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Silent Night – The Unsung Verse (Sermon) – A Christmastide Sermon

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I love Christmas carols... they tell stories. We all love a good story, and one thing that sets Christmas apart is the most wonderful story, for at the heart of Christianity is a story of peace and hope made real. It's the story of a young woman's YES to God – that's Mary. The story of a young man's YES to God – that's Joseph, who stood by Mary and raised Jesus as his own. The story of a little baby, shepherds and angels. A beautiful, pastoral scene. God's gracious love, made flesh among us... that's the heartbeat of our story.

Oh, so many carols to sing – all with parts of our story. Silent Night is one of the most popular. People have loved this carol ever since it was written 200 years ago, and performed at Christmas Eve at little St Nicholas parish church, in the river town of Obendorf. Think back to the first time you heard it, and you had fresh ears, like those folks in 1818. Can you remember... what was it that you loved best? Was it the music by Gruber, the way it echoes the quietude of the moment? Was it the harmonies of the choirs? Or maybe the words, by Mohr, capturing the heavenly peace after the work and expectation of such a birth as this.

For the Christmas story in a nutshell, Silent Night has it all! It's bright but calm, this silent, holy night "round yon Virgin Mother and Child" We are there... & that heavenly peace can fill us too, if we let it in. It did in World War I, as German soldiers sang it on Christmas Eve: Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht... French and British soldiers joined the song, and heavenly peace broke out unexpectedly... an impromptu truce that lasted all day. Can you hear those young soldiers sing verse two?

Silent Night Holy Night, Shepherds Quake at the Sight,

Glories stream from Heaven afar. Heavenly Hosts sing Alleluia!

Christ, the Savior, is born!"

The nativity of peace, an impossible peace, sung out in two perfect verses. Okay, we left off the Magi, but we've covered so much ground, many music directors leave it at that, never getting to the 3rd verse. Can't blame them. Lots of carols. Everyone has a favorite, and we want them all! The thing is, verse three is the key! It's the verse with the back story, no less than heaven's generous answer to the psalmist's cry, "my soul doth wait, and in his word I do hope..." a plea that ends with "and he shall redeem Israel from all his iniquities." The psalmist in Psalm 130 is waiting for the Lord more than people watching for the morning. Verse three, is the dawning... Son of God, love's pure light.



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Radiant beams from thy holy face, with the dawn of redeeming grace. The verse is echoing John, “And the Word was made flesh... full of grace & truth.”

When a songwriter gets something so right in two verses it sticks with us for 200 years, it’s good to listen to what they say next. After all, you don’t just stop when Martin Luther King says “I have a dream...” – a nice phrase, granted – without learning what that dream is, or you’ve really missed something crucial about what he’s saying. So, why do we stop? I’ve learned that sometimes, when people stop short, there’s a reason. Maybe, when music directors shy away from the last few verses of a song, they do it because they’re being careful. You know, like when they stop after a verse or two of the Woody Guthrie song This Land is Your Land. The first verses are no big deal, but those last verses are pretty intense – talking about signs w/no trespassing on one side, on the other side it doesn’t say anything, and that’s the side that was made for you and me. Talking about “Nobody living can ever stop me, as I go walking that freedom highway.” Is it any wonder music directors shy away? Well, what if the 3rd verse of Silent Night is intense like that... dare I say radical? Here’s verse three:

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!



Radiant Beams from
 Jesus’ Holy Face –
 BUMC Stained Glass
 Window

Here’s why I think it’s dynamite. Consider: it’s one thing, in this twenty first century, to paint a manger scene. Nothing controversial there. Even an unwed pregnancy – not such a big deal anymore... We’re accepting people. It’s quite another thing to start talking about Son of God and redeeming grace dawning!

Love’s pure light is the sort of thing that makes soldiers come out of the fox holes and play soccer together when they’re supposed to be waging war. Love’s pure light is the sort of thing that is behind our tears, whenever we cry at a happy ending, or reach out to a stranger in need. Now that’s worth singing about. Shout it from the rooftops. That’s a redemption song. A freedom song. That’s freedom’s highway. Radical peace... watch out, world!

There’s good news, as I see it, about the fact we’ve shied away from this controversial verse so often. It’s good news we did, because our ears will be fresh. And like those weary soldiers far from home on Christmas Eve, love’s pure light can dawn on us as a little baby... and that we can welcome, make a place, within ourselves, make a little room at the inn... After all, the days are getting longer again,





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why not throw off the shackles of cynicism and despair and dare believe that light and love and grace can triumph over darkness? I had a dear friend – a 90 year old cloistered nun named Sr. Mary of the Holy Spirit, now of blessed memory, who used to say this blessing over me, especially at Christmas – I give it now to all of you... “And the Lord will dawn for you in radiant beauty that you may see His glory within you.”

Amen.



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