



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
Spirituality · Community · Justice

The 200th Anniversary of Silent Night

The Rev. Dr. J. Carl Gregg

24 December 2018

frederickuu.org

Tonight is the bicentennial of “Silent Night.” This beloved Christmas carol was first performed in public on December 24, 1818, **two hundred years this very evening**. Joseph Mohr, a young priest in Salzburg, Austria, serving the church of St. Nicholas, wrote the original lyrics in German

in 1816 as a reflection on peace after the end of the Napoleonic Wars. On Christmas Eve two years later, he asked his friend Franz Gruber, a schoolteacher in the neighboring town of Arnsdorf and also the organist in Oberndorf, to set his words to music. Gruber did so, and together that evening at Christmas Eve Mass, the two performed “Silent Night”...Mohr singing and Gruber playing the guitar, since the church organ was not working.

To go deeper, I would like to share with you a reflection written by **Sarah Eyerly**, an Assistant Professor of Musicology and Director of the Early Music Program at Florida State University, about the historical context out of which “Silent Night” was written. Although we are living through some bleak days at the moment, consider what the world was like two hundred years ago this evening in Austria, the birthplace of “Silent Night”:

- Twelve years of war had decimated the country’s political and social infrastructure.

- Meanwhile, the previous year – known as “**The Year Without a Summer**” – had been catastrophically cold. **The eruption of Indonesia’s Mount Tambora** in 1815 had also caused widespread climate change throughout Europe. Volcanic ash in the atmosphere caused almost continuous storms – even snow – in the midst of summer. Crops failed and there was widespread famine.
- Mohr’s congregation was poverty-stricken, hungry and traumatized. It was in that context that he crafted a set of poetic verses to convey hope [and peace].

When Gruber went to work on composing a melody and harmonization to match Mohr’s lyrics, he chose an Italian musical style called the “**siciliana**” that mimics the sound of water and rolling waves: two large rhythmic beats, split into three parts each.

[Pianist play excerpt]

The first performance of the song with its wave-like tune was well-received by Mohr’s parishioners, most of whom worked as boat-builders and shippers in the salt trade that was central to the economy of the region. But in order to become a worldwide phenomenon, “Silent Night” would need to resonate far beyond Oberndorf.

According to **a document written by Gruber in 1854**, the song first became popular in the nearby Zillertal valley. From there, two traveling families of folk singers, the Strassers and the Rainers, included the tune in their shows. The song then became popular across Europe, and eventually in America, where **the Rainers sang it on Wall Street in 1839**.

At the same time, German-speaking missionaries spread the song from Tibet to Alaska and translated it into local languages. By the mid-19th century, “Silent Night” had even made its way to subarctic Inuit communities along the Labrador coast, where it was translated into Inuktitut as “**Unuak Opinak**.”

The lyrics of “Silent Night” have always carried an important message for Christmas Eve observances in congregations around the world. But the song’s lilting melody and peaceful lyrics are also more universal. One of the reasons this song has spanned two centuries—and been translated into more than 300 different languages

and dialects—is that part of what we want from our holidays is a “Silent night,” a “holy night”—when “All is calm, all is bright,” and we can “sleep in heavenly peace.”

Perhaps at no time in the song’s history was this message more important than during the **Christmas Truce of 1914**, when, at the height of World War I, German and British soldiers on the front lines in Flanders laid down their weapons on Christmas Eve and together sang together in their respective languages both “Silent Night” and “Stille Nacht.”

The song’s message of peace, even in the midst of suffering, has bridged cultures and generations. Its lyrics speak of

hope in hard times

and of *beauty* that arises unexpectedly from pain;

they offer comfort and solace amidst conflict;

and they are both inherently human and infinitely adaptable. So, happy anniversary, “Silent Night!”

May your message of peace

continue to resonate across the generations.

In that spirit, as we continue to discern the ways we are called—individually and collectively—to practice hope, peace, joy, and love—both this night and in the days to come, I invite you to remain seated as we sing together: Hymn No. 246 “O Little Town of Bethlehem”