

*Noisy Night, Holy Night*  
Christmas Eve 2018

“Twas the night before Christmas and all through the house, not a creature was stirring, not even a --“.

I'm not going to recite the whole poem, but I want you to imagine for a minute that you are such a mouse, living not in a house, but in a church, maybe a church like this one, but unlike this one, it doesn't have a kitchen attached to it. And people don't serve food here like we often do. It would be a pretty hungry place for a mouse family. They might forage for food outside and then return to the shelter of the church, but what happens when snow piles deep, too deep for a mouse? Where would they find food then? They just might end up eating the leather belts which hold parts of the organ together. And legend has it that's what happened 200 years ago in a church in Austria. Whatever the cause, on that Christmas Eve morning 200 years ago, when the organist went to rehearse he found that the organ wouldn't play. It was Christmas Eve and like us, he and the minister were getting ready for their Christmas Eve service. What would their service be without the thundering joy of the organ? There was no way to repair it that day. What were they going to do?

The minister and the organist sadly left the church. Later in the day, the minister went to visit a family with a new baby. While he was with them, holding the baby and talking with the parents about their hopes for their child, he forgot his worries. Walking home just after sunset and thinking about the family and the baby and the peace he had found with them, words came into his mind. Anyone want to guess what they were? “Silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright.” Or in his language, “Stille Nacht! Heilige Nacht!” As he walked, the whole poem grew in his head. He went back to his house, wrote down the lines, and then went over to the organist's house to show him the verses. When he got there, Franz Gruber, the organist, was playing his guitar. “Here,” the minister said, “It's our Christmas song.” When the musician read the new poem, he started experimenting on the guitar and came up with a tune. Then he went to the church, knocking on the doors of the choir families as he went, inviting them to come to learn the new song. And that Christmas Eve night, Franz Gruber played the guitar while the choir sang the words Joseph Mohr had written.

Legend has it that when someone came to repair the organ, he heard the new song and took it back with him and taught it to his choir. Performers heard it and

learned it and took it with them to other towns. The German King loved it so much that he said he wanted to hear it every Christmas Eve. Other people loved it too; over time it has been translated into 140 languages, including Chinese, Cheyenne, Swahili, and Zulu. During the World War I truce on Christmas Eve 1914, German soldiers began singing it in their language; the English soldiers responded in theirs, and to the song of peace, they came out of their foxholes into No-Man's Land where they shared chocolates and family pictures, and played soccer together.

And still we sing it every year to end our Christmas Eve service in harmony with people around the world in churches of many different denominations who are singing it tonight. Why does it speak to us?

I think it speaks to the yearning of our hearts for that same peace, the same hopes that are part of the birth of every child, and the same joy present even in the midst of chaos. And for anyone who has spent time with a young child, you know that the peace of the sleeping child comes as a gift in the chaos of crying and feeding and trying to understand the needs of an infant. It may be a silent night at that moment, but at other times in the night you know it's going to be noisy. Yet both are holy – and it's only because we have the noise that the silence seems so profound.

The hymn promises us that in the midst of our noisy, busy, boisterous, sometimes tearful Christmas Eves and beyond Christmas lives that we too may find the peace which passes all understanding, that peace which lies at the heart of all creation, that peace which was born in Jesus and is born in each of us still. And that is the peace nothing can take away from us. May each of us be renewed in that peace tonight.

- Pamela M. Barz