



# THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

## A Not-So-Silent Night

SERMON BY REV. DOUG PRATT ■ DECEMBER 24, 2017

**A**t that time the Roman emperor, Augustus, decreed that a census should be taken throughout the Roman Empire. <sup>2</sup> (This was the first census taken when Quirinius was governor of Syria.) <sup>3</sup>All returned to their own ancestral towns to register for this census. <sup>4</sup>And because Joseph was a descendant of King David, he had to go to Bethlehem in Judea, David's ancient home. He traveled there from the village of Nazareth in Galilee. <sup>5</sup>He took with him Mary, to whom he was engaged, who was now expecting a child.

<sup>6</sup>And while they were there, the time came for her baby to be born. <sup>7</sup>She gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped him snugly in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no lodging available for them.

<sup>8</sup>That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep. <sup>9</sup>Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them. They were terrified, <sup>10</sup>but the angel reassured them. "Don't be afraid!" he said. "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. <sup>11</sup>The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! <sup>12</sup>And you will recognize him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger."

<sup>13</sup>Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others—the armies of heaven—praising God and saying,

<sup>14</sup>"Glory to God in highest heaven,  
and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased."

Luke 2:1-14 (NLT)

## A Beloved Carol

It's usually ranked as the most popular of all the many Christmas carols, by polls in both Europe and North America. "Silent Night! Holy Night!"—with its sweet and lyrical reflection on the birth of Christ—is precisely 199 years old today. It was written and first performed in a small village in Austria in 1818; next year it will no doubt get lots of attention for its bicentennial. The words came from Father Joseph Mohr, an assistant priest of a parish high in the Alps. Preparing for the Christmas Eve service in the little town of Oberndorf, he discovered to his dismay early that day that the church organ (due to the bitter winter cold) had stopped working and nothing could revive it. He took a little poem he had written a couple years earlier (which reflected his thoughts while walking to the church on a snowy night in December) and showed the words to his friend Franz Gruber, the town schoolmaster and also the church organist, asking him if he could write a simple tune for the midnight mass that could be accompanied by a guitar. The melody quickly came to Gruber. It was sung that night by the small choir, followed by a reverent hush across the church.

The next week the organ repairman from the nearby city came to fix the church's instrument, and saw the hand-scrawled music for "Silent Night." He asked if he could take a copy with him. He shared it with the other churches he worked for across the Tyrolean region, and before long its popularity spread across Europe. "Silent Night" was first performed in America in December 1839 by a touring Austrian folk group. It is almost unimaginable today for a church to celebrate Christmas Eve without singing it. We will do so tonight, at all our candlelight services. The song is essentially a lullaby. Its mood is one of peace, calm, rest and security. It could be sung or hummed or played to help a child fall into a deep slumber. In fact, the words of the first verse carry the lullaby theme: "sleep in heavenly peace."

I do not mean to disparage "Silent Night! Holy Night!" in any way. It's beloved for good reason. But today, as we are preparing for the special night ahead of us, I want to inject a bit of reality into our

remembrance of the historic events of Christ's birth. With no disrespect to Joseph Mohr and Franz Gruber, the fact is that it was actually a "Not-So-Silent Night" when Jesus came to earth. Let's look again with fresh eyes at what really occurred. I will offer three slight correctives to our contemporary mythology that romanticizes and sentimentalizes the Christmas Story.

### **The Original Christmas Night was not so silent.**

It was not a quiet setting when Joseph and Mary arrived in Bethlehem. The problem they faced was not that it was the middle of the night and everyone was sound asleep and unable to be roused from their dreams. The problem was that the town was jam-packed, overcrowded to the bursting point, without a single bed available. It's likely that they arrived in Bethlehem in the afternoon, or no later than dusk—because once nightfall came in the ancient Middle East, people stopped traveling and set up their camp for the night. There were, of course, no headlights on donkeys or camels or wagons back then, and no streetlights, so traveling after dark was prohibitively dangerous. Had Mary's labor pains started while they had been on the highway, they would have had to stop there; but apparently she made it to Bethlehem before the contractions started. And by then it was urgent. The town was so busy, so noisy, so preoccupied with the census and feeding and housing all the visitors that nobody noticed or had any room for this pregnant mother in distress.

