

Through Advent and now into Christmas, we have been exploring the hymn stories, including some history and a look at the words we sing. I weighed the two options – all of the singing or all of the hymn stories, and singing won out, so I will only focus on two of the hymns we are sharing this evening.

We began the service with the song, Psalm 29, which will give us a framework for the time ahead: "Give the Lord glory and power," "let the Lord bless his people with peace." For thousands of years before Jesus was born the Hebrew people have sung this song. Through longevity of verse, if nothing else we should hear the ancient voices proclaiming that within our song of glory and power to God is the blessing of peace we seek for ourselves.

234 O Little Town of Bethlehem

Phillips Brooks, was an American clergyman and author, who briefly served as Bishop of Massachusetts in the Episcopal Church during the early 1890s. As an Episcopal clergyman, he visited Bethlehem and he said that his visit to the town inspired him to write this poem in 1867.

"{My only ambition}", Brooks once wrote "is to be a parish priest and, though not much of [a priest, I] would as a college president, be still less". In addition to his humble, moral stature, he was a man of great physical bearing as well, standing six feet four inches tall. During the American Civil War he upheld the cause of the North and opposed slavery, and his sermon on the death of Abraham Lincoln was an eloquent expression of the character of both men. Brooks' understanding of individuals of other ways and thought, and of other religious traditions, gained a following across a broad segment of society, and was thus a great factor in gaining increasing support for the Episcopal Church. His influence as a religious leader was unique.

Lewis Redner, organist at Holy Trinity Episcopal Church in Philadelphia, where Brooks served as priest, created the music which is actually titled "St. Louis" and it is believed that the carol was first sung by their Sunday School children's choir.

Brooks writes in verse 1 of the hymn about a quiet little town, where all the hopes and fears of the past, present and future are brought together in the person of the baby Jesus. While the mortals sleep, the angels keep their watch. The stars proclaim, sing praises to God and peace to humanity.

In verse three, God gives our hearts the blessings of the heavens. Christ comes silently, and unheard to receive the open hearts of humanity. Jesus waits for the invitation from us and in verse four, as we sing, the invitation is given. "O Come to us, abide with us, our Lord, Emmanuel." Emmanuel meaning, 'God with us.'

If you sang this verse without a meek soul, or not realizing the invitation you were giving, I want to give you an opportunity right now to say those words again, aloud or in your heart. Let us pray: "O Come to us - abide with us - our Lord, Emmanuel."

Here this week's news from Bethlehem: "Starting with Christmas celebrations, the high point of the year in the town – the new mayor, Vera Baboun is hoping to turn things around in the troubled city. For the past seven years, the Islamic Hamas militant group had a strong presence in Bethlehem's leadership, prompting a cutoff of international aid funds. But they lost their seats in October elections that brought in Baboun, who is Christian, as Bethlehem's mayors traditionally are.

The local economy is battered, with the highest unemployment in the West Bank, and local Christians continue to leave Bethlehem, which years ago moved from a Christian majority to a Muslim one. But the mayor is trying to raise hope, pointing to the Palestinians' recent boost of status at the United Nations.

"We still have a long way to go, but the Christmas season is special this year because not only do we celebrate the birth of Christ, but we are celebrating the birth of the Palestinian state," the mayor said, standing next to a 55-foot Christmas tree. "It is a Christmas of peace, of hope and love."

Tonight we can pray for those people and all, who throughout history have lived in turmoil.

239 Silent Night

The well-known Christmas Carol, "Silent Night," has not lost any of its allure for millions of people around the globe since it was first sung in 1818. It is not only the most popular German Christmas Carol, but also the most popular piece of music ever produced! Some of the details are still in dispute, but there is general agreement upon certain facts.

Nearly everyone knows that a hungry church mouse gnawed a hole in the bellows of the old church organ in Oberndorf, and that in just a few hours time, Josef Mohr and his good friend Franz Gruber produced what would become the most popular song in the world!

This makes for a terrific story, but there is no documentation for the role of the mouse. We do know that according to what Gruber called the "authentic story" (written 36 years later!), the organ was in a sad state of repair and that the church had no money to remedy the situation. It is, of course, very possible that a hungry mouse actually did help to incur the damage to the organ.

Neither Mohr nor Gruber could possibly have perceived that their co-production would someday make them famous. Their main concern was that the traditional Christmas Eve midnight mass not be entirely destitute of music. The guitar was seen as a worldly instrument in those days and not fit for use in a church, and organist, Gruber was probably not very excited about composing a piece for Mohr's guitar. The men were perhaps more concerned about how the people would receive the introduction in the church of this instrument than how they would like their new song.

Josef Mohr, who wrote the text to Silent Night, was the third illegitimate child born to a 41-year-old, unmarried seamstress. His father was a soldier, who had deserted from the army. Mohr began school and somehow, the Director of the Cathedral Choir in Salzburg, heard Mohr's clear tenor voice. He inquired about him and took the lad under his wing.

Mohr soon became one of his favorite Choir Boys in the University Choir and later sang in the St. Peter's Cathedral Choir in Salzburg. At sixteen, he began musical studies in the Benedictine Monastery. After returning to Salzburg, he enrolled in a seminary to study for the priesthood and was ordained in 1815 and was appointed as assistant to the priest in his home town.

