

Christmas Present (Advent 2011 Series)

2 of 3

Shopping for YourselfMedia: *I Need a Silent Night* by Amy Grant

Luke 2:1-7

2nd Sunday of Advent

12 04 2011 Sam Jones Memorial UMC

Christmas Present

Today we are continuing our Advent Worship Series entitled *Christmas Present*. The title has a twofold meaning. “Present” can refer to the gifts that we give and receive during the holiday season. However, “present” also has a temporal meaning—what happens in the here and now between the past and the future.

We began last week by considering the presents we give to others with *28 Days of Gifts*. Next week we will explore what to give to the God who has everything. Today’s sermon is: *Shopping for Ourselves*.

Scripture:**Shopping for Yourself**

There are only 21 shopping days left until Christmas. We are making our lists and checking them twice, buying gifts for the naughty and nice. We cannot really relax until everything on our *To Do List* is done.

In the midst of holiday shopping, however, have you ever found yourself buying a little something, something for **yourself**? Or maybe you bought a gift for someone else and ended up keeping it? Or at the very least bought a duplicate so you could have one, too? After all, who deserves it more? And the presents we buy for ourselves are always the right size and color!

But forget for a moment the material gifts we might WANT like a 65 inch TV, a multi-carat diamond ring, or a new car with a red bow sitting in the driveway . . . and consider instead the non-material gifts that we really NEED.

I did an informal survey of people and asked the simple question, “What gift would you really love to have during this holy day season?” How would you answer? The two most popular responses are actually related to one another.

The number one answer was **TIME**. In the hustle and bustle of the holiday season, everyone could use an extra hour per day, day per week, and week per season. Perhaps you’ve seen the Hallmark ornament that counts down the time until Christmas Day. Watching the seconds fly past would give me ulcers!

The second most popular answer was some **PEACE and QUIET**. In the midst of the chaos, the opportunity to create some “Me Time” to unwind. Some silent moments to recall the true meaning of the season.

Time . . . peace and quiet . . . if these are the gifts you are hoping to find under the Christmas tree, then good luck! They appear to be in short supply this December.

A Silent Night

An “*oxymoron*” is a figure of speech that combines two contradictory terms. The term comes from two opposite Greek words: *oxy* (sharp) and *moros* (dull.) So even the word “*oxymoron*” is an oxymoron! Other examples include:

- Pretty ugly
- Jumbo shrimp
- Long shorts
- Plastic silverware
- Boneless ribs
- Dry ice
- Freezer burn
- Fresh frozen
- First annual
- United Methodist

There’s a popular Christmas carol that would also qualify as an oxymoron: “*Silent Night*.” Has anyone here experienced a holiday season that is silent, holy, calm, and bright? It seems like an impossible dream.

First there are the malls. Some people tell me that they actually LIKE waiting until the last minute and shopping in crowded stores. However, I would not trust them to handle sharp instruments or heavy machinery! There are cars honking, bells ringing, children crying, parents screaming, credit cards swiping, and cash registers beeping. The noise even deafens *Muzak* Christmas classics such as *Grandma Got Ran Over by a Reindeer* and *The Redneck Twelve Days of Christmas*.

Even if we avoid the mall madness, what is the decibel level in our homes? There is the cheerful sound of children fussing and parents grumbling. The chief chef bangs pots and pans together in the kitchen. The resident engineer mutters over some “*easy-to-assemble*” toy. Meanwhile, the TV and stereo provide background noise.

Sometimes people come to church seeking calm from the holiday storm. Let me know if you find it! We seldom get more than vague hints of a “*Silent Night*” in our congregational life. In fact, December is one of the busiest times of the church year. In addition to the normal full routine, there are banquets, parties, rehearsals, pageants, cantatas, Nativity Scenes, and Christmas Eve services. Even in worship, we seldom experience much quiet. After five seconds of silence, I’m looking around to see who missed their cue!

Perhaps we shouldn’t be surprised. Despite the carol’s words, I doubt the first Christmas was a very SILENT night either. The declaration of “*No room in the end*” rang in the ears of Mary and Joseph. The sounds of the barnyard animals greeted them in the stable. The cries of labor and childbirth soon followed. Then the angelic chorus sang loud enough to awaken all of creation. The shepherds crowded into the stable with a late night visit. And despite the words of “*Away in a Manger*” that claim “*the little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes,*” any first time parent knows better! So it really wasn’t a “*Silent Night*” at all—either then OR now.

Holy Night

So I suppose it is only appropriate that the carol entitled *Silent Night, Holy Night* was written in the midst of a church crisis filled with pressure and anxiety. The year was 1818 in the town of Oberndorf, Austria. On Christmas Eve, church mice vandalized the

old organ at Saint Nicholas Church. The rodents chewed through the organ's leather billows, disabling the only source of music in the church.

The big Christmas Eve service soon would be there. So the parish priest, Joseph Mohr, frantically contacted the village's music teacher named Franz Gruber. Together they composed a carol that began with the words, "*Silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright.*" It was sung for the first time that evening accompanied only by a guitar.

The hymn quickly grew in popularity, and today it is one of the best known and loved songs of the Advent and Christmas seasons. All of us know the first verse by heart. The other stanzas may not be as familiar; but they all portray the birth of the Christ child with moving music and meaningful lyrics.

Good Methodists seldom know verse three of ANY hymn. However, the third stanza of "*Silent Night*" describes the wondrous gift that God gave to the world that first Christmas night:

*"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 thy birth, Jesus, Lord at thy birth."*

Christ's birth marked "*the dawn of redeeming grace.*" Only Matthew and Luke include the stories of Jesus' birth in their gospels. We never think of John 3: 16 as a traditional Christmas text. However, John describes Christ's incarnation with these familiar words: "*For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.*" This verse has been called "*The Gospel in Miniature.*" It certainly does a marvelous job of summarizing the Christmas story in one verse. With God's Christmas gift of the Christ child, we are invited to leave our old lives of sin, death, and darkness behind. Christmas morning dawns with forgiveness, life, and light.