There is also no reason to think the actual birth process was quiet. Both mother and baby tend to make noise—the mother in the agony of delivery and the baby on its exit from the womb as its little lungs suck in air and expel it with wailing. There was either no time to locate one or no availability of the services of a local midwife (as would have been customary at all Jewish births). We can imagine the desperation of poor Joseph, having to coach his young wife through this ordeal without benefit of having taken Lamaze classes: "Push, Mary, push," he coaxed, crouching in the hay to catch the baby as she screamed in pain.

And the only witnesses to this historic event, other than the parents, were some shepherds working the night shift. It may for awhile have been comparatively quiet for those guys that evening—except for the bleating of sheep and the howling of distant wolves and the usual coarse joking and man-talk around the campfire. But the silence didn't last long: first one angel showed up with a breaking news bulletin, and then the whole Mormon Tabernacle Angelic Choir burst out in song. Literally all heaven broke loose, shattering the still night. If any of those poor shepherds had harbored a hope that they'd be able to grab a little shut-eye, it clearly wasn't going to happen.

### **The times of the Original Christmas were not so peaceful.**

They were all living in occupied territory (like the French in the 1940s under Nazi tyranny). Everybody hated and feared the brute squads of the oppressive Romans. Everybody was complaining bitterly—and understandably so—about this ridiculous money-grabbing scheme of the Emperor. Easy for him, in his far-off palace, to order every person to get up and travel to the hometown of their ancestors. What a mess this caused—an incredible strain on the infrastructure. Think about the overcrowded chaos of US airports on the day before Thanksgiving, or bumper-to-bumper interstate highways in Florida as millions of people are trying to evacuate before a hurricane. Hotel rooms were all booked, tempers were short, people were exhausted and desperate.

Mary was probably eight months pregnant by now. And because she was legally married to Joseph (though they had not consummated the marriage), she had to travel with him (no doubt against her OB/GYN's advice, but what could they do?). It was a trip of perhaps 90 miles. If she was traveling on a donkey or wagon the trip would have taken several days; if on foot, even longer. Since roadside Holiday Inns hadn't been invented, most people traveling on the main trade routes through the Middle East clustered in caravans for protection. At nightfall they would all stop and set up camp, with people appointed to rotate as night watchmen. What a physical ordeal. It's possible that Mary and Joseph thought they could make the round trip back to Nazareth before the baby would come, but we know now that activity like this can very definitely induce early labor.

Not only was the trip anything but peaceful; the birth process itself was also quite disruptive and messy and even violent—as it always is. Labor and delivery can be chaotic in a sanitized hospital room. Imagine the mess in a stable! We would like to hope that no child would ever have to come into this world in such awful and inhospitable conditions. But that’s exactly how God chose to make His entrance.

**The story of the Original Christmas was not a Hallmark movie.**

The Hallmark cable channels have made something of a franchise out of Christmas. This year they have premiered 31 all-new, original made-for-TV films. These wholesome stories followed a finely-tuned template. They are certainly better and more uplifting than 96% of the junk on the screens. Some of you love them, maybe even are addicted to them. But the stories they tell are, of course, all interrupted prematurely.

I saw one a few weeks ago. I think it was called “Marry Me at Christmas” or “I Do at Christmas” or “A Christmas Wedding” or something like that. It was the adventure of the beautiful young Melissa and the handsome young Ryan. After weeks of resisting and denying their feelings for one another (and after a whole sequence of misunderstandings and miscommunications and jumping to the wrong conclusions and other relationship obstacles), they finally end up in each other’s arms on a perfect Christmas Eve. As snowflakes began to fall, they shared their first kiss while the strains of “Silent Night” came from the small church in the background. It was all so beautiful, so right, and we are left to assume that they live happily ever after from that magical moment on.

