

PREPARING FOR WORSHIP

We wait in the night
in the hush that only stars can hold
as they did bend towards the coming of The Light.

We wait in the night
labouring with anticipation
of what midnight did bring.

We wait in the night
listening to the ticking of minutes
beating in rhythm with the birth of hope.

We hold our collective breaths
as did the angelic host
restlessly clutching their alleluias
for the split second of time,
for God is on the way:
the mother is labouring
the father pacing
the stable readying
the Word is waiting
the Light is sliding
and the promise made when Eden fractured,
is breaking through

When we wait in the longing for midnight
in expectation of Good News,
may we choose to wait together
sitting on the edge of our seats.
For in such anticipation
it is the only place
for the Word to be born among us.

The warmth of affirmation by strangers - Jesus IS Born

Joseph, a descendant of King David, had to go to Bethlehem in Judea, David's ancient home, when the Emperor called for a census to be taken. He traveled from the village of Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem in Judah . He took with him Mary, to whom he was married, who was expecting the child, as the Angel told them both. And while they were in Bethlehem, the time came for her baby to be born. 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, anywhere. -Luke 2:4-7

All Christmas carols and hymns, "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing"¹, "Away in a Manger"², ³"Joy to the World", "O Little Town of Bethlehem"⁴, tell the Christmas story. Each one narrates, from the life experience and faith of the composer, God's act of sending His Son to redeem us, to free us from the blame of sin.

"Silent night" is a very special Christmas carol. There are several variations on the story of its origins, some embellish the original facts, others add to it.

It is a L-O-N-G story about a child born to a peasant woman after a fling with a soldier. The child had a beautiful singing voice and grew up to love music. As no reputable education institution would accept him, he enrolled in a seminary and became a priest. In December 1818, Joseph Mohr was pastor of the church in Oberndorf in the Austrian Alps, when a blizzard struck and stranded a group of travelling singers passing

¹ music by Felix Mendelssohn

² written and composed by Martin Luther

³ written by Isaac Watts, music by George Fredrick Handel.

⁴ written by the famous Episcopal preacher, Phillips Brooks

through. In return for the village's generous hospitality, they decided to perform in the local church's Christmas Eve service. On entering the church, they discovered the bellows which drove the organ, were destroyed by underfed church mice.

The only way to salvage the Christmas Eve service was to find a song which could be sung without musical instruments, not dissimilar to us here at Botley Baptist Church this Christmas.

He remembered writing a poem, imagining the picturesque village of Oberndorf as the place where Jesus was born. He took the poem to the village schoolmaster and church organist, Franz Gruber, who prayerfully put it to music. That night the choir sang the song for the first time, first *a cappella*, then with only guitar accompaniment.

This evening, we shall sing the three verses *a cappella*, pausing between the verses to reflect and meditate on what it says. Between the second and third verses, we shall participate in the breaking of bread.

I hope when we say the final **AMEN** and leave from here tonight, you will be refreshed with joy, perhaps with a fresh understand of God's love.

Bethlehem was far from silent on the night Jesus was born. Dogs barking, people doing the watches of the night, talking; the loud snore of those blessed to rumble walls. There are certain trades and activities which thrive only in the dark of night, and those who participate in these activities, can become boisterous.

Reading the first lines of the 2nd chapter in Luke's Gospel account, we learn:

- It was not silent in Bethlehem (Luke 2:1-7)
- It was not silent in the Judean hills (Luke 2:8-12, 16-20)
- It was not silent in realms of heaven (Luke 2:13-14)
- It could not have been silent in hell (Genesis 3:14-15)

The Son of God, the Redeemer, the Deliverer, entered a noisy, dirty, confusing, sin-filled world.

This carol, Silent Night, invites us into silence, to contemplate and reflect on what God was doing on the night when Jesus was born.

