

SILENT NIGHT AND WHOLLY HOLY NIGHT

Intro: A young priest, Joseph Mohr, just 24 years old, wrote the poem we know as SILENT NIGHT in 1816. He was an interesting young man. He had been born out of wedlock, the child of a soldier and a teenage seamstress, and because of that eventually became the foster child of the Salzburg Cathedral in Austria. Because of this he had religious and musical training all the way through his youth until he was ordained as a Catholic priest.

The Europe Mohr lived in was tired and worn in 1816. Napoleon, who had disrupted the continent with conquests and attempted conquests and the war that comes with that, for 12 years, had finally been subdued the year before. So it was relatively peaceful. But it's interesting that 1816 was known worldwide as the year where there was no summer. In 1815 the volcano, Mount Tambora in what is now Indonesia exploded in the largest and most destructive eruption in recorded history and it disrupted the climate worldwide for the better part of a year, and probably longer. There was even snow in July in places where it would have normally been very hot – because IT'S HOT IN SUMMER! This is recorded in U. S. history as well. As a result, there was famine, floods and sickness. Yes, Europe was tired as this young assistant priest was pondering the Christmas season and as he wrote this poem. Now, remember, he is in Austria and he wrote in German, Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht, SILENT NIGHT, HOLY NIGHT. these were the six verses – translated to English of course:

Silent Night! Holy Night!
All is calm, all is bright
Round yon godly tender pair
Holy infant with curly hair
Sleep in heavenly peace
Sleep in heavenly peace.

Silent Night! Holy Night!
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.

Silent Night! Holy Night!
Brought the world gracious light
Down from heaven's golden height
Comes to us the glorious sight:
Jesus, as one of mankind
Jesus, as one of mankind.

Silent Night! Holy Night!
By his love, by his might
God our Father us has graced
As a brother gently embraced
Jesus, all nations on earth
Jesus, all nations on earth.

Silent Night! Holy Night!
Long ago, minding our plight
God the world from misery freed
In the dark age of our fathers decreed:
All the world is redeemed
All the world is redeemed.

Silent Night! Holy Night!
Shepherds first saw the sight
Of angels singing alleluia
Calling clearly near and far:
Christ, the saviour is born
Christ the Saviour is born.

Now you are familiar with about half of that – in fact, you're more than familiar with it – you know it. Some people say that it's the most popular Christmas song and it very well might be. And we're going to be singing it in just a little bit as we close this service out and light our candles and we will not be projecting the words because we want the room to be darkened – but you probably know it well enough that you can sing it from memory.

Let me get back to the song story. Young Father Joseph set the poem aside as he became otherwise occupied with a transfer to his own parish in Bavaria in the mountains. It was a poor town on the Salzach River, where shipbuilders and shippers were the main population and for a couple years he was busy adjusting to his new assignment. But as Christmas Eve of 1818 approached he had the idea to put his poem to music. Now, Joseph was an accomplished musician who could play violin and guitar so he could have written the music himself. Instead, he turned to a very good friend, Franz Gruber, who was an organist, teacher and choirmaster, to compose the music, which Gruber apparently did in one afternoon. They planned to use song for the Christmas Eve Mass and there was not enough time to teach the song to the choir. I might add that the organ was also not available because flooding from that climate hiccup that I mentioned earlier had caused the organ pipes to corrode and the bellows to leak – it worked a tiny bit, but not nearly good enough for Christmas Eve. There was an organ mender, I guess that's what you call an organ repairman, who was scheduled to come, but he wouldn't arrive until next week or so. With this in mind, Gruber wrote the song for guitar and then he and his friend Joseph, the parish priest, sang the song as a duet, with Gruber singing bass, and Mohr playing the guitar and singing tenor. One account that I read said that the choir backed them up by singing the first line of every verse, all six of them that I recited earlier, and then the two young men would sing the remainder of each verse. So the choir would begin, **Silent night, Holy night**, and the two young men would continue. If they did it that way, it must have been a beautiful arrangement.

That was Christmas Eve 1818 and from then on SILENT NIGHT caught on. That organ repairman I spoke of earlier came along a week or two later, and he was impressed with the song, and he took it with him and it spread through the region. And then it spread through the world. And then a German singing family, the Singing Rainer Family, describe as the Von Trapp family only 100 years earlier, made a tour of America, and part of their repertoire was SILENT NIGHT. It was a hit. It was translated into English sometime in the 1830s. The rest is history. SILENT NIGHT has been a blessing for 207 years now and we are glad that we have it.

But what I love about the song is that it shows what God does with bad news. Europe had experienced very bad news, not just for the dozen years of the Napoleonic Wars but for decades, if not centuries. And then there have been the time of disease and flooding and famine I described. And into this came the reminder of the hope that Christ's coming into humanity brought.

You see, this is what God does with bad news, he brings the GOOD NEWS of a Savior who arrived just in time. With him in on that Silent Night, we welcome the radiant beams from his holy face bringing the dawn of redeeming grace. What God does with bad news is bring good news. That dawn of redeeming grace brought a new and glorious day. That is a holy night and a wholly, (I mean completely) holy night.

Savior that as we light our candles and sing. Amen.