

“O HOLY NIGHT.”

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First Christian Reformed Church

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Scripture Texts: John 1:1-14; I John 1:5-7

O Holy Night.

This classic Christmas carol has an interesting history. It is a story that combines a back-sliding French Catholic turn socialist, a Jewish composer, an attempted nation-wide censorship, a failed Unitarian American pastor/abolitionist, and a landmark moment in the history of communication.

In 1847 a Catholic priest in Roquemaure (rok e mar), a small village in southern France, wanted a new hymn to be sung at Christmas Eve mass. There was a man in town who was well known as a poet. Placide Cappeau was the town wine commissioner. I don't know if he imbibed too much of what he was in charge of overseeing, but he had a reputation as a trouble maker and showed no particular interest in the church or religion.

But the priest's request for a poem based on Luke 2 challenged him and while riding a stagecoach to Paris he compose a poem, Cantique de Noel. He sought out a friend of his to write a tune, a well-known composer of ballets and opera, Adolphe Adam, a Jew.

Adam didn't know much about Christmas or the Christmas story, but he was moved by the words and wrote a tune that was sung three weeks later on Christmas Eve, just as we are doing today, one hundred seventy years later.

The carol was an instant hit among the churches in France and spread quickly until it became known that Placide Cappeau was socialist who had left the church, and that the tune was composed by a Jew who didn't believe Jesus. This was scandalous and the church quickly denounced the song and tried to ban it from all churches. But it was too late.

A decade later a Harvard divinity school graduate turned failed Unitarian pastor, John Sullivan Dwight, turned to publishing a journal of music. Always on the search for new material he discovered this French poem, Cantique de Noel, and was taken by the haunting tune and by the line in the third verse about slaves, since he was a strong abolitionist. He translated the poem into English, gave it the title,

O Holy Night, and published it in America where it became a big favorite, especially in the north during the Civil War.

One more twist in the story of this hymn before we look at the hymn. In 1906 in Massachusetts Reginald Fessenden (33 year old professor and former chief chemist for Thomas Edison) was about to do what was thought impossible and send a man's voice out into the air without wires and it be heard.

Using an alternator-transmitter at 9 pm on Christmas Eve he and his wife spoke into a microphone some of Luke 2 and then with his violin he played the first song ever played on radio, O Holy Night. What a shock for the all the people used to hearing the dots and dashes of Morse code, to hear a voice. The first wireless radio broadcast was heard on ships in the Atlantic, and it was Luke 2 and O Holy Night. That was the beginning of AM broadcasting.

This carol is one of the most recorded in the entertainment industry. I typed O Holy Night into YouTube and got 11 million results. The only carol I found with more hits is the carol for tomorrow morning, Joy to the World.

This carol is as rich in meaning as it is rich in history.

Stanza 1, why Christ came.

O Holy night. Holy means set apart for a special or sacred use. This day, this night is holy, set apart from all others as the night of our dear Savior's birth.

From a human perspective there was nothing holy about this night. An ordinary couple in an ordinary town, in an ordinary stable, with ordinary shepherds. But the ordinariness of earth is invaded and visited by the extraordinariness of heaven.

Why was Jesus born at night? It was because of darkness that Jesus came. Darkness represents our world and our hearts, darkness represents sin and evil, all that's wrong with our world.

Long lay the world in sin and error pinning.

Pining is an old word, but a good one. It means longing or yearning. It is a kind of desperate longing for something you can't buy, you can't get, that's out of your reach unless someone gives it to you.

For thousands of years the world has long been in the grasp of sin and groaning under a weight, yearning for freedom.

Romans 8:19-21 For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. 20 For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope 21 that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

Remember how I said last week that I appreciated the old hymn writers not shrinking away from sin. So it is all the more amazing that this rebellious poet should mention it.

One reason we lack joy in Christmas is we fail to see God as holy, and our sin as serious. Serious sin says “Father, I have sinned, I am not worthy to be your child, I have sinned in thought, word and deed, in not loving you with all my heart, soul, mind and strength and not loving my neighbor as myself. Forgive me please and wash me clean.”

