

Silent Night

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Today's scripture texts are taken from the prophet Habakkuk, chapter 2, verse 20, the prophet Zechariah, chapter 2, verse 13, the gospel of Matthew, chapter 1, verses 18 to 25, and from the second epistle to the Corinthians, chapter 8, verse 9, as printed in the liturgy. A reading from the prophets Habakkuk and Zechariah. Zechariah, Habakkuk, the Lord is in his holy temple. Let all the earth be silent before him.

Zechariah, be still before the Lord, all mankind, because he has roused himself from his holy dwelling. The grass withers and the flowers fade, but the word of our God stands forever.

Gospel reading, a reading from the gospel according to Matthew. This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about. His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit.

[1 : 28] Because Joseph, her husband, was faithful to the law and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

But after he considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins. All this took place to fulfill what the Lord said through the prophet.

The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Emmanuel, which means God with us. When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife.

But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son, and he gave him the name Jesus. This is the gospel of the Lord. Praise to you, O Christ.

[2 : 31] New Testament reading from the second epistle to the Corinthians. For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you, through his poverty, might become rich.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Good morning, Christ Church.

This past week, I went to the dentist's office, and I sat down in the chair, and what did I hear playing on the radio? But these words, Oh, come let us adore him.

Oh, come let us adore him. Oh, come let us adore him, Christ the Lord. And I'm sitting there thinking, is anyone else, like cleaning teeth or having their teeth cleaned, hearing what I'm hearing right now?

And it's hard to adore Christ when you have pickaxes and drills, you know, in your mouth. But then the next song comes on, and it's, Oh, come, oh, come Emmanuel.

[3 : 47] And I'm like, is anyone hearing the words of this song right now? And I was waiting for Hark the Herald Angels Sing, followed by Joy to the World, just kind of tracking through our entire sermon series this month.

And I never really heard it, but it's probably because I had a dissociative experience there at the dentist. I don't love going to the dentist's office. I was a little concerned about keeping my mouth opened and, you know, the gum sensitivity and tooth sensitivity and all that.

But I was thinking to myself, this is why we're preaching this sermon series, because these carols of Christmas are everywhere, right? They're at the dentist's office. They're at the shopping mall.

They're at the grocery store.

They are on 96.5 KOIT since, I think, about September is when they began. Of course, not everyone's listening to these songs, and even those who are listening, not everyone knows what they mean.

And so we're looking at these carols that we know the best but perhaps understand the least, because every year at this time we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ with these beautiful carols.

[4 : 54] But how many of us really see the depth of the gospel in these songs that have become perhaps overly familiar to us? And what are the truths that we're singing that make these carols so timeless?

So for me, one of the great traditions that has developed over the past 200 years is the singing of the carol Silent Night at Christmas Eve in a candlelight service.

Now, if there were to be an 11th commandment, I'm pretty confident it would be about this, that thou shalt sing Silent Night to candlelight on Christmas Eve.

In 2011, the United Nations made a declaration that this carol, Silent Night, is an item of intangible cultural heritage. It's been recorded by artists from every conceivable genre, including pop, punk, and yes, heavy metal.

It's been sung by Bing Crosby, Boyz II Men, Annie Lennox, Sinead O'Connor. Basically, everyone has tried their hand at this simple three-chord melody that we're going to talk about today.

[6 : 05] And Time Magazine concluded, on the basis of their copyright records, that this is the most popular Christmas song ever. It's been translated into more than 300 languages, and God, in His wisdom, has used this carol in a way that transcends time and unites people across cultures.

And I want to, because, you know, like half of our church is gone on Christmas Eve, I wanted to talk about this carol today. Because most of you are, like, in other cities. And I thought, well, let's talk about it today so that we can actually sing it before some of you hit the road.

And we can have a little rehearsal for next Sunday night. Does that sound good to you all? I'm going to read these familiar words of this poem, Silent Night. And it's printed there for you and your liturgy.

We're going to sing it after this sermon. Silent Night.

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.

[7 : 34] Jesus, Lord at Thy birth. 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. Now, I want to talk for a few minutes about the Holy Infant, the Heavenly Savior, and the Gracious Redeemer.

