

It was 200 years ago on Christmas Eve in St. Nicholas Church in Oberndorf, Austria that “Silent Night, Holy Night” was first sung.

Joseph Mohr was the priest at the church and wanted Christmas music for the Christmas Eve mass. You see, the organ was broken.

According to Bill Egan, the historian for this Christmas Carol, the nearby Salzach River was always flooding the area, and the dampness from the flooding caused rust and mildew in various parts of the organ and it couldn't be played.

Father Mohr had written a poem a couple of years earlier, and he took that poem to the church's organist, Franz Gruber, and asked for help in creating a new song for Christmas.

It's hard to think of “Silent Night, Holy Night” being a new song, isn't it? But the poem was set to music for a guitar with two solo voices and chorus.

They decided that Father Mohr would play the guitar and sing the melody and Franz Gruber would sing the bass part.

It would be easy for the choir to rehearse, since they would merely repeat, in four-part harmony, the last two phrases of each of the six verses.

As the two men, backed by the choir, stood in front of the main altar in St. Nicholas Church and sang “Silent Night, Holy Night” for the first time, I don't think they could imagine the impact their new song would have on the world.

They were simply trying to make the best of a bad situation to provide music for Midnight Mass!

On one hand, though, I think they got the story wrong.

Let's be honest. When a baby is born, silence is not part of the picture!

And on this particular night, you had a sky full of angels singing, shepherds bursting in on the stable, and the stable itself full of animals.

Sleep in heavenly peace?

Maybe later, but ‘Noisy Night’ would have been a more literal title for this hymn!

If it had been up to us:

- Jesus would have been born about 3 o'clock in the afternoon so as to make all the evening network news shows;
- CNN and FOX would provide continuing coverage for the whole world to see;
- Mary and Joseph would be scheduled for The View;
- Anderson Cooper would go into the fields to interview the shepherds;
- Sixty Minutes would do an exposé on the innkeeper and why there should have been room in the inn;
- The angels' chorus would be on the TV show “Lip Sync Battle”;
- And we would have a new reality series, “Keeping Up with the Wise Men!”

Mary might ponder these things in her heart, but you and me? We would go for Selfies and Facebook!

All would be bright with lights, but calm? Who's calm when a baby is born, especially this baby?

But all of that comes from you and me trying to do Christmas, as if we are in charge of Christmas.

Because what we learn from this hymn, what the song gets so right about the story of that first Christmas night is that for you and me to have Christmas, the real Christmas, we don't have to do a thing!

I don't mean that we don't get ready to celebrate Christmas, that we don't sing the songs, that we don't decorate or give gifts or clean up afterwards.

What I mean is that Christians gather around the world tonight and sing this song, a Christmas Eve summary of our desires in difficult times.

All that we long for in this troubled world is given voice and melody in this carol that tells the story of what God did at Christmas.

God does Christmas for you and me.

Christmas is:

- God's invitation to come and see what has happened!
- God decorating the night skies so that we can make our journey to worship and see the newborn king!
- God coming to earth in this baby!

The real Christmas is what God does for you and me.

Madeline L'Engle describes it in her poem:

*"That was no time for a child to be born,
In a land in the crushing grip of Rome.
Honor and truth were trampled by scorn
Yet here did the Savior make his home.*

*When is the time for love to be born?
The inn is full on the planet earth.
And by greed and pride the sky is torn
Yet love still takes the risk of birth.*

God does Christmas for you and me because God takes the risk at Christmas: to make the new song when the situation is bad, to make the music simple and unforgettable so everyone can sing it.

"Don't be afraid," God says, "I know life can be difficult, it isn't what you planned; yet don't be afraid."

That's the story of the real Christmas that this song tells.

God is saying, "Don't be afraid" or as Father Mohr translated it: "All is calm, all is bright".

Yes, God did, God does, and God will do Christmas for you and me.

Don't be afraid: because the Christ child is born, you can sleep in heavenly peace.

This song, this music, for 200 years has told a 2,000-year-old story

- and continues to reach into the hearts of the faithful and...
- announces in the face of any tyrant the world can produce and...
- in spite of all the inn doors slammed in our face and...
- through all the dark nights of our soul...
- that with God, all things are possible, that even now, unto us a child is born.

And in that child, God has said all that needs to be said, and the night is silent.

And in that child, God is, and the night is holy.

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.