Serious sin leads to serious joy. when a light dawns, forgiveness is given and a thrill of hope floods our soul and our soul feels its worth.

The soul felt its worth.

What does it mean for your soul to feel its worth? Does your soul feel its worth? Where do we try to get our worth or value? From family, friends, job, social circles we travel in, who we know, who knows us, how well our kids do in school or sports, whatever we can brag about. We are all trying to find our worth and value somewhere in something.

Don't get your worth from anything that can be taken away or lost. Jesus makes our souls feel their true worth. He is the one who gives us purpose and meaning.

Your soul was worth God giving up His glory in heaven, worth God becoming human, worth God being humbled and humiliated by sinful man, worth God dying a horrible death on a cross.

Have you been stunned by the incarnation, the beauty of God becoming man to die for us, to save us from our sins, to remove the curse? Are you in awe of the love of God for you? Are you amazed that the eternal God would leave heaven and come to this dirty sinful earth? May you leave here amazed, stunned, in awe at what God has done.

Your worth and value and importance in this world aren't defined by what the world says or your friends or even your parents or spouse. Your worth and value are defined by what your creator and redeemer says about you, and what He has done for you.

You have eternal significance and value, your life matters for all eternity, it matters that you find your worth and value in Jesus Christ. He came into this dark world to take us home to glory.

***A thrill of hope the weary world rejoices
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn!***

The weary world. This is the world Jesus came into. A world weary of Roman oppression, weary of government intervention, weary of waiting for this promised Messiah who it seemed was never going to come.

This is our world. Weary of waiting for God to answer, weary of waiting for the right person, or the right job, or the right break, or weary to get past this present chapter and on to the next, weary of waiting for life to make sense, weary of living and wondering what's the point.

The birth of Jesus Christ is the end of weariness and meaninglessness and purposelessness. Jesus is the hope in a weary world, in a world desperately longing for hope and peace, in a soul thirsty for truth and life. Jesus brings a kind of hope that wells up into a thrill of hope.

The light of God has come into our dark world and our dark hearts. Only by the light of Jesus can we see truth and hope and salvation.

What is your world like? Is it weary? Are you worn out? Are you struggling with the idea of hope? Are you hope deprived? Are you putting hope in things that keep letting you down? In the wrong places?

Yes our worlds are weary. But God has come, God has what we need. Don't let go of Christ, don't let go of hope. A good friend of mine let go of hope last year and took his life. He took his eyes off of Christ. Whatever your darkness is, look to the light. Hold fast to the hope that is ours in Christ.

It is the weary soul that rejoices the most.

The prophet Jeremiah lived in an exceedingly weary world, Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians and Israel was taken into captivity. He poured out his heart in Lamentations.

Lamentations 3:20-26 My soul continually is bowed down [downcast] within me.
21 *But* this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope:
22 The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end;
23 they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.
24 “The Lord is my portion,” says my soul, “therefore I will hope in him.”
25 The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him.
26 It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.

Our hope is in the Lord. Sometimes you have to wait. Sometimes you have to sit in silence.

Lazarus was dead, without hope, but Jesus raised Him. For 38 years a man couldn't walk, and one day with Christ changed everything. For 12 years a woman suffered an issue of blood, and one touch with Christ changed everything. What a difference one day can make.

Romans 13:12 The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.

The incarnation of Christ on Christmas is the one day that makes a difference for all eternity

The Lord is our portion, our daily bread. God is what you need, He is your hope. He has what you need for your marriage, your kids, your job, your future.

Make His hope what you need to keep going. The Lord is good to those who hope in Him. The sun always rises. The Son always rises in us. Seek Him, seek the joy from Him that comes in the morning. Seek Him to be the lifter of your head.

After thousands of years of darkness, the darkness no longer reigns, darkness's power has been broken, the light has come and the darkness can no longer overcome it. The true light has come into the world.

