jesus can bring.

The song ends with, . . . and in his name all oppression shall cease. That is the hope – but we are bearers of that hope.

A couple weeks ago our Old Testament passage from Isaiah that I used for I HEARD THE BELLS ON CHRISTMAS DAY promised, *For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire.* Isaiah 9:5. This vivid picture would be as it was in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's vision of wrong failing as right is prevailing. With the coming of Jesus in the hearts of humanity, it would be the end of war. It's not a pipedream. It was John Sullivan Dwight's hope, it was Longfellow's vision, and it is promise of every Christ Follower.

It's at Christmas that we celebrate what the angel's message to the shepherds:

Glory to God in the highest,

And on Earth, peace among those

With whom he is pleased! Luke 2:14

The people of God are people of peace.

The coming of Jesus that is celebrated in O HOLY NIGHT, is a day where, as our Lamentations passage promised,

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases;

his mercies never come to an end;

they are new every morning;

great is your faithfulness. Lamentations 3:22-23

What comes after a holy night, is mercies that are new every morning. And what does that come from? I began this talk by reading from 1 John 4:7-12

The final verse of O HOLY NIGHT begins, Truly He taught us to love one another, his law of love is gospel is peace. The Apostle John tells us to love one another because *love is from God, whoever loves has been born of God and knows God.* John 4:7 They know what love is. They recognize it right away and they practice it. The people of God don't need to be reminded to practice the love they have seen in Jesus. And then John makes a bold and sobering statement, *Anyone who does not love does not know God because God is love,* 1 John 4:8. Love came at Christmas. But notice the apostle goes on to say, *In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him.* 1 John 4:9 Love shines through God's people. We need to love one another. Even though we've not seen God, if we love one love one another, our love will be sharpened, perfected, and made new.

We have not had the kind of emphasis on our advent candles this year, though we have lighted them each Sunday. I probably should have pointed out last Sunday when we sang JOY TO THE WORLD that our candle for the day is the pink candle signifying joy. Today when I'm talking about O HOLY NIGHT which has the words

Truly he taught to love one another;
his law is love and his gospel is peace,

It just so happens that we are in the Fourth (and last) Sunday of Advent which is the candle of love. Love came at Christmas. God so loved the world, that he SENT his Son. That was a holy night to establish a holy people. Amen.