The Holy Infant, the Heavenly Savior, and the Gracious Redeemer. First of all, the Holy Infant. And to talk about the Holy Infant, I want to provide a little bit of historical background to this carol and put the text of this poem into context for you.

I want you to imagine the majesty of the snow-capped Austrian Alps near the city of Salzburg in the year 1816.

And I want you to imagine the working class people in and around Salzburg living by the sweat of their brow in the salt mines of that region.

[8 : 33] This was the main occupation of these people. And I want you to remember that the Napoleonic Wars from 1803 to 1815 had devastated this area.

So if you're planning on going to see Ridley Scott's new film, Over the Holiday, you can just imagine these cannonballs of this military commander played by Joaquin Phoenix.

You can imagine his cannonballs just ripping through the homes of these working class people. And causing the one bridge of their town to collapse. And many, many people dying as these foreign soldiers invaded that place.

And as is typical during wartime, an economic depression followed and crowds of children, we're told, were going from house to house as beggars.

So you've got a picture of a not-so-silent night forming in your minds. These Napoleonic Wars ended in 1815. That same year, Mount Timbura in Indonesia erupted, pumping enough ash in the air to mask the sun, which caused global temperatures to drop one to two degrees Fahrenheit.

[9 : 45] So that the year 1816 was called the year without a summer. It was called the dark year. And this resulted in crop failures and widespread famine and hunger.

Add to that, the river that flowed through this area, the River Salzak, regularly overflowed its banks and destroyed people's homes with its floodwaters. In fact, the original church where this carol was first sung is no longer there because of flooding.

And so, as you can imagine, all these events piling up on top of one another, it was causing the spark of hope to die out among the people. People were absolutely demoralized.

There's nothing calm and bright about this moment. There's nothing tender and mild about their lives. There's no one is sleeping in heavenly peace.

So, the reason I bring this up is to ask the question, how do we deal with that? How do we deal with these kind of bleak circumstances as Christians?

[10:51] Well, I kind of thought, you know, the last four or five years have been hard as a pastor. But, man, I'm sorry for ever complaining because can you imagine trying to shepherd a people, a congregation through this level of disruption and insecurity and uncertainty and suffering?

In the midst of this terrible, traumatic time, there's this 24-year-old guy named Joseph Moore. And the way he dealt with the pain was he pinned the words to this carol.

And the secret for him was that he meditated not on his situation, but he meditated on something else. He meditated on the Scriptures. He meditated not on his situation.

He meditated on the Scriptures. Corrie ten Boom, some of you know, was a Christian woman who hid Jews from the Nazis in Amsterdam.

She famously said this. She said, if you look at the world, you'll be distressed. If you look within, you'll be depressed. If you look at God, you'll be at rest. You might want to learn that this Christmas.

[12:02] If you look at the world, you'll be distressed. If you look within, you'll be depressed. If you look at God, you'll be at rest. Joseph Moore, the pastor who wrote this carol, he was the son of a poor, unwed mother.

He never knew his father. They were so destitute that the town executioner was the only person who would agree to be his godfather. He's kind of had a rough life.

He's looking around at all the salt mines and the war and recession and cold and famine and floods. And how does he respond to all of this trouble and all of this pain?

Well, he opens his Bible. And he sets his mind not on earthly things that are temporary, but on heavenly things that are eternal. He sets his mind not on what's passing, but on what is permanent.

And I say all this to just urge you to learn this skill of Christian meditation, to learn this skill of meditating on Scripture and on the God whose Scripture reveals.

[13:07] Because what does Joseph Moore focus his mind and his attention on? Well, he locks himself in to this holy knight and this holy infant. Now, of course, he knew like all of us that there were aspects of the Messiah's coming that were not silent at all.

He's not saying that this night was completely silent. Of course, you know, if any of you have ever gone through childbirth or been with someone when they've been going through childbirth, it's not silent.

That's not what was going on at Jesus' birth. But at some point, that first Christmas night, this hungry, tired, fussy infant nursed in the arms of his mother and fell asleep in heavenly peace.

