

Sing it Like you Mean It! Confessing the Carols

Silent Night – Romans 8:18-22

Brothers and sisters, family, friends and guests - there is nothing quite like singing Christmas carols on Christmas Eve, am I right? In fact, I think for many people a Christmas Eve service without singing carols wouldn't feel complete. There's just something about these familiar tunes and lyrics which ties everything together and makes Christmas Eve feel like its really Christmas Eve.

In fact, our whole sense of feeling like its the Christmas season is dependent not only upon seeing the various decorations and displays go up in the shops and malls and... but on hearing the familiar Christmas music and carols being played in the background. We need the soundtrack to complete the experience of the season.

And its great to have the Christmas music playing in the background – but did you ever consider if this is that what those songs and carols were actually created for?

Are they just about creating the ambience? Or do they have a more significant purpose to them - reflected in their lyrics.

And if you've ever paid attention to the lyrics – do you ever wonder if the person singing them actually believes what they are saying? And when you sing those lyrics – are you just singing them because its part of what you do during the Christmas season... or are you thinking about what you're singing - and are you singing it like you mean it?

Do you know what I'm talking about here?

Brothers and sisters, friends and guests, over the past four weeks here at Valleyview, we've been taking a closer look at some of the Christmas Carols and what they are saying, so that we can have a better and deeper – and more biblical – understanding of what we're singing, in order to really sing it like we really mean it.

Because when you're singing something, you're singing it because just saying it isn't enough. It's so meaningful, so

important, so profound, you believe it so sincerely that it needs to be expressed more poetically, more emotively, more evocatively – it needs to be sung.

So tonight... we are preparing ourselves to sing about the meaningful, important and profound event that is the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ, and before we get into that - we want to pause and reflect for a moment and ask ourselves – can we sing it like we meant it?

And its appropriate to do this brothers and sisters – especially as our focus in this service is on music. A good piece of music or singing has dynamics and our service does as well. You see in a good song there will be some parts that are loud and energetic, and other parts are softer and more contemplative, and sometimes a song will even have a short pause before kicking back in – so right now, this is a short pause in our celebration which helps to make it that much better... when it kicks back in.

And so, as we have this break in the music, its appropriate that we use it learn about one of the carols we'll sing when the music starts up again - Silent Night.

Now I've always found the words to this Carol to be a bit of an oxymoron – because the evening of Jesus birth was likely anything but quiet. For those of us who are parents, or for any nurses who work in a maternity ward – you know that the birth of a child is anything but quiet right?

A woman who is giving birth is in a lot of pain – she's not quiet, and when the baby arrives – there is a whole lot of crying...

And when the angels appeared to the shepherds to give them the news – they were terrified, and I would guess that involved a lot of yelling and shouting to each other in fear ...

And then the angels spoke and were praising God – again not a quiet matter

And afterwards the shepherds were excited and were telling everyone they met about what had happened – and probably not in quiet discrete tones, but more likely shouting joyfully as they went through the town.

So, as I said – it's seems a bit incongruous to be singing "silent night" while describing the events that took place on the eve of our Lord's birth.

But perhaps the backstory of how Silent Night came to be will help us understand what this carol is really saying, and move it from being background mood-setting music to something that is upfront and gives us a profound focus when we sing it.

It was back in 1816 and Europe was experiencing hard some times, which our current circumstances can help to empathize with somewhat... There had been twelve years of war, so there was widespread damage to the political and social infrastructure which created a great deal of instability and problems.

Additionally, there had been a massive volcanic eruption which spewed so much ash and debris into the atmosphere that it altered the weather patterns in Europe and no summer weather occurred in 1815, this resulted in crop failure and widespread famine.

So it was in the midst of all this, as an expression of faith during a time of chaos and uncertainty, that a young Austrian priest by the name of Joseph Mohr was inspired to write a poem called Stille Nacht. His original poem written in German was six verses long.

Two years later in 1818, Joseph was serving a church in Oberndorf, Salzburg Austria, which sits on the Salzach river. The church organ had been damaged by flooding from the river and Joseph was trying to figure out how to provide some music for the Christmas Eve service.

So, he took this poem he had written and asked his friend, Franz Gruber, to compose some music for it on his guitar – and together they performed this song for the congregation

on Christmas Eve of 1818, as a message of reassurance to his congregation that in the midst of all the hardship they had endured - the celebration of the birth of Christ was still significant and relevant to their lives.

And the rest is history. The song was picked up by travelling folk singers and German missionaries and was spread across the world, translated into over three hundred different languages. The three verses of the English version that we are familiar with were translated by John Freeman Young in New York City back in 1859.

And on Christmas Eve in 1914, during WW1 - ninety-six years after Silent Night was first performed – it was the carol that was sung by the British and German soldiers on the battlefield during the amazing Christmas Eve truce.

Now, knowing all the chaos and turmoil and struggles that the world was going through when Joseph Mohr first wrote these lyrics and turned them into a Christmas carol resolves the tension that makes them seem to be somewhat incongruous.

You see brothers and sisters, friends and guests – singing silent night, holy night about a night that was anything but silent, and in the midst of the trials and tribulations of our own lives... is a statement of faith.

This is the what the Christian faith is all about – living with and through what we see and experience and know to be going on in the world around us with, which is contradictory to what God has promised in scripture – and keeping faith through it.

That's what it means to confess something. When we confess the carols we're not using the word confess in the typical usage where you are admitting to a wrong doing – but we use to speak about how faith and belief persevere in spite of contrary evidence and circumstances and experiences.

When we sing silent night, holy night we are confessing that even though the evidence and experience around us says that this world is chaotic, harsh, unforgiving, and hopeless... we still have faith that God's action of sending His son Jesus, to be

born into our world as the messiah is the establishment of peace, love, joy and hope.

Confessing this carol means that we believe God's actions will someday bring about a reality that will supersede and replace and transform the reality of what we know is going on around us and even inside us right now.

When we sing this carol we are stating that even though we've been through a pandemic, even though there is war in Ukraine and in the Middle East, even though there are economic challenges, and even though there is political turmoil – we are certain and confident that there is a God at work behind the scenes.

A God who is greater than all these circumstances, a God who can outwit and outplan any crazy conspiracy theory, a God who is control and working through all things, a God who can bring good out of evil – to bring about His expected end...

So, no right now things are not silent, things are not holy in the world around us... and no things were not silent on the night of Jesus birth... but let us remember that while giving birth is not silent once the birth has been accomplished and the baby has been born and is being nurtured by the mother, feeding and being held – then there is a quietness, there is a stillness

Pain gives way to accomplishment, fulfillment, peace and joy and love - and the hope that lies within the promise of a newborn child – and not just any child, the Christ Child. God himself incarnate in human flesh and nature – redemption.

So brothers and sisters, as we prepare to sing this carol, as we prepare to confess Silent Night, let me close off with the words of scripture from Romans 8:18-19 where Paul writes “*I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed.*”

That revelation has begun in the birth of Christ!

So brothers and sisters let us sing Silent Night – and sing it as a confession that in the birth of Christ we have a promise that will one day cause the sin-affected reality that we see going on around us and within us to give birth to a new reality – without sin and evil, without suffering and death – sing with faith, sing it with trust, sing it with confidence, sing it like you mean it.

Because Christ has been born..... (light candle)

So let us stand – and light our candles in the hope and expectation and anticipate that Christ will come again.