

Love's pure light

Isaiah 61:1-11

December 11, 2005

*Silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright
round yon virgin mother and child.
Holy infant so tender and mild,
sleep in heavenly peace, sleep in heavenly peace.*

For almost two hundred years, *Silent Night* has been the best-known and most-loved of all Christmas carols, in this country and around the world. I am sure that many of you would name it as your favorite. Every year, we sing *Silent Night* with lighted candles in our hands at the climax of our Christmas Eve worship services. Christmas Eve just wouldn't be the same without it!

What is it, do you think, that makes this carol so well-loved? The words? The melody? Both? What is it about this Christmas carol that touches our human spirits so universally, regardless of age, regardless of language?

Responses from the congregation: *simplicity ... soothing harmonies ... heavenly peace.*

It's a lullaby! A lullaby sung to a holy infant. A lullaby conjuring images of childhood innocence, images of tranquility and rest and sleep, images of an infant held and kept and enveloped in the arms of a loving parent. Christmas is about the birth of an infant, and this carol takes us back there, back to our own infancy, back to our own time of childhood innocence. As we sing we are children again: peacefully sleeping, surrounded by love, kept safe in the arms of our loving parent. For a moment, we are children again, free from the cares and burdens and griefs of adulthood.

But, my dear friends, we are not children anymore! We can't stay there. We can't remain in that silent night, sleeping in heavenly peace. The night passes, a new day comes. The infant grows up and faces life in this world as it really is, filled with cares and burdens and griefs! We are not children anymore.

*When I was a child, my speech, feelings, and thinking were all those of a child;
now that I am an adult, I have no more use for childish ways ...*

We are not children anymore, and the ways we speak and feel and think have changed. So too the ways we speak and feel and think about Christmas must change. We must not stop singing after the first verse!

*Silent night, holy night, shepherds quake at the sight,
glories stream from heaven afar,
heavenly hosts sing Alleluia!
Christ the Savior is born, Christ the Savior is born.*

The silence of the night is interrupted by songs of exultant praise, the darkness of the night is pierced by streams of glorious light, and those who watch and listen tremble with fear. This is not a lullaby anymore!

The lullaby sung to a holy infant is now an *alleluia* sung in honor of Christ the savior, the one who comes to save people from their sins, the one who comes to save people from other peoples' sins! ... the one who comes to bring good news to the poor, to heal the brokenhearted, to announce release to captives and freedom to those in prison ... the one who comes to comfort all who mourn. But how will he do that? How will he save us?

Well, why are they poor? Why are their hearts broken? Why are they in prison? Why do they mourn? Isaiah's message of salvation was proclaimed to oppressed Jews, men and women who were suffering and grieving because of evils done to them by their enemies. People hurt people, people oppress other human beings, people get for themselves wealth and power and security at the expense of the freedom and well-being of their neighbors. We need to be saved from ourselves, from the injustices done by person to person, by class to class, by nation to nation.

Christ the Savior comes to confront injustice, to bring an end to oppression, to turn the world as it is upside down! Christ the Savior is the love of God in action, a love that is not, as Wendell Berry put it:

... any kind of abstract love, which is probably a contradiction in terms, but particular love for particular things, places, creatures, and people, requiring stands and acts, showings its successes or failures in practical or tangible effects.

It is a love that changes the circumstances of our lives and the course of human history in tangible and measurable ways. If it didn't, it wouldn't be love.

The text from Isaiah 61 is the Old Testament lectionary text for this Sunday, except the lectionary chooses to omit verses 5-7! Listen to these verses:

*My people, foreigners will serve you.
They will take care of your flocks
And farm your land and tend your vineyards.
You will enjoy the wealth of nations
And be proud that it is yours.
Your shame and disgrace are ended.
You will live in your own land,
And your wealth will be doubled;
Your joy will last forever ...*

I guess these verses are just too scandalous, too politically incorrect, to be included in the lectionary! But I have chosen to read the whole text, because God's salvation is about turning the tables, about putting things right, about a reversal of fortunes. Kings will be brought down and the poor will be lifted up. Those who are hungry will be fed and those who have made others hungry will learn what it is to go without. The proud will be humbled and the humble will inherit the earth!

Since human beings suffer in body as well as in spirit, a salvation that is genuine must heal bodies as well as spirits, and since human beings are the cause of much suffering in this world, their power to hurt must be broken. A salvation that is anything less is no more than a pacifier, a form of escape, an illusion.

Christmas is about the birth of a savior, about one who comes to us to put things right in practical and tangible ways. So then, how should we, as adults, as those who recognize poverty and injustice and heartbreak, think and feel and speak about Christmas?

Joy to the earth! the Savior reigns!

When he goes to bring good news to the poor, you go with him! When he speaks words of comfort to the brokenhearted, you speak them, too! When he comes to announce release to captives, you make sure you are there to throw open the prison doors!

*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.*

Holy infant ... Christ the Savior ... Jesus, Lord. Jesus, Lord. Jesus is Lord! The infant, tender and mild, is the one before whom every knee will bow. He is more than Mary's child, more than the savior of his own people. He is Lord of all people, Lord of all nations, Lord of all creation.

The Lord will save his people and all the nations will praise him.

All the nations will praise him because they will see the glories of his righteousness! They will see the glory of one who does what is right, who loves justice and hates oppression, who doesn't merely take sides, drawing a line between friend and enemy, but one who defends the weak, befriends the lonely, provides for those who want, comforts those who grieve. He will save his people, but in so doing he will claim the allegiance of all people and offer to all the benefits of his redeeming grace.

Christmas is about the birth of Jesus, the Lord. Then how should we, as adults, think and feel and speak about Christmas?

Joy to the world! the Lord is come: let earth receive her King.

Christmas reminds us that we belong to him, and not he to us. He is not on our side, helping us win whatever battles of culture or religion or politics we may choose to fight. We are on his side, bearing the good news of redeeming grace to a hurting world.

Silent night, holy night, Son of God, love's pure light ...

Love's pure light reveals the world as it really is, uncovering what we conceal, bringing into the open what we refuse to acknowledge, exposing our flaws and our frailties, unmasking our demons, telling the truth ... all for the sake of love. Because the truth will set you free! Love's pure light will heal your wounds.

It was a silent and holy night, the night that Jesus was born, but his birth heralded the dawn of a new day and the coming of a new light into our world that the darkness will never put out. So may we celebrate this Christmas by singing his praise and walking in his light, not merely seeking solace in the safety of his sanctuary, but taking his light into the dark places of our world ...