And at some point, everything was silent. And I'm not sure what was on Joseph Moore's mind, but two prophetic texts occurred to me this week, and we read them just a moment ago.

Habakkuk 2, the prophet Habakkuk says, The Lord is in his holy temple. Let all the earth keep silence before him. The prophet Zechariah says, Be silent, all flesh, before the Lord, for he roused himself.

[14:22] He has roused himself from his holy dwelling. These two prophets of ancient Israel are summoning all the people of the world to a hushed and awed and reverent silence before the Lord who's in his holy temple and before the Lord who's rousing himself to deliver his people.

And I think Joseph Moore seems to be meditating on the fact that on this night, this holy Lord has come down to us from his holy temple.

He's rousing himself from his holy dwelling on this holy night in the person of this holy infant. And I want us to think about that. What does it mean to be holy?

To be holy means to be set apart. To be holy means to be utterly unique and different. To be holy means to be spiritually and morally whole. Now this is going to come as a surprise to some of you, but when I was born, no one called me a holy infant.

We have a baby boom. It's so wonderful. It's happening. Like every week at this church, there's a new baby born. And as adorable as they are, no one could call these infants holy infants.

[15 : 40] When I came into the world, my birth did not solve any major historical or cosmic problem. In fact, my arrival on planet earth only increased and complicated the problem.

But here on this holy night is a holy infant. The Gospel of Matthew says that Mary is pregnant through the Holy Spirit. And what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

This Holy Spirit-conceived holy infant is what the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 calls the last Adam. The final Adam.

The ultimate Adam. And as we know, in Genesis 3, Adam became spiritually and morally corrupted. He defiled himself and became unholy because he thought that he knew better than God.

He thought that he could live without God at the center and with himself at the center. In our first Adam, he fell spiritually and morally from a very great height so that all the sons of Adam and all the daughters of Eve have been living ever since then in a fallen condition far below God's design and intention for us.

[16 : 58] But we're not focused on that. What we're focused on in this carol is that here in this holy infant is the ultimate Adam. Here is this one who is set apart as spiritually and morally whole.

And he is the new beginning of the human race. His birth, his coming into the world, his presence is God's solution to the fundamental problem of this world.

His being here means that all that's wrong with our world, all that was wrong in Austria in the 19th century, all that's wrong in America in the 21st century, all that was wrong in Joseph Moore's life and in the congregation of St. Nicholas Church in his little village, all that's wrong in my life and in our little congregation here at Christ Church, all that is wrong is going to be put right by this holy infant.

And so when we sing, all is calm, all is bright, we're not just describing what's happening in that particular room on that particular night as this holy infant sleeps in the arms of his beloved mother. Rather, we are proclaiming what God intends to do through this holy infant on both a personal and a cosmic level. That this holy infant has come to reclaim his whole creation and to make it calm and bright and tender and mild.

[18 : 32] This holy infant has come to take all that is conflicted in your relationship with God and turn it into calm. He's come to take all that is dark in your heart and make it bright.

This holy infant has come to take all that's tough in my character and to make it tender like him. He's come to take all that's harsh in me and in my attitudes and make it mild like him.

It's not just that this holy infant sleeps in heavenly peace on that first Christmas night as cute and cuddly as that might sound. It's that this holy infant came to reclaim his whole creation as a place of heavenly peace and heavenly rest.

And so like these prophets Habakkuk and Zechariah, silent night is an invitation to us. It's an invitation to a hushed and an awed and a reverent silence before this holy infant who's come to put the world to rights and come to put you and me back in a right relationship with God.

It's what we most needed was a holy infant. That's my longest point, okay? So you can relax. I want to talk not only about this holy infant, but I also want to say a word about the heavenly Savior.

[20 : 01] The heavenly Savior. This is stanza two. I want to focus on the last line where it says, Christ the Savior is born. Christ the Savior is born. That comes from the Gospel of Luke chapter 2 where it says, Today in the town of David a Savior is born to you.