John 1:14 The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Stanza 2, how Christ came.

This is the incarnation. It's historical, real places, real people, real events recorded in history. This is not a once upon a time myth or fairy tale.

In fact one way you can tell it isn't made up is no one would make up a story like this about God.

That first Christmas is just too crazy. A pregnant virgin teenager, a young scared husband, a birth in a barn. And baby births are not just sweet, precious moments. There is pain, there is crying, there are sleepless nights.

God became one of us, like us in our weakness and need. He is no stranger to what it means to be human, though without sin, to live in a weary world.

Stanza 3, what we should do as a result of Christ's coming.

O Little Town of Bethlehem got practical by ending with a prayer. O Holy Night gets practical by calling us to respond to this thrill of hope, in three ways.

First, Jesus' actions teach us to love one another and show that love. In a weary world filled with hate and violence this is the light of the gospel, to show love toward one another.

How we live and how we love says and shows what we believe about Jesus.

John 13:34-35 A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

When the light of Christ is in us then we become lights in the world, shining the light of Jesus. We have received the gift of light and we are to share that gift. As we follow the light may we so live as to attract others to the light.

Second, Jesus' actions of setting us free calls us to do what we can to set others free from the chains of oppression, of addiction, of racism, of whatever diminishes the worth of the soul. How can we show others their value in God's eyes and our own?

Why is the slave our brother? Because we all were once slaves, in bondage to our sin, until we were set free by faith in Jesus. We share the slaves past, we are the same, brothers.

There can be no pride, we are no better than the person in bondage to sin, addicted to whatever controls them. That was us, if we are honest.

We all have friends and family who are shackled by grief and depression and loneliness, and held in bondage by bitterness, anger, prejudice, hopelessness, addictions. Do we have a story to tell them, a story about a the worth of their soul and the new and glorious morn? Can we show them the thrill of hope?

Third, Jesus' actions toward us are all cause for worship, cause to stop doing what we are doing and express our gratitude and praise to God. What other response can there be to the stunning news of the incarnation and the arrival of God's amazing grace but to sing.

Fall on your knees! Oh hear the angel voices. His power and glory, evermore proclaim.

Implications and application.

An apostate socialist wine merchant wrote a poem set to music by an atheist Jewish composer which was translated into English by a agnostic Unitarian and sung and recorded today by Christians and non-Christians. You can know the story and not know the Savior. You can sing the songs and not believe the words.

But you can also be an outsider, an outcast, a broken person and still be a part of God's purposes. God uses all kinds of people to accomplish His purposes. The only thing that matters is are we part of the story. Are we in Christ, is Christ in us? This carol captures the beauty of the gospel.

“The very Son of God came into the world as a light into darkness He is the divine king, and we join the wise men and shepherds in beholding His power and glory, and invite others to behold Him as well. He was born to be our friend, knowing the weakness and trials that were entailed in doing so. And now we find our worth and salvation from sin in His victorious name. It is this holy name we proclaim to the nations, Jesus our Christ, the risen Lord. May this day of celebration in the Christ be one of great joy for you” (Roger Overton).

<https://www.firstthings.com/blogs/firstthoughts/2009/12/o-holy-night-12-christ-is-the-lord>

Prayer:

Bow your heads please. Do you know Him? Do you want to know Him? Do you want to trust Him with your life, with all that you have and are? Do you want to make Him your Lord and King? If you do then I invite you to pray to Him today and ask Him to do just that, to come into your heart and become your Lord and Savior. Acknowledge that you are a sinner that needs a savior, confess your sin to Him and confess with as much faith as you have right now, that you believe He is everything He says He is and that He came down to earth to die for your sins and mine.

Let's pray. Holy Father in heaven, help us to ponder and treasure these things in our hearts as Mary and Joseph did. Help us to grasp the wonder of all that you have done in this indescribable gift, Jesus Christ, whose name we confess, whose glory we lift up and in whose name we praise you and pray. Amen.