According to official documents of the Catholic Church, the appointment of Mohr, as priest was seriously questioned by the Diocese's Provisor. His comments are recorded as follows: "The curate priest Mohr acts immaturely, walking through the streets with a long tobacco pipe, his pouch at his side. Similar to the ship boys, he rides the river at flood stage, gambles, drinks and above all, he sings unedifying songs."

Franz Gruber, who wrote the music, was born into a weaver's family. His birthplace was the small town , where Adolf Hitler was born. Gruber's father wanted him to learn the weaver's trade, but a teacher recognized other gifts in his student and persuaded the father to allow him to pursue a teaching career. In 1816, shortly before the 24-year-old Mohr arrived as curate priest, Gruber accepted a position as church organist in Oberndorf. Some sources claim that his decision was with hopes of obtaining a teaching position there.

After realizing that the defective church organ would be unusable for the midnight mass, Mohr took his Christmas poem to the home of his friend, Franz Gruber. Within a few hours, Gruber had set the composition to music for two solo voices and a choir. Mohr sang tenor and Gruber bass, while the church choir joined in on the refrain. Musical accompaniment was provided by Mohr's guitar. Called "a plucking violin," the guitar was

considered to be a worldly instrument, used mainly in taverns. According to Gruber, the townspeople received the new song with enthusiasm.

The organ builder, Carl Mauracher, made temporary repairs to the old organ the next spring and built a new organ six years later. On one of his visits, he discovered the text and music of Silent Night (then called "Christmas Song") and took it back with him. Folk music groups began singing it in Alpine villages, and before long, the song was known in Munich and other cities.

From that time on, the carol began its ascent to fame, conquering the hearts of people everywhere. Once again we find God using the gifts of the lowly to accomplish great work, as Mohr and Gruber wrote to God's glory and power to preserve the music of Christmas for the congregation and for all Christmases since.

A few notes about the words we sing: 'yon virgin,' is the virgin over yonder; shepherds that 'quake' are terrified of night visions - the angels - proclaiming the coming of the baby; 'heavenly hosts' are the angel choir singing; and the word 'Alleluia' means praise to God. In verse three 'God loves pure light,' and as we sing verse four we will lift our candles to let God know, that though we are imperfect, we lend our light together in Alleluia with the angels.

"Sleep in Heavenly Peace" can mean different things at different times. The night my father was dying, as I sat bedside, I sang Silent Night to him as a prayer for him as he entered God's eternal heavenly peace. This is the hope that we have through Christ, for our loved ones when they die, and for ourselves when we go to be with the Lord. But where is peace hopeful here on earth? Possibly in the pauses between the violence; the pauses before and after the storms.

The story of the Christmas truce was a series of widespread, unofficial ceasefires that took place along the Western Front around Christmas 1914, during World War I. Through the week leading up to Christmas, parties of German and British soldiers began to exchange seasonal greetings and songs between their trenches; on occasion, the tension was reduced to the point that individuals would walk across to talk to their counterpart soldiers from the other side, even bearing gifts.

On Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, many soldiers from both sides – as well as, to a lesser degree, from French units – independently ventured into "no man's land", where they mingled, exchanging food and souvenirs. As well as joint burial ceremonies, several meetings ended in carol-singing. Troops from both sides were also friendly enough to play games of football with one another.

The truce is seen as a symbolic moment of peace and humanity amidst one of the most violent events of modern history. It was not everywhere; in some regions of the front, fighting continued throughout the day, while in others, little more than an arrangement to recover bodies was made. The following year, a few units again arranged ceasefires with their opponents over Christmas, but the truces were not nearly as widespread as in 1914; this was, in part, due to strongly worded orders from the high commands of both sides prohibiting such fraternization.

Bruce Bairns, who served throughout the war, wrote: "I wouldn't have missed that unique and weird Christmas Day for anything. ... I spotted a German officer, some sort of lieutenant I should think, and being a bit of a collector, I share with him that I had taken a fancy to some of his buttons. ... I brought out my wire clippers and, with a few deft snips, removed a couple of his buttons and put them in my pocket. I then gave him two of mine in exchange. ... The last I saw was one of my machine gunners, who was a bit of an amateur hairdresser in civilian life, cutting the unnaturally long hair of a docile [german], who was patiently kneeling on the ground whilst the automatic clippers crept up the back of his neck."

General Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien, commander of the British II Corps, was irate when he heard what was happening, and issued strict orders forbidding friendly communication with the opposing German troops. Of

course how dare the soldiers, interrupt a war for some peace. When we get too caught up in the fighting of life, we have lost sight of the glory and power of God, making peace an elusive dream.

Our hope for heavenly peace while we are here on earth, can be personal. Several people in this last year have told me they sleep well at night, because their conscience is clear. Once again, not because I know anyone that is perfect, but because when you live this life, with the best intentions and an eye to your Creator, there is peace to be had.

So I leave you with this from Psalm 29; "Give the Lord glory and power," "let the Lord bless his people with peace." Amen.