

Sleep in Heavenly Peace
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Isaiah 9: 2, 6-7

You may already know the story behind the writing of the carol, Silent Night. In 1818 in Oberndorf, Austria, the village church had planned to celebrate Christmas with a drama put on by a traveling group. Unfortunately, the church organ was not working, so they went to a private home to see it.

As he walked home, the associate priest, Josef Mohr, moved by the drama, looked upon his snow-covered village. The scene reminded him of a poem he had written a couple of years earlier about the birth of Jesus. He thought it might make a good carol for the congregation to sing. The trouble was that pesky broken organ.

The next day he went to the organist, Franz Gruber. With only a few hours to go, Herr Gruber wrote a simple melody that could be accompanied by guitar. That night, on Christmas Eve, they sang it for their congregation. And that's how one of the best loved Christmas carols of all time was born.

Sleep in heavenly peace. The difficult truth is that so often there is no peace. While a malfunctioning organ is pretty minor when compared to global crises, to pastors and organists on Christmas Eve it is a big deal. Mohr's poem moved him beyond his worry over the *problem* to a *solution* which has blessed us now for two centuries.

Sleep in heavenly peace. It is a lovely sentiment, a lovely wish. Like so many other Christmas carols it could be a lullaby sung to the baby Jesus.

Jesus was born into a world which was not at peace. Oh, on the surface it seemed to be. The Pax Romana, or Roman Peace, kept outright war at bay. Ceasar had created "peace" by suppressing human rights. The text we heard from Isaiah would have been on the text on the lips of the Jewish people of Jesus' time. How to them poignant would be the vision, "*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.*"

It seems that we still live in a world which is filled with conflict and tension. People the world over are fleeing their homes, seeking asylum, leaving behind threats of violence – families running from gangs in Guatemala, girls in fear of Boko Haram in Nigeria, everyday people in Syria, women fleeing abusive partners in our own community. It seems there is no good will among people, no sleeping in heavenly peace.

We need a Silent Night.

One of the most famous stories about this beloved hymn took place during World War One. Though accounts vary, it seems that in the week leading up to Christmas 1914, groups of German and British soldiers began to exchange seasonal greetings, cigarettes and songs between their trenches. These small, unofficial ceasefires allowed soldiers on both sides to venture out into the trenches to collect and bury the bodies of those who fell.

One version of events has it that the Germans began singing "Stille Nacht", "Silent Night" on Christmas Eve. British soldiers, recognizing the tune, joined in. So close were the encampments, they could hear each other in the peaceful quiet singing "Silent Night," each in their own language.

This prompted the soldiers to come out and meet on the battlefield, without weapons, and they spent the day playing soccer and exchanging small gifts—whatever they had.

Actual letters from soldiers who witnessed the truce give us a glimpse of that Christmas Eve on the Western Front 100 years ago. I've asked Molly and Gerrit to help me read excerpts of these letters, to hear their version of what happened:

Molly: "The Germans started singing and lighting candles about 7.30 on Christmas Eve, and one of them challenged anyone of us to go across for a bottle of wine. One of our fellows accepted the challenge and took a big cake to exchange."

Gerrit: "We came from our mouseholes and saw the English advancing towards us and waving cigarette boxes, handkerchiefs and towels. They did not have rifles with them, so we knew it could only be a greeting and that it was alright."

Molly: "We had a church service and sang hymns, we met the Germans midway between the trenches and wished each other a 'Merry Christmas'. We exchanged buttons, badges, caps, etc., and we all sang songs."

Gerrit: "They gave us cigars and cigarettes and toffee and they told us they didn't want to fight but had to. Some could speak English as well as we could, and some had worked in Manchester. The Germans seem very nice chaps who were awfully sick of the war."

Molly: "We were able to move about the whole of Christmas Day with absolute freedom. It was a day of peace in war.... It is only a pity that it was not a decisive peace."

Gerrit: "A German soldier said to me 'today (Christmas Day) nice; tomorrow, shoot.' As he left, he held out his hand, which I accepted, and said: 'Farewell, comrade.' With that we parted...."

Remembering this truce a century later isn't just about what happened then, as amazing as it surely was. It's about what we, God's children and followers of the Prince of Peace, can do now, amid conflict and fear in the 21st century.

What we can do today, right now – this Christmas, to help our families, our communities, our world hang on to our humanity, so that all children may "*sleep in heavenly peace*"?

What can we do to continue to love one another and to care about those we don't even know, while so many around us shout to hate and fear and give up on the real possibilities for compassion, peace and reconciliation?

Our exploration of the hymn "Silent Night" during this Advent/Christmas season is a way of "shining a light" on the power of reaching out across divides and getting silent enough to listen to the "*hopes and fears of all the years*" of those we tend to cast as the enemy (or simply "different") for one reason or another.

We still need a Silent Night.

Like that one person who issued the initial invitation to come out of our trenches and connect face to face, we too have the ability to reach out across divides and connect. As human beings, with common human needs, who desire peace for ourselves and the children in our care.

Jesus, the Bethlehem Babe, born into a world of trouble and woe, the Child who fled to Egypt in fear for his life, the man executed due to a conflict between church and state, is the One who brings us salvation.

Out of despair, Jesus brings hope.

Out of hatred, Jesus teaches us love.

Out of death, Jesus brings life.

I do not know the answers for how our country should reform our immigration policy or what our role should be in addressing global terrorism. What I do believe is that God's love comes to all people. And the peace of God urges us to seek compassion and good will – in our families, our community, our country, and the world. We establish good will by really listening to each other, by naming the problems which haunt us, by working together to resolve them.

May it be so, and may it be soon. Amen.