

“Sleep in heavenly peace.” I imagine many of you know the Christmas carol containing these well-loved words, sung about a “mother and child, holy infant so tender and mild,” on a night so silent and holy, when “all is calm, all is bright.” Two hundred years ago Franz Gruber created a melody for these words of “Silent Night,” words written in German by Joseph Mohr.

I think we all long for a silent night, filled with heavenly peace so we can sleep soundly and without worry. That may be why we like this hymn so well, for it reflects the deep longing within each of us. That may be why after 200 years, we continue to cherish this song and look forward to holding candles around the sanctuary on Christmas Eve as we sing these words about a “silent night, holy night.”

That longing for “sleep in heavenly peace” goes way beyond 200 years, for as the prophet Habakkuk knew, violence filled his life as well, some 2300 years before the words to “Silent Night” were composed.

Habakkuk lived during the time when many of his friends and neighbors had been dragged away from their homes by the Babylonians. Imagine if a set of aliens arrived on earth this afternoon from a distant galaxy. In order to obtain the natural resources from our planet that they desired, they dragged away and relocated to another planet many of our community leaders—from city mayors to national presidents, from police officers to doctors and surgeons. Imagine they shut down banks and hospitals, grocery stores and communication systems. We would suddenly find our lives in chaos, following orders by those in control while mourning the loss of our loved ones who had been carried away.

Although to another nation rather than another planet, that’s the type of destruction the Babylonians inflicted on those living in Jerusalem and surrounding communities. As Habakkuk looked around, he cried out, “How long shall I cry for help, God, and you don’t listen? How long shall I cry out

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to you about the violence I see, but you do not save us?”

He found himself struggling as he witnessed the destruction, and he complained to God, “Why do you make me see wrong-doing and look at trouble?”

Have you ever felt that way? Have you ever muttered, “Why do I have to see the suffering around me? I don’t want to see the lives lost in the forest fires of California. I don’t want to see the cries of the children hit with tear gas at the border. I don’t want to see the homeless people in our community sleeping in the frigid weather.”

Years ago, after reading from the prophets for several weeks, someone said to me, “Why do we have to include these scriptures in worship? I come to church to be inspired, to feel good about my life, not to hear about the suffering of ancient people. I don’t want to hear about the struggles in today’s world, the political struggles or the violence. I want to be inspired, not be challenged.”

I’ve thought about those words over the years, wondering what it would be like to leave out a

major chunk of the Bible, to never hear about the struggles and conflicts of the ancient believers. In our Bible study on the prophets [here] at Central, I asked a similar question, “What would it be like if we never read these words from the prophets and about their struggles?” Someone replied, “It would feel as though the Bible was out of touch with the reality of our lives, for we still have struggles and conflicts today. If they trusted God in their chaos many years ago, it gives me hope today in my struggles.”

One of the amazing things our Bible study has discovered as we read the prophets is that no matter how much conflict the writers endured, no matter how much they complained, they could still give thanks to God.

Most of the book of Habakkuk contains complaining by the prophet, followed by God’s response of reassurance. After several rounds of bitter words from the prophet, at the end of the third chapter, Habakkuk proclaimed, “

Though the cherry trees don't blossom
 and the strawberries don't ripen,
 Though the apples are worm-eaten
 and the wheat fields stunted,
 Though the sheep pens are sheepless
 and the cattle barns empty,
 I'm singing joyful praise to GOD.
 I'm turning cartwheels of joy to my Savior God.
 Counting on GOD's Rule to prevail,
 I take heart and gain strength.
 I run like a deer.
 I feel like I'm king of the mountain!¹

It's in the midst of the chaos, in the struggles of life that we encounter, that our longing for a silent night with peaceful sleep inspires us to keep working toward the peace that God envisions for us and to give thanks to God for being with us in the struggle. It's not as simple as sitting back and hoping that life will get better. Working toward peace does involve inspiration, yes, but it also involves opening our eyes to the struggles around us, striving to prevent violence in order to create peace. As one writer has expressed,

There are lots of ways to prevent violence, lots of ways to repair its consequences, lots of ways

to build beloved community. In a polarized society there may be no more effective violence prevention measure than building bridges... Get to know at least one person who votes differently. It's not necessarily easy. But it is necessary. And the history of conflict transformation proves it works. Start with the person of different political views with whom you feel most comfortable. Just get to know each other. This is the work.²

Nearly one hundred years after a congregation sang "Silent Night" for the first time, a group of soldiers during WWI found the words offering them hope, inspiring them to bring a day of peace in the midst of war.

Charles Brewer never expected to be spending Christmas Eve nearly knee-deep in the mud of northern France. Stationed on the front lines, the 19-year-old British lieutenant... shivered in a trench with his fellow soldiers.

Although disappointed to be far from home on Christmas Eve, Brewer at least took solace in the fact that the perpetual rain, which made moving through the trenches as much of a slog as the war itself, had finally abated on the moonlit night. All was jarringly quiet on the

Western Front when a British sentry suddenly spied a glistening light on the German parapet, less than 100 yards away. Warned that it might be a trap, Brewer slowly raised his head over the soaked sandbags protecting his position and through the maze of barbed wire saw a sparkling Christmas tree. As the lieutenant gazed down the line of the German trenches, a whole string of small [pine trees] glimmered like beads on a necklace.

Brewer then noticed the rising of a faint sound that he had never before heard on the battlefield—a Christmas carol. The German words to “Stille Nacht” were not familiar, but the tune—“Silent Night”—certainly was. When the German soldiers finished singing, their foes broke out in cheers. Used to returning fire, the British now replied in song with the English version of the carol.

When dawn broke on Christmas morning, something even more remarkable happened. In sporadic pockets along the 500-mile Western Front, unarmed German and Allied soldiers tentatively emerged from the trenches and

cautiously crossed no-man’s-land...to wish each other a Merry Christmas. Political leaders had ignored the call of Pope Benedict XV to cease fighting around Christmas, but soldiers in the trenches decided to stage their own unofficial, spontaneous [cease-fires] anyway...

“We shook hands, wished each other a Merry Xmas and were soon conversing as if we had known each other for years,” British Corporal John Ferguson wrote... “Here we were laughing and chatting to men whom only a few hours before we were trying to kill!”³

That’s the kind of “Silent Night” we all long for—a night without violence, when those of differing views can put down their weapons and laugh and celebrate that God has created us as one human family. During this Advent season, as we wait for the small baby born in a manger, may we each create a silent night in our homes, calm and bright, bringing a bit of peace into the world.

¹ Habakkuk 3:17-19, The Message Bible.

² The Porch Magazine, www.theporchmagazine.com/articles/2018/10/2/talk

³ Christopher Klein, “World War I’s Christmas Truce,” Dec. 19, 2014, www.history.com/news/world-war-is-christmas-truce-100-years-ago