

THE NOT SO SILENT NIGHT

Scripture: Luke 2:8-20

This year our Advent worship services and family devotions are built around four well known Christmas carols. The carol for this week is “Silent Night,” but it occurs to me that the night of Jesus’ birth was not all that silent. For one thing a baby was born. This year six couples in our church have had a new baby born into their family. Their Christmas will not be silent. Then there was the barn. I have not spent a lot of time in barns, but I have seen the animals at the Spokane Interstate Fair, and they are not silent.

Add to that the crowded inn, the disgruntled guests, and the beleaguered innkeeper. As some of you know, I lead a Bible study every Wednesday at the House of Charity homeless shelter. As the temperature goes down, the tension goes up. People worried about a place to stay are not silent. People who do not have room to lie down are not quiet. There are very few homeless people in downtown Spokane who sleep in heavenly peace. And I don’t imagine it was any different in Bethlehem.

Finally, there was the Roman census. In America we have a census every ten years to determine the number of representatives each state will have in Congress. The more people there are in a state, the more representatives they get to send. But this Roman census was not about representation; it was about taxation. People were required to register so that the Romans could collect taxes from them. As you might expect this did not go over well in a country occupied by a foreign army. An ancient Jewish historian named Josephus says that during a census in the time when Quirinius was governor of Syria there were riots and armed attacks against the Romans. Think about the American Revolution. When a foreign army imposes taxes on a country to support its occupation of that country, the people are not usually silent.

So the world was not silent on the night Jesus was born. Not all was calm; not all was bright. It may not be for you this Christmas either

But Luke ignores all that. The cries of a mother giving birth, the cries of a baby thrust into a cold world, the bellows of the animals when they discover that their feed trough has been occupied by an intruder, the protests and riots of people living under oppression—Luke is totally silent about all that, which explains why Joseph Mohr wrote the song he did. When you read Luke’s gospel, it sounds like it really was a silent night where everything was calm and everything was bright.

But even in Luke’s gospel the night is not completely silent. “And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!’” In Luke’s gospel the night of Jesus’ birth is not rent with cries of anguish but with songs of praise, not the chants of protestors but the announcement of good news.

That is also true of the second verse in Silent Night.

Silent night, holy night! Shepherds quake at the sight,
Glories stream from heaven afar, Heavenly hosts sing: “Alleluia;
Christ the Savior is born, Christ the Savior is born.”

It was not a silent night, even in Joseph Mohr’s hymn.

So what about you? What sounds will punctuate your Christmas this year? As I mentioned six couples in our church will have a new baby making noise in their house this Christmas. On the other hand eight people in our church lost spouses this year. They will experience the silence of any empty place at the table. The service men and women in Iraq or Afghanistan may hear the sounds of war this Christmas. Their families will feel the silence of their absence. Some will hear the sounds associated with their job because they have to work on Christmas. Others will hear the silence of not having a job.

What sound or lack of sound will you hear this Christmas? It does not matter, because one sound still comes through: “Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord.” That sound, that news, silences the anguish and fills the silence. That is what Luke is telling us. The birth of Jesus silences the anguish and fills the silence. In a world of chaos it brings peace. In the midst of despair it offers hope. In a world of heart-breaking sadness it invites you to joy.

There is a poem written by Debbie Wallis that I once heard recited at a Whitworth Christmas choir concert. It goes like this:

It was not a silent night.
Men were questioning what this strange starlight meant.
Others, roused in the midst of their watch, no longer questioned.
For their night was split with the shock of a choir of angels
 Shouting, “Glory to God, the Christ child comes!”

It was not a silent night.
It was a noisy confusing night. The city was congested,
 tempers were short, the inns crowded—all of them!
And Mary and Joseph—what did their hearts cry
 when they saw the lowly birth bed?

It was not a silent night.
His coming tore a woman’s body. His coming was hard—
 dreadfully hard for everyone involved.
His coming was not a mythical anesthetized 20th century dream.
It was hard and cold. It was heavy.

But it was not silent.
He forever split our darkness with the proclamation of angels
 that the Light of the world was shining.
That for all ages to come we could know that heaven is not silent.

For God has spoken. He has come.

It was not silent that first Christmas. An angel chorus shattered the stillness. And still today it reverberates, silencing the fears and filling the silence of those who hear and follow.

- Ken Onstot
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