

A Song in the Silent Night

So many songs come to my remembrance at Christmastime. Perhaps the most famous of all is “Silent Night.” The song was composed on Christmas Eve morning, December 24, 1818. The poem had been previously written by Joseph Mohr. He was wanting something special for the Christmas Eve service at their church, appropriately named St. Nicolas, in the Austrian village of Oberndorf, where he served as assistant. Mohr took the twenty-minute walk to his friend, organist, schoolteacher, and choirmaster, Franz Xaver Gruber’s house. On that very morning the two put together the song, *Stille Nacht! Heilige Nacht!* On Christmas Eve night, Mohr played guitar, and he and Gruber sang the first stanzas with the church choir backing them up in the final portion of the song. The song traveled far and near; it has been performed in churches, concert halls, municipal auditoriums, and cottages, among laity, clergy and before royalty around the world for almost two hundred years since. In my research, two historical pieces of information came to my attention. First, Mohr had been at St. Nicolas for only one year when the first performance of Silent Night was given by him, Gruber and the choir of St. Nicolas. Previously, Mohr had to resign a former church and underwent hospitalization for poor health before assuming his new position. The second piece of information was that Mohr had, in fact, written the poem in 1816, two years before collaborating with Gruber. It appears that Mohr wrote the poem in the midst of his illness that took him out of the pastorate. This was, it seems, when God had been silent, yet at the same time given him a song in the night. The song the Lord gave him during his darkest hour begins by speaking of something he so longed for: “Silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright. Round yon virgin mother and child, Holy Infant so tender and mild, Sleep in heavenly peace, sleep in heavenly peace.” The Bible says, “*Deep calleth unto deep at the noise of thy waterspouts: all thy waves and thy billows are gone over me. Yet the LORD will command his lovingkindness in the daytime, and in the night his song shall be with me, and my prayer unto the God of my life*” (Psalm 42:7, 8). “...Where is God my maker, who giveth songs in the night” (Job 35:10).

Consider those chosen “silent nights,” when God gives you a song in the night:

I. The Assignment of the Night

God made the night. “*And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day*” (Genesis 1:5). In Isaiah God says, “*I form the light, and create darkness...*” (Isaiah 45:7). Sometimes God assigns us the dark times. St. John of the Cross called it “the dark night of the soul.” Allow me to give you two benefits of the night:

(1) The dark creates hunger for the light.

“*For thou art my lamp, O LORD: and the LORD will lighten my darkness*” (II Samuel 22:29). I have often heard it said, “It is always the darkest before the dawn.” I believe this to be true. When the darkness comes we can either chose to have hope or be hopeless. Dr. Charles Allen often said, “The saddest word in the English language is the word hopeless.” Having hope is a choice. God was instilling hope within the hearts of His people when He said, “*Thy sun shall no more go down; neither shall thy moon withdraw itself: for the LORD shall be thine everlasting light, and the days of thy mourning shall be ended*” (Isaiah 60:20). Make note of the promise to those in the night, sunrise is coming! “...*the LORD shall be thy everlasting light, and the days of thy mourning shall be ended.*”

(2) The night sharpens the vision.

Have you ever entered a darkened room and felt you were stone blind, yet if you lingered and observed, your eyes adjusted to the darkness and if you looked, you began to see things you had not

seen before. Not long after our last child had left for college, I was studying in one of the kid's old bedrooms. As night fell, I turned off the lights and was astonished as I observed something I had forgotten about for years. The child who occupied this room as an elementary age child had placed opaque glow-in-the dark stars all over the ceiling so when his room was dark, he could look up and see the stars. The reason I had forgotten is that I was never in the room without the light. I was so amazed that I just lay on the floor looking into the milky way of a youth long gone. After all, "Never, Never Land" was located second star to the right and all the way to morning. Sometimes we need the night to remind us of our dreams. Have you ever noticed how brilliant the stars are way out in the country? The darker the sky, the brighter the stars.

II. The Angst of the Night

"And the people stood afar off, and Moses drew near unto the thick darkness where God was" (Exodus 20:21). Our angst often comes when God appears to be silent in our night. Isn't it touching, that the very fear of the dark that grips us in our youth should instead transform into trust. God's Word reveals that He was dwelling in the dark. If God is there, we need not fear.

III. The Answer in the Night

World War I was called the war to end all wars. Although it did not do that, it was one of the most costly wars ever fought on the face of the earth. The total killed during the war was a staggering 8,538,315 and the total wounded was 21,219,452. Yet as bloody and horrendous as those days of battle, there stands one momentous day in the winter of 1914. It took place on the battlefields of Flanders. The British and French were in fierce battle with the Germans. Both sides were dug in muddy trenches 6 to 8 feet deep, which seemed to stretch forever. Then on Christmas Eve all along the German trenches, Christmas trees, lit with candles began to appear. Christmas carols were heard above the trenches, and then as though they were being led by an unseen hand, there came an answer from the British and French trenches, across "no man's land." The carols were answered with carols. Much to the chagrin of some of the military brass, the men began to lay down their weapons and surface. The enemies met in "no man's land," buried their dead, and exchanged gifts of chocolate cake, post cards and newspapers. Why, some even played soccer. The moment that stands out was when someone started singing "Silent Night" in his respective language and it was answered as the song continued with everyone joining in singing in English, German and French. In the midst of this horrendous war that cost no less than 8 ½ million lives, heavenly peace was found one silent night.

In the midst of a world full of hate, bondage and iniquity, the baby Jesus was born. Even wicked Herod went into a killing spree with the slaughter of the innocents, but what peace came to the shepherds, what peace came to the wise men that traveled from the other side of the world when they found Jesus! *"For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace"* (Isaiah 9:6). A Scottish poet, a veteran of the Western Front, later penned these last words to a poem that commemorated the temporary armistice of WWI, "Oh ye who read this truthful rime, From Flanders, kneel and say: God speed the time when every day, Shall be as Christmas Day."

- Pastor Pope -

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