During the early part of the last century, the Reuben Donnelly Company in Chicago was one of the world's largest printers of magazines. In the days before computers, the company had a large machine that sent out notices to people whose subscriptions had expired.

One day a tiny spring in the machine broke, and a rancher in Powder Bluff, Colorado received 9,734 notices that his subscription to *National Geographic* had expired! He walked ten miles to the nearest post office and sent in his money with this note: "*I give up—send me the blessed magazine!*"

No matter how many times we say "*No*" to God, our Lord continues to say "*YES*" to us. Our Savior woos and invites, pursuing us with an unwavering passion and love. At Christmas, we celebrate "*loves pure light*" that is offered to each of us.

Human Response: Verse 4

God's gift is ours to open. Yet divine initiative requires a **human response**. Verse four of "*Silent Night*" recognizes we must accept God's Christmas present.

*Silent night, holy night, wondrous star, lend thy light;
With the angels let us sing, Alleluia to our King,
Christ the Savior is born, Christ the Savior is born.*

God's divine Word demands that we choose. Recall again the words of John 3: 16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life." On this most holy of evenings, we are challenged to sing with the angels, worship with the shepherds, and bow down with the magi. We are called to stand in wonder before Bethlehem's manager. We are invited to kneel and confess, "Jesus Christ is Lord!" Jesus Christ is Lord—not only of the world but also of my life!

Human Love: Verse 5

And then we are sent forth from this time of worship to walk in Jesus' footsteps. We are called to lives of service and love. After the first Christmas night, the shepherds returned to their flocks. Mary and Joseph began their lives together as parents. The wise men later returned home to the east. Normal life resumed.

Today we depart from worship and return home. Later we will return to school and vocation. The true work of Christmas begins as we live out the message of God's love. Perhaps *Silent Night* needs a fifth verse that describes our return to ordinary time with the extraordinary gospel.

*"Silent night, holy night, God's pure love, shines so bright!
As God's children let us love, reflecting heaven's light from above.
Our hearts are nativity's scene, our hearts are nativity's scene."*

III. Christmas in Camak

The Reverend Joan Biles, who is a retired United Methodist minister in the North Georgia Conference, wrote an article in *Interpreter* (December 1997) about an incident from her childhood. Here are excerpts from her story.

"It was Christmas Eve, 1944, in my hometown of Camak, Georgia. The war was well into its third year, and Camak's population of 350 had dwindled. Many young fathers, including my own, had been drafted, and as others came of age, they too went to war

Despite the shadow of war, the air was filled with excitement, as we prepared for our annual Christmas Eve worship service to be held in the center of town under the train depot shed. I, at age 6, had the most exciting part of all. Dressed in the new red dress my grandmother had made, and wearing the new shoes for which Mama had saved all of her ration stamps, I was to stand on the tallest mail cart—the one bearing the Holy Family—and recite Luke 2: 3-14. I knew it by heart.

But by noon on that day, word began to circulate that a train bearing wounded German prisoners of war would be coming into our station yard and stopping for water at about 7 that evening. Another train carrying wounded U.S. soldiers would be coming

from the opposite direction at about the same time. Telephones rang as the three sponsoring groups discussed whether to call off the service. After all, who knew what might happen? Finally, the decision was made that we should continue as planned.

Seven o'clock arrived, and the whole town gathered under the depot shed. The night was crisp and clear. Standing on the mail wagon, I waited for a signal from Pastor O'Neal, then began my recitation. A whistle blew in the distance. I stopped. The crowd began to flutter as a huge black steam engine came to a stop parallel with the station. All was deathly quiet.

Painted on the side of the passenger cars were a big red cross and the words *Prisoners of War*. There were bars in the windows, but the windows were raised. We could hear the men talking softly to each other

Another whistle blew, and from the opposite direction came another long string of passenger cars. This train stopped parallel with the German prisoner train. For several moments, the whole town and our visitors were caught in an awkward silence.

Suddenly, like a prayer, the prisoner's of war began singing the familiar song, "Silent Night" in a language none of the townspeople knew: "*Stille nacht, Heilig nacht, Alles schalft, Einsam wacht . . .*"

Their spontaneity underscored the same hope for peace that stirred in the hearts of all of us who were present. Then somewhere in the middle of their song, the U. S. troops from the other train began singing along in English. The volume swelled and the rest of us under the shed joined in. German and English blended in the final line of the carol: "*Sleep in heavenly peace; Schalf in himmlischer Ruh . . .*"

As the night grew still again, we stood as in a drama. Pastor O-Neal motioned to me, and I began again. Then, as now, I found profound new meaning as I recited, '*Peace on earth, good will to men.*'"

Conclusion

The holidays are a hectic, noisy time. "*Silent Night*" IS an oxymoron in the hustle and bustle of the Holy Day season. If you think about it for a moment, however, Christmas is filled with oxymorons. Consider for a moment:

- A virgin birth
- A human God
- A baby Savior
- Emmanuel: God with us

I don't wish you a silent night this year; however, I do pray that you experience a holy night—a holy season in which you encounter God's mercy, grace, forgiveness, joy, light, life, and love. Today we remember the reason for the season: Jesus the Christ who is the Savior of the World . . . and the Savior of our Souls.

*"Silent night, holy night, shepherds quake at the sight;
Glories stream from heaven afar, heavenly hosts sing Alleluia!
Christ the Savior is born, Christ the Savior is born!"*

Closing Hymn: " <i>Silent Night</i> "
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