INTRODUCTION: Bethlehem was the home of King David. The prophet Micah prophesied 250 years prior, that the Saviour of the world would be born there: "But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, are only a small village among all the people of Judah. Yet a ruler of Israel, whose origins are in the distant past of eternity, will come from you, on my behalf."⁵

Caesar's call for a census of all eligible to pay tax, made Joseph and Mary, who were of the house and lineage of David, to travel from Nazareth, nearly a hundred miles north in Galilee to Bethlehem. The little town was crowded. There was no room anywhere, and Mary delivered her firstborn son, the Lord Jesus, and laid Him in a manger.

God does not want us worship a place, or dwell on a mood, or even worship any of the people involved in the birth of God's Son, not the shepherds, nor the angels, nor the wise men, and definitely not Joseph or Mary.

To do so, would distract us from the main point - God so loved the world, He sent His Son, from the security and purity of Heaven, into the danger of a world encased in sin, THAT whosoever believes in the message He brings from the Father, will be saved and restored into eternal fellowship with God the Father, when this world will inevitable self-destruct.

⁵ Micah 5:2

1. Christ Born in a Stable (176)

*Silent night, holy night,
All is calm, all is bright
Around yonder virgin and her Child,
Holy Infant so tender and mild,
Sleep in heavenly peace,
Sleep in heavenly peace.*

The Angel said, "*I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.*" It is a joyful, happy time and the song very properly says,

"All is calm, all is bright!"

It is very appropriate that Jesus is laid to rest in a manger. The shepherds' wives might have given birth to one of their children whose first cot was a manger; they knew it was the cleanest and most hygienic place for a newborn infant.

*Look! See! Around yonder, the young mother and child
The Holy Infant, (just as the angels told us), so tender and so mild.*

This Baby, conceived by the Holy Spirit, is the "Seed of the woman" which was promised to Eve, her descendant who would deal a fatal blow to the head of satan⁶. This is Immanuel: God with us, as one of us, bringing to fruition Isaiah's promise, "Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son."⁷

The Psalmist sings, "you brought me safely from my mother's womb and led me to trust you at my mother's breast."⁸ *Sleep in Heavenly Peace!*

⁶ Genesis 3

⁷ Isaiah 7:14

⁸ Psalm 22:9,10

Was baby Jesus conscious that God was His Father, and His hope was in His Father? I think so. He knew what the prophets had said; After all, He was with the Father when the Father spoke through to the prophets one thousands of years, that His Son, when He came, would be a Man of Sorrows, acquainted with grief. He came to be abused and rejected, as well as to save all who would receive Him as the bearer of God's Good News. He is to be, "anointed. . .to preach the gospel to the poor. . .to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to those held captive by sin".

But right now, the Baby Jesus, cradled in a manger, wrapped in swaddling clothes, is at peace. Mary and Joseph are also at peace. This ordeal is over. The Baby has safely entered His earthy mission. The peace and tranquility on His face was telling, *All is calm!* The presence of the glory of God, *all is bright!*, the child, *sleeping in heavenly peace.*

Sleep little Baby, sleep in Heavenly Peace!

2. Angels Announce Christ's Birth to the Shepherds

*Silent night, holy night,
Shepherds quake at the sight
Glory streams from Heaven afar,
Heavenly Hosts sing, "Alleluia!"
Christ the Saviour is born,
Christ the Saviour is born.*

"That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep. Suddenly, without any warning, an angel of the Lord God appeared among them, and the radiance of the God's glory surrounded them. They were absolutely terrified!"

The suddenness of it all! No wonder the poor shepherds were terrified and frightened out of their wits! The calm, peaceful, starry darkness, turns as bright-as-day. The stars fade in the light of God's glory, as beams of powerful light streaming in from Heaven! Can we even begin to imagine what it would be like?

The Angel Gabriel had announced to Mary up in Galilee nine months before, that she was to be the mother of God's Saviour of the human race. Might well have been the same Angel Gabriel bringing glad news, *"Don't be afraid! I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. The Saviour—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! And you will recognise him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger."*⁹

And ALL Heaven rejoices! The night sky is filled with Heavenly beings, angels, praising God with the words, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men."

