

Notes from the Music Director (No. 24)

Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church, Rochester, Pennsylvania

Henry Doktorski, III

December 24, 2015—Christmas Eve



The Nativity by Gentile da Fabriano (c. 1370-1427) from the Strozzi Altarpiece (Italy)

The Christmas Eve liturgies (at 7 and 11 pm) are arguably the most-beloved and best-attended services at Grace Lutheran (with the possible exception of Easter Sunday). The Christmas season (twelve days of gaiety and joyous celebration ending on the Feast of the Epiphany) is anticipated and celebrated not only by the members of Grace Lutheran, but also by billions of Christians (and many non-Christians) worldwide.

Tradition suggests that Jesus was born at night (based on Luke 2:6-8) and at Grace Lutheran we celebrate the birth of the Christ child with festive decorations, including a very tall Christmas tree adorned with ornaments and electric lights, a crèche depicting the stable and manger in first-century Bethlehem, Christmas caroling for the elderly residents of Rochester Manor, a musical play of the Nativity (every other year) with children and adults wearing gaily-colored costumes representing angels, shepherds, animals, wise men, Mary, Joseph & Jesus, and very special and elaborate liturgies with very special music featuring the Grace choirs, musicians (including a brass/woodwind ensemble), hand bell ensemble, piano and our recently-tuned 1983 two-manual and pedal 25-rank Schlicker pipe organ. (For more about Grace Lutheran's organ, see "The King of Instruments" at http://henrydoktorski.com/misc/king_of_instruments.html.)



Josef Mohr, a painting at Stille-Nacht Chapel, Oberndorf, Austria

At the Christmas Eve services at Grace, as at thousands of churches throughout the world, we dim the overhead electric lights, ignite individually hand-held wax candles and sing the lovely carol with lyrics by Joseph Mohr and music by Franz Xaver Gruber: "Silent Night." As the principal organist at Grace for over nine years, I like to feature the chimes in the accompaniment during the third and final verse which proclaims: "Silent night, holy night! Son of God, love's pure light radiant beams from Thy holy face, with the dawn of redeeming grace, Jesus, Lord, at your birth, Jesus, Lord, at your birth."

The carol "Silent Night" (originally "Stille Nacht") was first performed on Christmas Eve in 1818 at St Nicholas parish church in Oberndorf, a village in the Austrian Empire on the Salzach river in present-day Austria. A 26-year-old priest, Father Joseph Mohr (1792-1848), had come to Oberndorf the year before. He had already written the lyrics of the song "Stille Nacht" in 1816 at Mariapfarr, the hometown of his father in the Salzburg Lungau region.

The tune for "Stille Nacht" was composed by Franz Xaver Gruber (1787-1863), a schoolmaster and organist in the nearby village of Arnsdorf. Before Christmas Eve, Mohr brought the words to Gruber and asked him to compose a melody and guitar accompaniment for the church service. Both performed the carol during the mass on the night of December 24, 1818.

The English translation which we use at Grace Lutheran was written by an Episcopal priest, John Freeman Young (1820-1885), then serving at Trinity Church, New York



Franz Xaver Gruber, painting by Sebastian Stief (1846)

City. Young's translation was first published in 1859. "Silent Night" has been translated and published in at least 140 languages.

To hear "Silent Night" sung by the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, go to <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ri2thaAlyA>.

Resources

Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version (Zonderfan: 1989)
LBW: Lutheran Book of Worship (Augsburg Publishing House: 1978)
WOV: With One Voice (Augsburg Fortress: 1995)
W&P: Worship & Praise Songbook (Augsburg Fortress: 1999)
ELW: Evangelical Lutheran Worship (Augsburg Fortress: 2006)
Wikipedia: <https://en.wikipedia.org>
Hymnary.org: <http://www.hymnary.org>
GIA Publications: <http://www.giamusic.com>
Hymntime.com: <http://hymntime.com>
Singers.com: <http://singers.com>

Back to the index of "24 Essays on 24 Hymns":
http://henrydoktorski.com/Music_Director_Notes.html.