He is the Messiah, the Lord. Now what does that mean? What does it mean that of all the gifts that God could have sent the human race, the one thing He decided to send us was a Savior? What does that say about us? What does God think that we need to be saved from? And I want to turn your attention to the Gospel of Matthew chapter 1 because God there comes to Joseph in a dream and He reveals some truth to Joseph and He says to Joseph in chapter 1 verse 20, He says, Don't be afraid to take Mary home as your wife because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

She will give birth to a son and you are to give him the name Jesus. Now that Greek name Jesus in Hebrew is Joshua or Yahshua, which means Yahweh saves.

And if you're a Jew, you're thinking, Well yes, this is what Yahweh has done. Yahweh saved us from the Egyptians under Moses and Yahweh saved us from the Canaanites under Joshua and Yahweh saved us from the Philistines under David.

[21 : 28] He's always saved us through a military warrior and hero. He's always come to us through a political leader and ruler to save us. So if you're a first century Jew like Joseph and Mary, what's the most obvious plight and problem that you need to be saved from?

Well, it's the Romans. Right? It's Caesar and his generals and his armies. So word about a new Joshua coming into the world that finally Yahweh is going to send someone to save us from Rome. He's going to send a freedom fighter to whip up on all of our enemies and kick them out of the Holy Land and give us peace. He's going to overthrow this oppressive empire just like he overthrew the Egyptians and the Canaanites and the Philistines.

He's going to save us again from other people. He's going to save us from the sins of others. But friends, the radical message of Christmas is that God did send someone to save us from the plight of an oppressive, imperial, occupying power.

But the painful message of Christmas is that that power that he came to save us from, it's not outside of us. It's inside of us. It's in our hearts and it's in our bones.

[22 : 49] It's what the Gospel of Matthew and what Jesus himself calls sin. And I just want to read verse 21 again to you. It says, She will give birth to a son and you are to give him the name Jesus because he will save his people from their sins.

That's an old Greek word, hamartia. And when it's used by Homer and the Iliad and the Odyssey, he's talking about throwing a spear but missing the mark, failing to hit the bullseye, falling short of your target.

And in all those old Greek dramas, all the characters were written about, that all of them had some sort of hamartia. They had some sort of tragic error, some fatal flaw where they were missing the mark of their humanity.

And what is that for us? What is hamartia for us? Well, to get at it, I want to quote one of the great theologians of our time, Taylor Swift.

You've heard me maybe quote her before, and she's got incredible insight in this song, Antihero. She says, I should not be left to my own devices.

[24 : 00] They come with prices and vices. I end up in crisis. I wake up screaming from dreaming. One day I'll watch as you're leaving because you got tired of my scheming.

And then here's the line. It's me. Hi. I'm the problem. It's me. Now, I have no idea if she realizes how close she has gotten to the Christian doctrine of sin.

But she's pretty much nailed it. We were all of us made to hit the bullseye of loving God with all of our being. We were made to have God at the very center of our lives.

We were made to find our deepest identity and our deepest value in our relationship and our service to God. But we missed the mark. We failed to hit that target.

We fall short of the glory of God. Sin is a word we need to kind of dust off and redefine, isn't it? Because sin is seeking to become yourself and getting your identity apart from God.

[25 : 13] The ancient theologians used to say that we are homo incurvatus in se. We are human beings curved in upon ourselves. That is to say we are people who become desperately self-oriented and self-centered.

Or as Taylor has said so well, it's me, hi, I'm the problem. It's me. It's not out there. It's right here. That's the miserable plight that Jesus came to save us from.

To be under the judgment of God. To be cut off from the light and the life and the love of God. To die in your sins without being forgiven by God.

Without knowing God. Without having hope in God. That is the worst tragedy that could happen to a human being. But in this carol we sing Christ the Savior is born.

Christ the Savior is born. And when we say that, what we mean is that our creator and our judge came to save us from our sins.

[26 : 15] Not the sins of other people. And he came not conceived in a union between a man and a woman with his own inherited sins to be atoned for. He was conceived by the Holy Spirit without the sins of fallen humanity.

Born to die as a pure, unblemished sacrifice for my sins and for your sins. As we say in the most famous verse in all the Bible, for God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

He came to save us from perishing and to save us to eternal life. So, you with me so far? We're singing about a holy infant.

