



SAINT JAMES'
EPISCOPAL CHURCH
Fremont, California

SERMON

24. December, 2009. Christmas Eve

Title: "O Holy Night"

Text: Luke 2:1-18

J.J.



Having heard the Christmas Gospel, there's not much more to be said. Luke does such a good job of it. It's a story we've heard often, and for most of us, it's a story that brings back some wonderful memories of years gone by. It does for me, and particularly on this night, Christmas Eve. Let me share with you one particular memory.

As many of you know, I grew up in Lake Wobegon, Minnesota, where the women are strong, the men are beautiful and the children are above average. We attended a Lutheran Church there, but not the Lake Wobegon Lutheran Church with Pastor Ingqvist. My folks didn't like Lutefisk—thought it was disgusting—so we went to the Missouri Synod Church down the block, where my mother taught in their parochial school for some twenty-four years.

Now, my mother's birthday was December 19th, and, as many of you know, those of you who have birthdays close to Christmas, such birthdays are often neglected or forgotten—they simply get mixed in with the holiday celebrations. In our home, that was often the case. Now, Mom never said anything about that or complained about it—I suspect she was too busy baking cookies, and making fruitcake, and her special Christmas bread . . . and with all the other holiday activities, she was just too busy to celebrate her birthday, or to remember it. Actually, I think she kind of liked that. But I'll never forget her 32nd birthday. I was only six years old, but I remember it well, as if it happened yesterday. Dad had come home early from work, which in itself was a big surprise . . . you see, my Dad was a letter carrier at Lake Wobegon, and that was his busiest time of year. He often left home at 5am and didn't get back until well past 7pm. But that day, Mom's birthday, Dad arrived home in the middle of the afternoon, and right behind him came a very large delivery truck . . . and out of that delivery truck came my mother's birthday present . . . a brand new Baldwin piano. Well, I can tell you, Mom was surprised and shocked . . . and, there were some tears. Dad had not forgotten her special day. Quickly, the piano was moved into the living room . . . one of the men did a quick tuning of it . . . and Mom sat down to play. It was wonderful. And she played it day after day and all of the Christmas preparations went sort of by the way side—not all the cookies got made. And, Christmas came. Now in our home we had a wonderful way of celebrating Christmas. On Christmas Eve, we would go to the family service (around 5pm) . . . return home for "special snacks" (like cheese and crackers, pickled herring, sausages, home-made headcheese, nuts and all kinds of goodies), and Dad would make up a special drink, called a Tom and Jerry, and we would party (even us kids got to taste a little of the Tom and Jerry in those special mugs) . . . then we opened our presents (yes, on Christmas Eve, and somehow Santa always seemed to make it to our home while we went to the family service—interesting how that happened) . . . and after opening our presents, we would all return to church for the midnight candlelight service (we got to sleep in on Christmas morning). Well, that year, after opening our presents, before going back to church, Mom went over to the new piano, handed Dad a sheet of music, and she began to play "O Holy Night," and Dad, he began to sing. Well, let me tell you, again, I was shocked. You see, I had never heard my Dad sing before. I didn't know he even could sing or that he knew anything about music. Ah . . . but sing he did. And that night on, every Christmas Eve for as long as I can remember: Mom played and Dad sang, "O Holy Night."

Now I tell you this story, because the text of this song, written by Placide Cappeau in 1847 . . . the words of this song tells the Christmas story, and its meaning, oh, so well. It's a song which has been very important for me—and not just because Mom played it and Dad sang it on Christmas Eve—but because these words have meant much to me during those times in my life, when, frankly, the stars are not so brightly shining or the morning was so glorious. And, this night, I hope this song and these words, I hope that once again the Christmas story may speak to you . . . especially this year, when, for a lot of us, the stars may not be so brightly

shining or the mornings now so glorious, what with record high unemployment in California, and the sending out of more troops to Afghanistan, and the never ending debate in Washington over a national health care program (which may have been somewhat resolved this morning by the Senate vote). But tonight . . . tonight the message is clear: This is the night of the dear Savior's birth . . . and there is a ray of hope for a world that has become very, very weary . . . Christ is born, and the soul (or "the spirit"), your spirit and my spirit, our spirit has felt its worth. Christ is here! And, indeed, yonder breaks a new and glorious morn. And, hope abounds. [*THE ORGANIST BEGINS TO PLAY: "O HOLY NIGHT" AND THE CHOIR SINGS*] . . . That's what the Christmas story is all about . . . and, if you listen carefully . . . you can hear it now . . . I can . . . right from old Lake Wobegon . . . [*PREACHER JOINS THE CHOIR*].

O Holy Night! The stars are brightly shining,
It is the night of the dear Saviour's birth.
Long lay the world in sin and error pining.
Till He appeared and the soul felt its worth.
A ray of hope the weary world rejoices,
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn.
Fall on your knees! Oh, hear the angel voices!
O night divine, the night when Christ was born;
O night, O Holy Night , O night divine!
O night, O Holy Night , O night divine!

Blessed Christmas!

S.D.G.

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