

Silent Night, Holy Night

When you hear the Christmas story, you get a picture in your head of what things must have looked like at the birth of Jesus. Sometimes it's interesting to find out how others envision that scene. I read recently about a children's Sunday School class that heard the Christmas story and sang the beloved Christmas carol, "Silent Night". They were then asked to draw what they thought the nativity scene might have looked like. One little fellow did a good likeness of Joseph, Mary and the baby Jesus, but off to the side was a roly-poly figure. The teacher, thinking that the boy had somehow worked Santa Claus into the scene, asked him who that was. She wasn't sure whether she was relieved or even more worried when the boy responded, "Oh, that's Round John Virgin!"

If we were really truthful, we would admit that our picture of the birth of Jesus is often influenced more by Christmas carols and Christmas cards than the actual account given to us in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. That may be because the Gospel accounts are a little short on details, so we tend to fill in the gaps with our imaginations. The Gospel of Matthew simply says about that wonderful night, "[and Joseph} **did not know her till she had brought forth her firstborn Son. And he called His name Jesus.**" (Matthew 1:25). The Gospel of Luke gives us a bit more information: "**And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.**" (Luke 2:7). The Scripture doesn't say that Jesus was born on December 25th, or that there were three kings, or that the stable was full of animals, or that a little drummer boy played. I love all those Christmas carols even though at times they tend to embellish the story a bit.

Think about that wonderful song, "Silent Night," that our choir just sang. "Silent Night! Holy Night! All is calm, all is bright..." Consider this for a moment. Silent Night? Really? How many of you have ever been present at the birth of a child? Okay, be honest now - was it silent? Childbirth is usually noisy, isn't it?

And think about where Jesus was born. Remember what the scripture story tells us - Bethlehem was crowded with visitors coming home to register for the Roman census. Neither the locals nor the visitors would have been very happy about the decree. Tempers were probably short, words were spoken in anger, people were taken advantage of, and rooms were at a premium. It was so crowded that there was no room for Joseph and his pregnant wife Mary at the inn. So Jesus was born among the animals, his bed was a manger, a feeding trough for animals.

Was all calm that night? Let's see - a baby born in a stable, shepherds visiting, angelic choirs singing overhead - it doesn't sound very calm to me! And yet, when we picture this scene, we don't picture noisy chaos, do we? We picture exactly what the song says - a silent night, a holy night, where all is calm and all is bright.

And you know, in a sense, I don't think we are totally wrong! I like to think that in the midst of noisy childbirth chaos, there was a sense of calm, a sense of holiness, because the power of God was upon that little stable, surrounding that mother and father and child. You see, it may not have been a truly silent night, but it was indeed a Holy Night!

It was a Holy Night because in the birth of that little child, God had fulfilled a promise made to the people of Israel thousands of years before. God had promised to send a savior, a Messiah, an anointed one who would deliver the people from their oppressors and would free them from their sins. And this was not a joy meant only for Israel - the prophets had proclaimed that the Messiah would come, not only for the sake of Israel, but for the sake of all the nations, all the people of the world. On that Holy Night, a baby was born who would be the Savior of the world.

It was a Holy Night because all of God's plans and purposes were coming together. The glorious night of Jesus' birth was but the beginning of the story. The child that was born would grow up to be a teacher, a preacher, a healer, and most of all,

a Savior. The child Jesus would one day take upon Himself the righteous punishment of God for the sins of all humanity - dying on our behalf, cruelly tortured and killed on a cross. But that was not the end of the plan, of God's plan - for death could not hold the Son of God! Jesus was raised from the dead by the power of God, He appeared to His disciples, He ascended into heaven where He has all authority and power at the right hand of the Father, and He promised that he will come again to bring final peace to our world. On that Holy Night, a baby was born who was the King of kings and Lord of lords.

It was a Holy Night because it was God Himself who was born. This is the eternal mystery of God, that He is Three-in-One - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The child born to Mary was not just an earthly child, although he was fully human. His father was not the man Joseph, although it seems Joseph lovingly raised Jesus through his early years. The Son of God did not come into being when Jesus was conceived in the virgin's womb, or the night He was born in Bethlehem. Jesus was with God at the creation of the world, all things were made through Him and for Him. The John in the first chapter of his Gospel proclaims this truth when he calls Jesus the Word saying, **"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. 4 In Him was life, and the life was the light of men... 14 And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth."** (John 1:1-4, 14). No wonder the angels sang, **"Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!"** (Luke 2:14). On that Holy Night, a baby was born who was God Himself.

When we sing the beloved Christmas carol "Silent Night", we grasp in our hearts and souls an essential truth - yes, it may not have been a very silent night, but it was indeed a Holy Night - a night that would change our lives forever. On that

Holy Night, a baby was born who was God Himself, who would grow up to be the Messiah, our Lord and Savior. On that Holy Night, God gave us His greatest gift, the Son of God, the Savior. Through the Lord Jesus God gives to us the forgiveness of sins. He adopts us into His forever family. He raises us from the dead and gives us eternal life-- all we have to do is accept that gift, and believe. As the third verse of "Silent Night" so beautifully proclaims - "Silent night! holy night! Son of God, love's pure light, radiant beams from thy holy face, with the dawn of redeeming grace, Jesus, Lord at thy birth, Jesus, Lord at thy birth!"

Thanks be to God for His glorious Christmas gift to us, given on that holy night!

There's a painting by Holman Hunt called *The Light of the World* that hangs in St. Paul's Cathedral in London. Most of you have probably seen a print of it. It pictures Jesus on a dark night carrying a bright lantern. He is standing at a closed door, knocking, the door appears to be overgrown with weeds. There is no handle on the outside of the door where Christ stands knocking. The door remains unopened. When I see that painting it always reminds me of the words of Jesus in Revelation 3:20, **"Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me."**

One day a little boy was standing in front of the painting with his father. "Daddy," he said, "why don't they answer the door?"

The father said, "I don't know why."

The boy thought about it some more and then said, "Maybe they're making too much noise to hear him knocking."

Maybe that is why we need a Silent Night, a Holy Night, so we will stop making so much noise and listen for the Son of God, the Light of the World, knocking on the door of our hearts. He will not force His way in. You must open the door.