

## Column

For many, Christmas means music, and rightly so. After all the Psalmist long ago wrote, “O sing unto the Lord a new song: sing unto the Lord, all the earth.” Of course, many of the songs we sing in this season are old in origin, but the message is ever new. The God who made the stars and put the planets in place has taken on human flesh and come among us. He has done so to rescue us from the mess we humans have gotten ourselves into and to restore the divine image marred in the Fall (Genesis 3).

Surely, we have something to sing about. Yet, as we look around our world, we know all has not come right. God has come down, victory over sin and death has been achieved on the cross, peace and goodwill among men has been proclaimed, yet many refuse to hear the angels’ song and continue in rebellion against God’s righteous rule.

One way we may view our present time is two overlapping circles. One circle represents the Old Age characterized by human rebellion; the other, the New Age brought in by Christ which includes the abolition of all that mar and disfigure God’s good creation, including sin and death. You and I live in the overlap in the middle. Christ has come, and He comes.

In this overlap we do well to be quiet and reflect on what God has done and resolve to offer ourselves in His service. The beloved carol “Silent Night” and the story that goes with it is a good place to begin this quiet reflection.

Joseph Mohr, assistant priest at the Church of St. Nicholas, Oberndorf, Upper Austria, wrote the words, and his organist Franz Gruber, at Mohr's request, composed the melody. On Christmas Eve, 1818, the carol was sung with only a guitar for an accompaniment because the church organ was out of order . . . some versions of the story say because mice had wreaked havoc with the bellows!

The silent organ, as it turned out, helped popularise the song. When Karl Mauracher came to repair the instrument, Gruber played the new carol. So taken by it, Mauracher requested a copy and took it back with him to his own village of Zillerthal, where it became popular.

But there is more to the story still. Four daughters of a Zillerthal glove maker learned the song and began singing it at concerts from town to town while their father sold gloves. Soon its fame spread throughout the whole region and beyond.

In 1863, John Freeman Young, an Episcopal clergyman, translated the carol into English. Young went on to become the second Bishop of Florida in 1867. No doubt he took the carol with him and introduced it to the congregations under his oversight.

By the time of the First World War the carol was well known. So well known, that it served as a catalyst for men on both sides of the trenches to lay down their arms and join in a spontaneous celebration of our Lord's birth on Christmas Day 1914.

Even in the worst of conditions, its simple words pierced through the darkness and brought light: All was calm, all was bright, albeit for a brief moment.

The good news is this light really didn't go out. It's still available to those who seek it -- whatever their circumstances.

Where might it be found? John, in his prologue to the Fourth Gospel, tells us: "In him [in the Word made flesh] was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" John 1:4,5 (RSV).

2023 has been a tumultuous year. According to ABC News, there have been 627 mass shootings in the U.S. Hostilities between Russia and

Ukraine continues with no end in sight. Violence and bloodshed in the Middle East carries on. No solution appears to be in sight for the border crisis between Mexico and the U.S. New Covid strains appear. No wonder many are fearful, not just for themselves but for future generations.

As 2023 draws to a close, let us hear anew the words of the carol, “Glories stream from heaven afar . . . Christ the Saviour is born” and resolve to the best of our ability to reflect that light.

*O LORD, raise up, we pray thee, thy power, and come among us, and with great might succour us; that whereas, through our sins and wickedness, we are sore let and hindered in running the race that is set before us, thy bountiful grace and mercy may speedily help and deliver us; through the satisfaction of thy Son our Lord, to whom, with thee and the Holy Ghost, be honour and glory, world without end. Amen. (Collect for the Fourth Sunday in Advent, Book of Common Prayer)*

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