

# "The Dawn of Redeeming Grace"

## Christmas Eve Message

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Trinitarian Congregational Church  
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*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*

*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*

*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*

The year was 1818. And in the little Austrian village of Oberndorf there was a problem. The organ at the St. Nicholas Church was broken and it couldn't be repaired in time for Christmas. Now Christmas Eve is always a big deal in churches, but it's especially important when your church is named, "St. Nicholas." Fr. Joseph Mohr was the parish priest at St. Nicholas. A few years prior to 1818 he had written some poetry about the Nativity of our Lord. So he gave that poetry to the minister of music at the church, Franz Gruber. Gruber wrote the melody. Their song was entitled, "*Stille Nacht.*" "*Silent Night.*" Silent Night made its debut at the midnight Mass in 1818 on the King of all instruments, the guitar!

The words and the melody are reflective, aren't they? It's not a festive song, like "*Joy to the Word*" or "*Hark! The Herald Angel Sings.*" Silent Night is never accompanied by trumpets and timpani. The mood is more in tune with, "*Mary pondered these things in her heart.*" Let's ponder a bit tonight ourselves. Spiritual pondering is good for our souls, isn't it?

*"Silent Night, Holy Night."*

It certainly was a holy night. Christmas was God's initiative, the holiest of endeavors. But was it a Silent Night? A young woman goes through labor (an appropriate term, though a bit understated). A child is born, and we know that baby is healthy and doing well when we hear the newborn . . . . cry. A Silent Night? Eventually.

You can picture Jesus asleep in his mother's arms, and Mary even falling asleep herself. That's where we find ourselves tonight - on that side of the birth, where silence is a proper response to something so holy. In Matthew's Gospel

the Wise Men kneel and present their gifts to the child, but the Bible doesn't record them saying anything. It's as if the message is, sometimes in the presence of God, in the presence of that which is so holy, it's best to keep silent to take it all in.

*"Silent Night, Holy Night, All is calm. All is bright"*

How can something be all calming and yet all bright? Does this night calm our souls and yet enlighten and enliven them all at the same time? Isn't that one of the reasons why we love Christmas Eve in church? Christmas Eve is calm and bright. "All is calm. All is bright" - in the presence of God.

*"Sleep in heavenly peace"* - a little baby on earth sleeping in heaven's peace.

The 3rd verse is my favorite:

*"Silent Night, Holy Night, Son of God, love's pure light."*

There is something so pure about Jesus - pure love, a laser beam of light and love straight from heaven into our souls when we open them up to God. Say what you want about religion. Say what you want about the church. Like all human institutions, it's flawed. But there is such a purity in the love of Christ. Passionate and tender, unwavering and undying. And that's why we come to church, isn't it? - to seek the purity of Christ, to somehow take it in that we might live holy and better lives than we would without Christ, more who God made us to be as Children of God.

*" Son of God, love's pure light. Radiant beams from thy holy face."*

William Barclay tells of a legend from the Early Church. The legend is

that as a child Jesus had the most beautiful and radiant face that anyone had ever seen. And in the village where he grew up, Nazareth, when people were feeling down and discouraged, they would say to one another, "Let us go and look upon the face of Jesus and our spirits will be lifted." So, too, our spirits are lifted to the heavens when we gaze upon the purity of Christ.

*"Radiant beams from thy holy face, with the dawn of redeeming grace."*

Isn't that a wonderful phrase? - "*The Dawn of Redeeming Grace.*" The Birth of Christ represents "The Dawn of Redeeming Grace." The Dawn. The Beginning. The Sunrise of a New Day, a New Era in God's relationship with human beings.

- where God's heart has been revealed.
- where a clear message has been spoken regarding the Eternal One.
- where the very nature and character of God has been embodied in a person - Jesus of Bethlehem.

Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish Philosopher and theologian, has a parable that gets to the heart of Christmas. It's called "*The King and the Maiden.*" Once upon a time there was a great and powerful king who fell in love with a young maiden, a commoner. The King met her when he was out in the marketplace one day among his subjects. He was drawn to her, smitten by her natural beauty and humble, gentle spirit. He wanted her as his Queen, but most of all, he desired her love. He wanted a love that was genuine and true. He didn't want her to love him just because he was the King. He wanted her heart. So he came up with a plan.

He took off his crown and covered up his royal garments, and each day he went into the marketplace and would strike up conversations with her, looking like a commoner. They went for long walks together and sure

enough, they fell in love. Once they had professed their love for one another, the King then revealed his true identity to her - he took off the common cloak, the overcoat he was wearing, revealing his royal clothes underneath, for he was now sure of her love. And she became his Wife and Queen.

It seems to me that God was doing something like that at Christmas. God became a commoner in Jesus. God became one of us - to win our hearts, to win our love. And what we see unveiled in the life and love of Jesus Christ is the Grace of God. This night is the Dawn of that Amazing Grace. Grace is the Gift of God's Unconditional Love.

C.S. Lewis said Grace is Christianity's chief contribution to the study of God. Grace is at the heart of Christianity. Because God's love is a gift. It's a gift you can't earn, but you don't have to. God simply and profoundly and eternally loves you.

When my children were born they didn't have to earn my love. Do something cute and I'll love you. Show me a smile and I'll love you." No. I fell in love instantly. These were moments of Grace - of pure, unconditional love. If I an imperfect human can love like that, how much more does God love you? That's the heart of Christmas. You are loved. You have received a gift, the gift of God's love. It is the Dawn of Redeeming Grace.

One last point, It's *Redeeming Grace*. It's not just Saving Grace, it's redeeming Grace. It's Grace that embraces us and transforms us, ushering us into a new life in the family of God, a life filled with meaning and purpose, a life lived for God and with God, for Christ and with Christ.

I'll close with an illustration that comes from the author Robert Fulghum. (Fulghum is best known for the poem he wrote, "*Everything I*

Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten.") Fulghum was in Greece taking a course on ancient Greek philosophy. He writes:

*A Greek philosopher and teacher ended his final lecture by asking, "Are there any questions?" I then asked him my favorite question, "Dr. Papaderos, what is the meaning of life?" The usual laughter followed, and people started to leave the room. Papaderos held up his hand and stilled the room and looked at me for a long time, asking with his eyes if I was serious and seeing from my eyes that I was. 'I will answer your question,' he said. Then taking his wallet out of his hip pocket, he fished into it and brought out a very small, round mirror, about the size of a quarter. Then he said, 'When I was a small child, during the war, we were very poor and we lived in a remote village. One day, on the road, I found several broken pieces of a mirror from a wrecked German motorcycle. I tried to find all the pieces and put them together, but it was not possible, so I kept only the largest piece. This one. And by scratching it on a stone, I made it round. I began to play with it as a toy and became fascinated by the fact that I could reflect light into dark places where the sun would not shine - in deep holes and crevices and dark closets. It became a game for me to get light into the most inaccessible places I could find.*

*I kept the little mirror, and as I went about my growing up, I would take it out in idle moments and continue the challenge of the game. As I became a man, I grew to understand that this was not just a child's game but a metaphor for what I might do with my life. I came to understand that I am not the light or the source of the light. But light - truth, understanding, knowledge - is there, and it will only shine in many dark places if I reflect it. 'I am a fragment of a mirror whose whole design and shape I do not know. Nevertheless, with what I have, I can reflect light into the dark places of this world - into the dark places in the hearts of men - and change some things in some people. Perhaps others may see and do likewise. This is what I am about. This is the meaning of my life.'*

This is the meaning of your life and mine as well - to reflect heaven's light to others, especially into the darkest of places in this world.

This is the Dawn of Redeeming Grace. That God loves you so much that God gave you a mission, to reflect heaven's light to a world that needs it so much.

When you receive the light tonight make it a commitment to let your light shine for God.

Amen.