

Needing a Silent Night
Isaiah 9: 2-7; Luke 2: 1-20
December 24, 2014
Rev. Dr. Charles Parker

I. Introduction

On a cold Christmas Eve in 1818, a young Roman Catholic priest named Joseph Mohr visited his friend, Franz Gruber, who is a choir director and organist of his church. Mohr wanted his friend to come up pretty quickly with a tune for a poem that he had written a little while earlier so that they could sing it at the Christmas Eve service that night. There are all kinds of stories about why he wanted the song written that quickly: one story was that the organ was broken, and they needed something to play by guitar -- but nobody knows what the real history was. My own suspicion is that he was just another pastor looking for something to make Christmas Eve a little bit special and a little bit different than it had always been.

And his friend, Franz, came up with a tune and his congregation that night sang for the first time a hymn that we all know as *Silent Night*, which fairly quickly swept across Austria and Europe as one of the most popular Christmas Eve hymns. It captures for a lot of us that sort of beatific, romantic picture of that first Christmas Eve with the Holy Family surrounded by shepherds and gently bleating sheep and illuminated by the soft light of angelic star. It feels like that image plays into something that we want so desperately from our faith, which is a place that we can go to get a little respite from the chaos of our ordinary lives, a place where we can retreat and breathe a little bit deeper and get a little bit better perspective.

II. Mystics

During these last several weeks of Advent here on Sunday morning, we've been going through the lectionary texts of Advent and focusing on the lives of some of the great mystics in our tradition. People who seem to be good at breathing a little deeper and getting a little bit more perspective on their lives, people who seem to hear God speak with a little bit more regularity and a little bit more intensity than most of us. And we've also been spending a lot of time in our community this whole year learning about how to find that quiet space, to learn how to be a little bit more silent and reflective.

We've been exploring some of the disciplines of contemplative prayer. We've got a wonderful Wednesday morning meditation group every week. We've got a wonderful Thursday morning men's *Lectio Divina* group that's been meeting. This month we had a weekend long seminar in contemplative prayer meditation and a beautiful Advent contemplative service. So, we've worked on learning how to try to quiet our minds just a little bit and listen more closely for the voice of God.

And then we get to Christmas with all the last-minute gift purchases, and if you're like me, you have a couple of hours of gift wrapping ahead of you, and all of those good intentions for some quiet space often go skittering away and we find ourselves feeling again just a little bit like spiritual failures.

III. Not Such a Silent Night

But one thing I hope that you heard as we talked about the mystics was that they are not simply folks who cloistered themselves away in order to hear God's still, small voice. Some of them were. Some of them were folks like Julian of Norwich, some of the Desert Fathers and Mothers. But others like Ignatius Loyola or Catherine

of Siena were folks who were deeply immersed in the politics and daily life of their age. And others like Alfred Delp or Dietrich Bonhoeffer were so involved in the politics and power struggles of their day that they were executed for the work that they did.

Author Kathleen Norris writes, "I have come to believe that the true mystics are not those who contemplate holiness in isolation, reaching God-like illumination in serene silence, but rather those who manage to find God in a life filled with noise, the demands of other people and relentless daily duties that can consume the self. If they are wise, they treasure those rare moments of solitude and silence that come their way and use them not to escape, to distract themselves with television and the like, but instead they listen for a sign of God's presence as they open their hearts toward prayer."

Those feel like helpful words to me because what they say is we can all be mystics. It's not just those who build small cells on the side of the church where they live in silent prayer and meditation. All of us are called to and can live a life in which, in Norris's words, "We treasure the rare moments of solitude and silence to listen more carefully, and then we use what we learn there to watch and listen for God in the midst of a life that is more often chaotic and confused and frenetic. Because that's ultimately what the Christmas story is about. It's about God's deep and absolute engagement in the chaos of the world and it's about those who in the midst of the chaos listen and look for where God is at work.

In this passage from Isaiah that Mark Schaefer read so beautifully, Isaiah talks about the lands of Zebulun and Naphtali. Zebulun and Naphtali were a swathe of land

that lay between the Israelite capital of Samaria and the Syrians with whom they were so often at war. So, if there was going to be a war that happened, it happened in the middle of Zebulun and Naphtali. It was a land that was steeped in bloody warfare. And it's in the midst of that chaos that the word of God says through the prophet, "A child is coming to bring peace and justice and to reestablish the throne of David in a way that will last forever. Those people who walk in darkness and the darkness of war and conflict and fear will see a light in the midst of that that is God's dawning age."

Likewise, of course, Luke's story is no story of a silent night. It's a story of a forced deportation, of the whim of far-distant emperor in which a nine-month pregnant teenager is stripped away from her support network and her family and forced to walk 90 miles to a strange land, to a city that is so jam packed with people that she's got to settle down in a barn surrounded by noisy, filthy animals, and in that place bear her first born son. Silent and holy were probably the last words that came to Mary's mind in those moments, and yet this is how God enters the world, not in quiet, radiant splendor but amid chaos and noise and confusion. God, in other words, enters the world exactly where we are.

IV. Birthing the Christ Anew

And so, if we are truly called to follow Mary's example and to give birth to the Christ anew in our lives, it may be that that happens in a detached space of quiet contemplation surrounded by candles and quiet music. But I suspect that more likely Jesus gets born when we invite him into the chaos that we are in the midst of. Maybe Jesus gets born tomorrow when in the midst of all the frenetic activity, your parent pushes your last button one last time and you want to snap and instead you invite in

Jesus and you speak with a word of gentleness. Maybe Jesus gets born tomorrow when our children are whining and ungrateful and we choose in that very moment to love them just a little bit more fiercely. Maybe Jesus gets born next week when in spite of a crazy schedule, we choose to share a meal with our shelter residents, or maybe it's the week after that when our boss is taking his frustration out on us and we take a moment to respond in sympathy because we understand the pressure that he's under.

Dorothy Day, the powerful founder of the Catholic Worker Movement wrote, "Christ is always with us, always asking for room in our hearts. But now it is with the voice of our contemporaries that he speaks, it is with the eyes of store clerks and factory workers and children that he gazes. It is with the hands of office workers, slum dwellers, and suburban housewives that he gives. It is with the feet of soldiers and beggars that he walks. And with a heart of anyone in need that he longs for shelter. And giving shelter or food to anyone who asks for it, or needs it, is giving it to Christ."

V. Conclusion

Father Mohr, the author of *Silent Night*, was born into poverty. He was born to an unwed, single mother whose father had abandoned both of them, and he died in poverty having spent his life doing ministry but giving all of his lifesavings to build a school for needy children next to the church where he served. That's what giving birth to Jesus looks like. I think it's less about living a life of quiet contemplation than about living a life deeply engaged in a chaotic world and looking for God in the midst of that because, while all of our nights may not be silent, when God is in the midst of them, they are always holy.

Amen.