

THE SONG HEARD ROUND THE WORLD¹

Luke 2: 1-14

A Christmas Eve Meditation by Thomas R. McKibbens

December 24, 2009

Every year we reach a point where Christmas just has to happen. Bing Crosby has had his white Christmas. The chestnuts are roasted on the open fire, and Jack Frost has nipped at your nose. The little drummer boy has played his drum for him pa rum pum pum pum. Burl Ives has had a holly jolly time. Alvin and the chipmunks have sung their Christmas song. Grandma has been run over by the reindeer. Rudolph is popular again. The partridge is in the pear tree; the halls are decked with boughs of holly; Elvis has had a blue, blue, blue Christmas; the tree-tops are glistening; the children are listening; the Salvation Army is jingling; you've seen mommy kissing Santa Claus; Scrooge has once again realized the error of his ways; Jimmy Stewart has decided that life is really worth living; the miracle has happened on 34th street; the Grinch is no longer trying to steal Christmas from Whoville; Ralphie has his Red Ryder BB gun; Bill Murray has put a little love in your heart; and the terrible Herdmans have once again starred in the Christmas pageant. It has all happened, and now you are ready for the real thing.

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For some of us there is one thing that makes us say, “Now I know it is Christmas.” And that one thing is standing with a candle in hand in a beautiful church sanctuary and singing “Silent Night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright.” I have been thinking a lot about that carol since I told the story of its origin on the 3rd Sunday of Advent. I have pondered why it means so much to many of us. In fact, I have wondered why it is so important to people around the world. It has been translated into over 300 languages.

I

It is not a joyous, fast-paced carol like Handel’s “Joy to the World.” Nor is it theologically rich like Charles Wesley’s “Hark, the Herald Angels Sing.” Nor does it have a complex tune like “Angels We Have Heard on High.” In fact, it is the simplest of words and the simplest of tunes. What is it about “Silent Night” that makes it so important for us at Christmas?

I have seen the beauty of the Tyrol region of Austria between Salzburg and Innsbruck, but it was in September. I can only imagine how beautiful it must be in December, especially at night. The little town of Oberndorf is just outside of Salzburg, and the year was 1818. So imagine how crystal clear and cold it could be with no factories, no car exhaust, no electric lighting. Perhaps there was a half moon out.

And the creation of the carol came on the heels of a church emergency. The organ would not work. And Joseph Mohr, the pastor of St. Nikolaus Church (how right is that?) needed a Christmas carol that could be played on the guitar. So the story goes that he took a poem that he had composed two years earlier and visited his friend Franz Gruber, who was a school teacher and part-time organist. He asked Gruber if he could compose a tune to fit his poem.

The two creators of “Silent Night” were the first to perform it: Mohr sang tenor and played the guitar, while Gruber sang base. On that Christmas Eve, 1818, before a packed church at midnight and just before communion, the two men sang it, and the choir sang the last two repeating lines of each verse in four-part harmony.

The following year, the song became part of the repertoire of the Tyrolian musician families Rainer and Strasser. They eventually toured Europe and North America, bringing “Silent Night” to New York in 1839. So much for the history, but the question still hangs in the air: why has “Silent Night” become so loved at Christmas?

II

Is it the words—so tender and gentle in a tough and harsh world? Or is it the tune—so peaceful, so memorable, so quiet? It may be that it becomes so

important for us late on Christmas Eve because its quiet and reflective message calls us to slow down from the Christmas rush and contemplate the meaning of this special time. It is a kind of oasis of peace in our hectic world.

“All is calm, all is bright” we sing almost as a prayer, for we live in a world where it seems that nothing is calm. It calls us to reflect on the scene of Mary and Joseph and the child. “Round yon Virgin” we sing. And we all smile as we remember the old joke about the fat little guy name “Round John.” But soon we are brought back to the meaning: “Round yon virgin mother and child, holy infant, so tender and mild, sleep in heavenly peace.” The carol leaves us free to imagine the scene.

Then we feel the fear of the shepherds as they “quake at the sight” and hear “heavenly hosts sing Alleluia.” And we sing right along with the angels. Many paintings of the scene show rays of backlit light, but this carol paints the scene in words: “Glories stream from heaven afar...Radiant beams from thy holy face....”

The carol gently pushes us to consider what Christmas is all about. And it leaves us free to come to our own conclusion. Yet however we contemplate the meaning of Christmas, we conclude by singing “Christ, the Savior is born! Christ, the Savior is born!”

III

As we take communion this Christmas Eve, and as we sing “Silent Night” by candlelight, I hope we will resist the greatest temptation of all in this season: namely, to “put Christ into Christmas” only to leave him there—to receive with joy and gratitude the gift of the Word made flesh and to fail to live as the body of Christ the other 364 days of the year.

May we have the courage this Christmas to refuse to keep Christ in Christmas! May we follow the Christ of Christmas into the Christ of Good Friday and Easter, the Christ of the Sermon on the Mount and the Christ of doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with our God in every season of the year.

And may we be given the imagination to ask “what child is this” of each and every member of God’s beloved human family as we go out to do the work of Christmas.