We're singing about a heavenly Savior who's come to save us, not from other people, but save us from us, right? To save us from our sins. And then lastly, I want to talk about the gracious Redeemer.

Last few minutes, I just want to talk about the gracious Redeemer. In stanza three, I want to focus on that phrase, the dawn of redeeming grace. With the dawn of redeeming grace, what in the world does that mean?

[27 : 30] We sing it. What does it mean? Well, what happens at dawn? What happened this morning at dawn? After a long night of deep darkness, the sun rises in the morning with its radiant beams of pure light and it gives life to the world.

And what this song is saying is that the coming of the Son of God into the world is like that. He's the dawn. He's the sunrise of God's redeeming grace. Theologians talk about God's eternal covenant of redemption or God's covenant of redeeming grace.

And what that is is that the three persons of the Trinity, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in eternity past, before the foundation of the world, they made a sworn commitment each to the other about what they were going to do in the future.

And I want us just to imagine, before we sing this song, I want you to imagine how that commitment between the three persons of the Trinity was made and agreed upon. And here's how I imagine it to have sounded.

The Father says to His Son, He says, Son, I want to save a great company of men and women. I want to save a great company of boys and girls from their sins and from the fallen race of humanity.

[28 : 52] I want to save a great number of people. And it's going to require that someone goes down into the world, that someone perforates into time and space, that someone becomes like Adam, to do what Adam failed to do and to undo all the consequences of what Adam did.

My son, will you, will you do that? And Jesus says, I will, Father, I will. And the Father says to Him, well, you understand, my son, what that will mean.

You understand that you're going to become the target of satanic attack in a way that has never been the case with any man or woman before. I understand, Jesus says, I understand.

Will you understand that you're going to have to obey every facet and every detail of my word, every jot and tittle? I understand, Jesus says.

You understand that if you become the substitute for sinners, they're going to take you and abuse you. And they're going to nail you to a cross.

[30 : 05] Do you understand that? I understand, Jesus says. And do you understand, my son, that I will have to be just in that moment, that I will have to pour out my unmitigated wrath upon that sin which you're going to assume to yourself.

You're going to cry out from your cross, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Do you understand that, my son? And he says, Father, I understand that.

And will you still become the savior of sinners? Will you still become the gracious redeemer of my people? Yes, Jesus says, yes, I will.

Why? The father asks. Because I love them, Jesus says. Because you love them.

That's why. That's the eternal covenant of God's redeeming grace. grace. And here in the birth of Jesus Christ, God the father, who is love itself, he's shining his radiant beams of pure light through his son, Jesus.

[31 : 29] Jesus is the incarnation and the embodiment of love's pure light. And his coming into the world is the dawn, it's the sunrise of that eternal covenant of God's redeeming grace.

It's finally happening here and now. Jesus is the gracious redeemer. And this gracious redeemer, he is the true gift of Christmas.

That's why we give gifts to one another because he's the gift. And there's nothing more foolish than to turn away from this gift that God has given.

But there's also nothing more liberating than to receive it, to live and to die as one who's no longer merely a sinner, but one who's been saved from their sins by God's redeeming grace.

That's the priceless gift of Christmas. And I hope if you haven't received that gift, you receive it even today. And that if you have received that gift, that you would be so bold as to share that gift with the people that you love the most this Christmas.

[32 : 40] That's what Joseph Moore did on Christmas Eve, 1818. He penned these words a few years back and then he had his friend Franz Gruber set this poem to a memorable tune and then on

that night, Christmas Eve, 1818, these two men gave these suffering villagers in Austria a Christmas gift they'd never forget.

They walked to Midnight Mass at St. Nicholas Church. After service, they pulled out a guitar, which nobody did in those days. The organ was broken. Pulled out their guitar and this tenor and bass sang this carol for the first time and those notes rang out that night are still echoing across the world today all the way here in Berkeley, California.

So, now that we understand a little more about this holy infant and this heavenly Savior and this gracious Redeemer, you ready to sing to Him?

Let's sing together and we'll just take a moment of quiet and then when we're ready we'll offer this song to the praise of God in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Amen.