

Christmas 2021

♪ *Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht – Alles schläft, einsam wacht ...* ♪

To your great relief, I am not going to sing the whole song in its original German. But I turn to that familiar carol we know as “Silent Night” this Christmas because we so much need to find again the stillness, the silence, the peace these words promise. Perhaps you have your favorite carol, a song that prompts memories of Christmases past: a familiar melody or phrase that captures in your spirit something of what was revealed on that Silent, Holy Night: to know again the nearness of God, a promise of mercy offered in love and kept in faithfulness to a Covenant made long before, forgotten by many, but never by God.

“All is calm, all is bright,” we sing; but that’s not quite what Father Josef Mohr composed just over 200 years ago. *Alles schläft, einsam wacht* means literally, “all are asleep, only the Holy couple keep watch.” Mary and Joseph were joined later by angelic choirs and curious shepherds; but ***that first revelation of God’s mercy in Person took place in silence***, far away from the noise and business of the world.

The Son of God, the Word through whom all things were made, chose this stillness, this silence, this obscurity, to come among us. It was an unexpected but profound fulfillment of words we heard near the beginning of Advent from the prophet Zechariah: ***“Silence, all mankind, in the presence of the Lord, for He stirs forth from His holy dwelling.”*** In Zechariah’s vision, these are words that command respect for the power of God, coming to judge the world. But they also speak about our world today, for there are different kinds of silence. Then as now, the world is filled with noise – political slogans and arguments about the problems we face; the weapons of war, the distractions of our amusements; but also with the cry of the poor, the tears of the sorrowful, the suffering of human pain of body and mind and spirit. For many people today, it seems that it is God Who is silent and absent, no longer relevant; perhaps not even there at all. To the doubting postmodern spirit, words and rituals of faith seem like mere empty relics of a simpler time now left behind. Even if we want them to be true, many seem to wonder ... what if they are not? ***What if the silence is all there is?***

But there is another kind of silence ... the stillness of spirit that allows God to speak and act. In fact, *all of the greatest mysteries of God's plan to redeem us were fulfilled in silence and darkness* ... from that Silent Night in a manger in Bethlehem, to the darkness of a Friday afternoon, when the sun was eclipsed and the Voice of Jesus was silenced on the Cross; and then the predawn darkness on the third day, when the Risen Christ emerged from a tomb, unseen and unheard, but victorious over death. *God still speaks to us in this silence* ... not only the reverent silence of prayer and adoration, like the speechless shepherds and the awe-filled Magi; *but even in the silence of doubt, of uncertainty, of disbelief, of indifference to His Word*. His mercy endures forever; and He never ceases to visit us, to join us, even to sit with us in our silence where human words fail so the Divine Word can speak.

Silent Night, holy night ... the Christmas silence is not an empty nothingness, but an opportunity to quiet the noise that drowns out God's Voice. He comes not in overwhelming power but in weakness, in the wordless simplicity of an Infant. This revelation of divine Mercy does not make us tremble in fear but draws forth from us the natural response we have with any baby ... to smile, to caress, to hold that Child close in love. *Jesus brings God close ... a soothing, calming, and peaceful Presence for the restlessness of our spirits – a Person Who loves us without fail and without end.*

This Love, this Body, is given to us over and over in the Eucharist – silently but received in faith – for Jesus never stops coming to us, speaking that timeless Word: This is My Body, which is for you. Amid the busyness and joy of celebrations with family and friends, take a few moments of silence, perhaps before a manger scene, or listening to your favorite carol ... keep watch like Mary and Joseph on that silent night, that holy night. Join their loving awe at the Birth of this Child, all of God's promises kept. As Fr. Mohr knew, it is worth repeating: *Christ, the Savior, is born ... Christ, the Savior is born.*