⁹ Luke 2:10-12

*It is DONE! God's son has been safely delivered, from the security of Heaven onto earth! Christ the Saviour is **BORN!** Christ the Saviour **IS** born!*

God speaks; many people hear. Few listen, and even fewer obey.

HOLY COMMUNION

An ACT of obedience.

Every single person mentioned in the events surrounding the birth of Jesus, was acting in obedience to God's plan.

We shall now participate in an act of obedience. During Jesus' last Passover meal with His Disciples He *took some bread and gave thanks to God for it. Then he broke it in pieces and gave it to the disciples, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. **Do this in remembrance of me.***

As we remember the birth of Christ, let us also remember, **why** He came, and **what** He came to do.

Jesus said, **"The one who enters through the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep recognise his voice and come to him. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. After he has gathered his own flock, he walks ahead of them, and they follow him because they know his voice. They won't follow a stranger; they will run from him because they don't know his voice."**

Those who heard Jesus use this illustration didn't understand what he meant, so he explained it to them: "I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me were thieves and robbers. But the true sheep did not listen to them. Yes, I am the gate.

Those who come in through me will be saved. They will come and go freely and will find good pastures. My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life.

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd sacrifices his life for the sheep.”

“I am the good shepherd; I know my own sheep, and they know me, just as my Father knows me and I know the Father. So I sacrifice my life for the sheep.”

I have come that you may have life and have it to the full

We have life through Jesus’ broken body which defeated death. THIS body had to be broken and destroyed for Jesus’ new body to emerge from death.

Breaking and sharing of bread

We not only have life, but have LIFE TO THE FULL - which is eternal life - through the life-giving cup of Hope.

Sharing from one cup

3. A new age dawns on the human race

*Silent night, holy night,
Son of God, Love's pure light
Radiant beams your Holy face
With the dawn of saving Grace
Jesus, Lord at your birth!
Jesus, Lord at your birth.*

There were wonders, marvels and miracles surrounding Jesus birth: conception beyond comprehension, obedience to God's plan breaking all social taboos, a miraculous provision for Jesus' birth, angels breaking through the curtain of night-time darkness, unable to contain their joy that God's plan of salvation was finally operational, and who would have thought, a band of shepherds would be so excited, they could not contain the news, **Jesus is Lord at His birth!**

*This is not the age of Aquarius
This is the dawn of saving (redeeming) grace*

A new age had dawned! Shepherds who supplied sheep for the sacrifices at the Temple, came to see the Lamb of God who would end all sacrifice, because He **IS** the Sacrifice!

Christmas is the birth of Christ. Like the shepherds and the wise men, we have come to worship Jesus the Christ, and like Mary, let's treasure in our hearts, the true experience of Christmas - **Jesus was Lord at his birth, and He is our Lord.**

This carol invites us into silence, to contemplate and reflect on what God was doing on the night when Jesus was born. Before we leave this evening, let's pause for a moment and each in our own hearts, give thanks to God for just ONE specific thing He has done for us.

BENEDICTION

The Almighty, the Eternal, the Creator of Heaven and earth says,

“Be still and know, I AM God!”¹⁰

Be still enough to hear God’s call

Be still enough to hear God’s Word

Be still enough to hear God’s direction

Be still enough to hear God speaking to you, today, now!

Be still enough to be bathed by God’s love.

“Be still, and know that I am God!

I will be honoured by every nation.

I will be honoured throughout the world.”

The Lord of Heaven’s Armies is here among us, now, today.

Go into the darkness of the night,

knowing the Light of the World is here!

I pray this Christmas, you will experience this great stillness

without irony of "peace on earth"

and, without despair, to work for it.

Go in the Name of Christ, of whose Kingdom we belong.

AMEN.

¹⁰ Psalm 46:10