Except that, in the real world, there might be more to the story. Let’s allow our imaginations to fill in the rest. Let’s imagine that after Melissa and Ryan’s wedding some challenges come to them as they live “happily ever after.” Let’s imagine that they have three children, and the middle child is discovered to be on the autism scale. Let’s imagine that Ryan gets an offer to take a new job requiring them to move from their bucolic town to a busy city, ripping up their friendship and family roots. Let’s imagine that Melissa’s mother declines

into Alzheimer's, putting tremendous strain on her family. Let's imagine that Ryan is diagnosed with cancer, and that Melissa closes his eyes for the final time as he breathes his last in a hospice bed.

But let's also imagine that Ryan and Melissa make a deep and personal commitment to Christ and become involved in their church and a Bible study. Let's imagine that they discover a new level of intimacy and mutual commitment through their new shared faith. Let's imagine that their oldest son goes into the ministry, and they share unspeakable pride at his ordination. Let's imagine that, when each of the trials of life come, they find that God's grace is sufficient. Let's imagine that, when they are about to be parted by death, they both feel secure that they will be reunited forever in the presence of the Lord. None of this is told in the Hallmark movie. But it's the rest of the story.

The birth of Jesus at Christmas was not the end of His story either. As beautiful and sentimental and perfect as we may picture it to be, it certainly wasn't a "He lived happily ever after" story. The baby Messiah's life was threatened by a murderous king, and the family had to flee for safety, becoming undocumented illegal aliens in another country. When the coast was finally clear to return to their home in Galilee, they lived a very modest middle-class life of a tradesman. Jesus then launched into a very public career, such as had never been seen before, not only generating wild popularity but also vicious enemies. Their evil plot resulted in a great travesty of justice, and a violent public torture and execution—all of which his heartbroken mother had to witness. It had all the markings of an unspeakable tragedy.

And then, of course, in the most dramatic plot twist in human history, the crucified and buried Hero suddenly came to life again—and the world was changed for good. The manger scene was not a Hallmark "happy ever after" ending. It was just the beginning of a story that would prove to be more amazing and awful and wonderful than anyone could have scripted.

## Family Christmas Traditions

Nearly every family has developed certain traditions that become meaningful to them, traditions that are enjoyed and repeated year after year to refresh memories. Some of the traditions are simple: how the house is decorated, what foods to enjoy, when to open gifts, what holiday movies to watch again, even though everyone already has memorized the lines. Speaking of holiday films, one of my favorites is “Christmas Vacation” with Chevy Chase. The Griswold family had holiday traditions taken to the extreme: 50,000 lights on their house that caused a power outage, a tree that overflowed the living room, etc.—all of them ridiculous, even absurd.

A Christian author and songwriter named Michael Card came up with a unique family tradition that I am guessing no families represented here have ever done. Late afternoon on Christmas Eve, he and his wife would bundle their three kids into the minivan and drive to a farm. By prearrangement with the farmer, they would go into the barn (with the chicken coops out back); there they would make a place on the wood floor to sit on hay, light a Coleman lantern, and huddle in the cold while they took turns reading the entire Christmas story from the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. The noises and smells of the horses and cows in their stalls, along with the hay and the stuff the animals dumped in the hay, filled their senses; they pulled their jackets tight against the draft. And there, as darkness fell, they remembered the real Christmas, and the dark, cold, messy world that Jesus entered into—the very world He loved so much that He came to save. It’s a far less pleasant Christmas tradition than most of ours—but a far more powerful one.

It was not a postcard-perfect evening with silence and peace on that first Christmas. It was the real world. Thanks be to God that He chose to come to us just as we are! ■

