

Sunday Sermon
December 24, 2018
Luke 2:8-16, Matthew 2:1b-2, 9b-11
“So We Light Candles and Sing”

Introduction

Never does a sanctuary look more beautiful than on Christmas Eve. Never does music sound sweeter. But even more, there is a feel. Can you feel it? The winding down as all our preparations come to an end, for Christmas to arrive.

We are not the only ones who are slowing down tonight. On Christmas Eve all creation slows down to listen, to watch, to wait . . . for God to come among us, Emmanuel.

Barbara Brown Taylor says that for good or for ill, Christmas Eve functions like a kind of time machine. This room is full of all our Christmas dreams and memories, taking us back to every other Christmas Eve we have spent on this earth. Back to when Christmas smelled like cedar and oranges stuck with cloves, and tasted like coconut cake and peppermint. Back when mom and dad sat around in bathrobes sipping coffee while remote controlled cars were chased through a sea of wrapping paper.

But for some, this night is a reminder of the way they thought Christmas should be but never was. They have spent their lives as if looking through a window, watching Christmas from the outside. Everyone is supposed to go home for Christmas, right? Only where is home? Some of us know; some of us are still trying to find out.

But tonight the answer is *right here*. This is our home tonight, and we are all inside. This is our Bethlehem, where we have hauled the hopes and fears of all our years. And for a moment we catch a glimpse of the angels and the star, we light the candles, we sing “Silent Night” and it is Christmas.

I

Everything we do tonight builds to that moment, the lighting of the candles and the singing of “Silent Night.” Why is it that Christmas Eve worship always ends with candles and that song?

We light candles in part because Christmas comes at the darkest time of the year, the time when sunlight is the shortest.

Ancient peoples in pre-scientific societies became depressed and unsettled about the short days of December. What if, they wondered, the sun just kept retreating until there was no daylight at all? What would happen to the world?

So they lit bonfires and lanterns and candles to encourage the sun to return and not depart for good. They lit candles to cheer the sun to shine again.

Today, even with all our scientific advances, it is still a dark world. We still become depressed and unsettled this time of year. We long for light.

“It is better to light one candle, than to curse the darkness,” the old proverb says. But the darkness seems so great, and our candles seem so small. All Advent I have been thinking about these little candles and why we want to light them and sing “Silent Night.”

II

Tonight is the 200th Anniversary of the debut of the carol “Silent Night.” On December 24, 1818 in a little alpine village church in Oberndorf Austria, associate pastor Josef Mohr took words he had written 2 years earlier during a time of massive deaths due to drought and famine. He gave those words to church organist Franz Gruber s to put to music. And they taught the song to their little congregation, and sang it with guitar at their midnight mass.

Little did they know that their Christmas Eve carol would travel around the world and that 200 years later, it would be sung in multiple languages in all kinds of places, great cathedrals and tiny churches, massive concert halls and family living rooms.

Little did they know that their carol would help initiate a Christmas truce in the fighting of World War I. That on December 24, 1914, as a London regiment of soldiers was dug into muddy trenches, they heard a rich baritone voice coming from a parapet on the enemy side, the German side. Henry Williamson wrote that he recognized the song as one his German nurse had sung to him when he was little. The song, he said, took those hearing it, both sides, to another world, away from the fighting, the casualties, the deaths. The words were in German but he knew their meaning, *Silent Night, Holy Night, All is calm*, and that night it was sung, *All is quiet*.

The singing of that song started an exchange of carols in English and German, soldiers sending songs back and forth across the lines. Then soldiers got up, left their trenches and enemies began

greeting in the no-man's land that was a killing zone the day before. And they agreed not to fire their rifles on Christmas Day. Cease-fires moved up and down the line, eventually embracing a 500-mile stretch of the Western Front. Enemies stopped their fighting to celebrate the Prince of Peace.

Conclusion

It is Christmas Eve 2018, 200 years after the words were sung for the first time. And it is difficult for us to find silence in our land amid violence, acts of hatred, angry divisive arguing. These candles seem so small and worthless.

And yet tonight we light the candles and we sing the song because . . .

The candle that is never lit never invites enemies to sing together songs of peace and joy.

The candle that is never lit never helps us see the goodness in each other's faces.

The candle that is never lit never provides light for others who stumble.

And the candle that is never lit never lights other candles.

You see we have come here tonight not to light our candles, but to light each other's candles.

So that together we may celebrate the Light who has come to us in our noise and in our darkness,

Jesus the Christ,
the Light of the world.

And the Light who has come into the world shines in the darkness;
and the darkness cannot overcome it.

Tonight, may the light of that love shine upon you. Amen.

*Adapted from "Past Perfection," a sermon in *Home by Another Way* by Barbara Brown Taylor, Cowley Publications, 1999.

Wanda gives a verbal cue for the lighters to come forward, "Now the time has come for the Sharing of the Light from the Christ candle. Let us stand and prepare to sing the words like they have been sung for 200 years as we hold up light in the darkness."

Wanda, Lynn and Beth Ann get their lights from the Christ candle. As they go down the line lighting the lighters' candles, Robert begins playing "Silent Night." He plays an introduction long enough to let the lighters get to their stations.

Meanwhile, Rick starts taking down the lights in stages, faster than $\frac{1}{3}$ each verse, but enough time for lighters time to get their stations.