

Sermon for 12-24-18
Gospel -- Luke 2:1-20
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This is a tale of three Christmases. Or three Christmas Eves, actually.

The first is in the year 1818, in a town called Oberndorf, just outside Salzburg, Austria. A young priest named Joseph Mohr planned a special ending to the Christmas Eve mass at St. Nicholas parish, where he had served for about a year. Shortly before Christmas, a winter flood had caused major damage to the church and wreaked havoc on the organ. There was no way the instrument would be repaired in time for Christmas Eve. Mohr had the text of a poem he'd written two years earlier about the night of Christ's birth, and he asked his friend Franz Gruber, the organist at a neighboring church, to set his poem to music.

So Gruber, his organist friend, composed a tune for Mohr to play on the guitar alongside his little choir. Something simple and singable; Mohr wanted it to sound like a lullaby. Gruber wrote the music in a single afternoon, and the sweet song that made its debut with just a few voices and a priest strumming his guitar on that Christmas Eve night in 1818 has now been translated into 140 languages. And the little church outside Salzburg with the broken organ has become a tourist attraction, a sort of Christmas pilgrimage site, 200 years later. It's now known as the Silent Night Chapel, the place where one of the world's most beloved carols was born.^{i ii}

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That's the first Christmas Eve. The second one was just shy of a century later, in 1914, also in Europe. Hostilities in what would become known as the First World War had begun six months earlier, and by Christmas Eve 1914 approximately 150,000 troops were engaged in combat. There are lots of different versions of what happened in the trenches and on the battlefields that night; but it's believed that two-thirds of the troops (British,

Belgian, French, and German) participated in some form of impromptu truce.ⁱⁱⁱ

A British soldier named Graham Williams described his experience like this: "It was a Christmas card Christmas Eve... white beautiful moonlight, frost on the ground... And round about... 7 or 8 in the evening... all of a sudden, lights appeared all along the German trench and I thought, 'That's a funny thing' and then the Germans started singing '*Stille nacht*' [Silent Night]. I woke up -- all the other sentries did the same thing -- we all woke up the other people to come along and see this -- what on earth's going on.

[The Germans] finished their carol -- we applauded them then we thought we must retaliate in some way so we replied with 'The First Noel.' When we finished that they all began clapping, then they struck up their other favorite carol, 'O Tannenbaum...

So we went on -- first the Germans singing one of their carols and then we'd sing another of ours. Then we started up 'O Come, All Ye Faithful' the Germans immediately joined in singing the same thing to the Latin words '*Adeste Fideles*.' And I thought, well, this is really a most extraordinary thing -- two nations both singing the same carol in the middle of a war."^{iv}

On Christmas morning, in some areas, soldiers emerged from their trenches and met in the areas between them -- 'No Man's Land' -- to share cigarettes, tell jokes, pose for photographs, and bury the dead on both sides. The Christmas Truce of 1914, short-lived as it was, brought a tiny bit of peace and light and humanity into the middle of those blood-soaked battlefields. And it all started with a simple carol.

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I misspoke earlier, when I said this was a tale of three Christmas Eves; it's actually a tale of four. I hope you'll forgive me.

The first Christmas Eve happened long before the other two, centuries before. It's the one Luke describes in the second chapter of his Gospel, which we heard a few minutes ago. You know the story -- Augustus, the Roman Emperor, called for a grand registration, a census. Joseph, that gentle and devoted son of David, makes the journey to his hometown of Bethlehem, and he's not alone. He's brought along his young and very pregnant fiancée, Mary, who's due to give birth imminently. And of course there's no room at the inn, no guesthouses where they can stay... but we can imagine there were plenty of raised eyebrows and whispers as this man of high reputation searched high and low for a room and a bed for his betrothed in her hour of great need.

And we know what happened. No room, but they did the best they could, and the newborn Savior and Redeemer of the World was wrapped in strips of cloth and laid in a trough where cows and horses fed.

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The fourth Christmas Eve -- well I can't tell you much about the fourth Christmas Eve, because you are writing that story right now. I can tell you that it's over two thousand years since the first Christmas Eve, and we're not in Bethlehem or Europe, there's been no flood, and this is certainly not a battlefield.

And although I may not know all the circumstances of your life, or the kind of year you've had, your joys and your sorrows, or exactly what brought you into this sanctuary today/tonight, here's what I do know: you're here. You're here to sing the songs and hear the story because even though you've sung these songs and heard this story before, you **know** deep in your soul that you **need** the gift of Christmas Eve -- you need the Good News. Our whole world needs this Good News!

We are fractured and broken, like the organ in that little Austrian church in 1818. We are divided and turned against each other, like those soldiers in the trenches in 1914. We are all searching for a place to find comfort and lay

our heads, like Mary and Joseph on that holy night, and we are all ready to birth something new together, to seek and find a better way of living, honoring each other's dignity, nurturing and cultivating grace and mercy and hope and love in the midst of this world of despair.

Here's a little secret, one you probably already know if you stop to think about it: our God has a way of bringing glory from chaos, peace from division, beauty and joy and newness from that which is broken, or bloodied, or humble and lowly. Our God shines light into the darkness, and sends hope into our longest night.

May the Christ-child, the One who saves and restores and redeems us all, be born anew in you tonight. **Amen.**

ⁱ <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/silent-night-celebrates-its-bicentennial-180971044/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.cnn.com/travel/article/silent-night-salzburg/index.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://time.com/3643889/christmas-truce-1914/>

^{iv} <http://www.bbc.co.uk/guides/zxsfyrd>