

The Difference He Makes

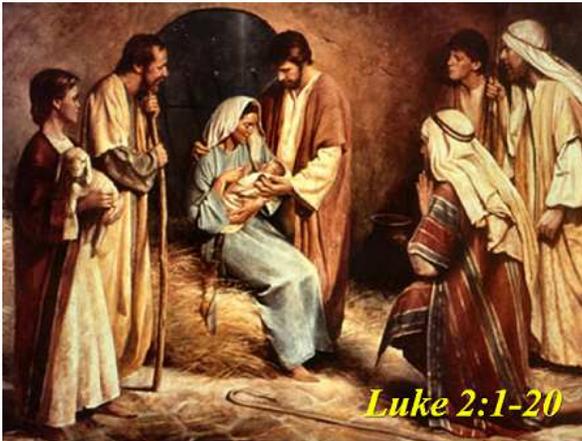
Richard C. Leonard, Ph.D.

First Christian Church, Hamilton, Illinois, December 24, 2015 (Christmas Eve)

Luke 2:1-20 NIV

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to his own town to register.

So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.



While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the

highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests."

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.

But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.

The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

The story of the song "O Holy Night," which Sharon and Vivian have presented, is a fascinating one. In 1847 the priest of a small-town church in southern France asked the poet Placide Cappeau to write a Christmas poem. The result was "Minuit, chrétiens" or "Cantique de Noël" ("Midnight, Christians," or "Song of Christmas"). Cappeau asked his friend, the Paris opera composer Adolphe Adam, to write the now-familiar music for his poem. Worshipers loved it when it was sung during worship.

However, during a time of revolutionary ferment in Europe the words to the song didn't suit the French church authorities.

*Le Rédempteur a brisé toute entrave:
La terre est libre, et le ciel est ouvert.
Il voit un frère où n'était qu'un esclave,
L'amour unit ceux qu'enchaînait le fer.*

("The Redeemer has broken every restraint, the land is free, and heaven is open. It sees a brother where there was only a slave; love unites those chained in iron.") These words seemed a challenge to the ruling powers. It didn't help that the poet, Placide Cappeau, left the church and became a socialist. It also didn't help that Adolphe Adam, the composer of the music, was Jewish. So the song was banned from all church services.

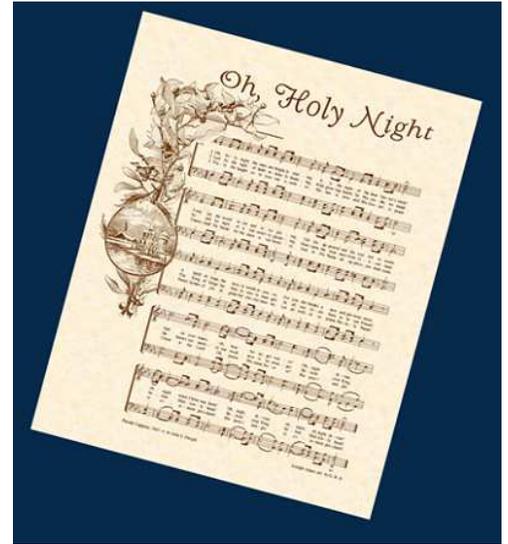
However, in 1855 the American musicologist John Sullivan Dwight, who was also a leader in the movement to abolish slavery, translated the words into English as the "O Holy Night" familiar to us today. The song became a rallying cry for the freedom of slaves.

Eventually the "Cantique de Noël" was received back into the life of the French church. There's a legend that on Christmas Eve, during a lull in the 1870 war between France and Germany, a French soldier began

singing the carol. The Germans were so moved that they responded with a hymn by Martin Luther. The singing back and forth led to a 24-hour Christmas truce.

The remarkable story of "O Holy Night" doesn't end there. In 1906 a man named Reginald Fessenden, who had worked with Thomas Edison, was experimenting with the microphone and wireless telegraph. On Christmas Eve he read the story of the birth of Jesus from Luke, chapter 2, and wireless operators around the world began to hear a man's voice coming from their sets. Fessenden then picked up a violin and played "O Holy Night." The first radio broadcast of a man's voice was the Christmas story from the Gospel, and the first music played over the radio was "O Holy Night."

What's the point of all this history of a carol — a song containing these words: "Chains he shall break, for the slave is our brother, and in his name all oppression shall cease"? To make the connection we have only to go back to the words the angels spoke to the poor, despised shepherds on that first Christmas in Bethlehem: "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior — a Deliverer — has been born to you; he is Christ — the Messiah — the Lord. . . . Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace — wholeness, well-being — to men on whom his favor rests."



These words are the first preaching of the gospel, the "good news" that something is about to change in the order of things. No longer will people be consigned to the cruelty of poverty, sickness, or ignorance. No longer will oppression and injustice rule the day. A Deliverer, a Redeemer, has come; and through his life, death, and resurrection a process will be set in motion that will demonstrate the love God has for his creation, and bring peace and freedom to people everywhere.

*Truly He taught us to love one another,
His law is love and His gospel is peace.
Chains he shall break, for the slave is our brother.
And in his name all oppression shall cease.*

Perhaps, as we ponder the state of our world today, we wonder whether this Gospel promise is truly being fulfilled. Has the coming of the Messiah really made a difference? But historians of the ancient world remind us what a difficult, hopeless world it was for most people, like those shepherds of Bethlehem — like Mary and Joseph themselves, compelled by the edict of a foreign Emperor to make their taxing journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem while she was with child. Except for those who knew the God of Israel, the ancient world was a world of slavery, violence, and cruel indifference to the needs of the less privileged.

But wherever the gospel of Jesus has taken root, all that has changed. Forgiveness, humility, mercy, and other qualities we assume are the mark of decent human beings were not common until the Christian faith spread throughout the world. Hospitals, schools, orphanages or homes for the aged, help for the disadvantaged, fair treatment for all, justice for those who have been wronged — all these things we assume are right, and take for granted, are present in our world today because of what God has done through his Son. It was only because of Jesus that the founders of our nation could write, in the Declaration of Independence, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

Such things were scarce, or entirely nonexistent, before Jesus came, and are still rare in regions without a Christian presence. Let's reflect on how different our world would be if Jesus had never come. Certainly our world isn't perfect! But no one can reasonably deny that the influence of Christianity has made it a far better place than it was 2,000 years ago.

*The King of kings lay thus in lowly manger;
In all our trials born to be our Friend.
He knows our need — to our weakness is no stranger.
Behold your King! Before him lowly bend!*