

TWO HUNDRED SILENT NIGHTS

**A holiday homily given on Christmas Eve by
The Rev. Dr. Kelly Murphy Mason at UU Wellesley Hills on
Monday, December 24th, 2018**

Two hundred years ago tonight, an associate pastor met his friend the church organist after their Christmas Eve services had ended, right outside by the Nativity scene, where the pastor played his guitar and the organist joined him in singing a duet the two of them had written especially for the occasion. So their song “Silent Night” is now celebrating its bicentennial. By most accounts, it is the best-known Christmas carol on earth. This year, more than two billion people sing it in roughly 300 language and dialects. In just a little while, we ourselves will sing it in this Sanctuary. It is highlight of our Lessons and Carols service each year; it’s the song we sing once the overhead lights go down and our candles flicker in the dark. “All is calm,” we intone, “all is bright.” In that instant, we believe all is.

Together we are singing a lullaby to Jesus at his birth, a “holy infant, so tender and mild” held in his mother’s arms. We cannot deny the appeal of Madonna and Child this holiday, the reverence we all feel for that amazing moment of birth. The junior pastor who authored “Silent Night”, Joseph Mohr, originally penned the lyrics at a famous pilgrimage site in Austria, a Basilica dedicated to Mary. He was recent graduate from seminary where he might never have been admitted. Mohr was born out of wedlock to a poor mother and a soldier who

deserted his military post. He was born in what were then considered shameful circumstances; only a special dispensation granted him permission to prepare for the priesthood. But he needed that melody composed by a friend to sing his tribute to “love’s pure light” to the public.

Most of Mohr’s ministry was to the marginalized of his time. His mountainous region had suffered horribly in the Napoleonic wars and afterwards been subjected to fire and famine alike. As a young priest, he served small faith communities on the verge of despair, often in menial roles at remote outposts. He tried to instill hope in the people and had modest success in that, much to the annoyance of his church superiors. One senior priest complained that Mohr had a penchant for singing “uplifting songs”, which somehow seemed to offend his pious sensibilities. Such critiques might help to explain why Mohr sang with his friend Franz Gruber after the Christmas Eve service, and not during it. As one music critic notes, “the song... makes it possible to hope for and believe in a better life here on earth again”, which is clearly a scandalous proposition in some quarters. Perhaps these are even quarters close to you, around where you live now.

When Mohr died after honorable clerical service that included important social advocacy for the children around the Alps - he built them schools, and established scholarships fund for those born to unwed mothers - the whole of his estate consisted of a worn guitar. Indeed, it was his one and only guitar, the same one he used to play “Silent Night” with Gruber in 1818. Today it sits in a museum, a prized historic artifact.

The popularity of “Silent Night” is now a global phenomenon. “It’s a simple lullaby... said to express tenderness and a beautiful sense of melancholy,” one musicologist explains. “The song is neither liturgical nor stern; it is a love song to a newly born child. It is a song of peace, filled with spirituality, which crosses barriers.... It belongs to all... those in the world who have good intentions.” In 2011, UNECSO affirmed its contemplative melody as an Intangible Cultural Heritage, one that now holds “status as a world peace song” and has a distinct musical legacy.

While Mohr and Gruber’s was not included in a Salzburg songbook until nearly 50 years after its holiday premiere, it had already gained multinational acclaim. It appeared in a Boston score, for instance, as early as 1842. But in the international arena, it is best known as for featuring prominently in the Christmas Eve truce of 1914 along the Western Front. At that point, more than a million soldiers have been killed or wounded in World War I. For a 50 mile stretch near Flanders, though, the firing ceased as troops began to observe Christmas. They lit trees outside their trenches and started to sing carols including “Silent Night”, in a host of languages. They all committed the crime of fraternization while they harmonized. The brought a “heavenly peace”, briefly but believably, to earth that holiday season.

Sometimes in our Candlelight service, the carols themselves contain the greatest lessons. Maybe you came here with friends or with family, or maybe you came by yourself, seeking the enduring spirit of

this holiday, all these centuries and millennia hence. Silent Night captures that so well: hope is insistent; it breaks in on our despair, wherever it weighs heaviest on the world or in our history. Christmas communicates this revolutionary proposition that a compassionate God is intimately concerned with our broken human condition and even labors within it. Regarding the Nativity on a cold winter night, Mohr spied “the dawn of redeeming grace.” Redeeming grace! Treasure those words, and ponder them in your own hearts — what do they mean to you? What do they mean tonight? What will they mean tomorrow, or in days to come, or in the next year? Imagine — Love, newborn, come entirely to life.

*** * ***