

## **Sermon: Make Room**

**Written by: Rev. Jessica M. Ashcroft-Townsley**

**Scripture: Luke 2:1-20**

Last summer, my grandparents moved from their house into a one-bedroom apartment in a lovely retirement community. During that time, they had to decide what to make room for in their now smaller home. As a child, I one of the constants in my grandparents' house was presence of actual paintings on the walls. Seldom did I see prints anywhere. Most of the wall hangings I remember were paintings by one or the other of our very artistic family members. One painting that always struck me depicts a tiny snow-covered chapel set against a wintery landscape between tall pine trees. It's a stunning image that I assumed was painted by one of my talented relatives. Having only minimal wall-space in their new apartment, my grandmother sought to find new homes for these pieces of actual art. Looking at that snowy-image, my grandmother said, "I thought you might like that one, it has a long history. We don't know who painted it or where it comes from, but it has been in the family as long as I remember." Not one to turn down art or family heirlooms, I agreed to make our home its new dwelling place, promising it would stay in the family.

My grandmother went on to tell me that the chapel depicted in the painting is famous as the "Silent Night Chapel" in Salzburg, Austria. This chapel has become a monument to the beloved Christmas carol we sing together to close Christmas Eve worship each year. In fact, the Silent Night Chapel was erected just uphill from the very site of the former St. Nicholas Church where, on Christmas Eve 1818, "Silent Night" was first performed.

That evening in 1818 was a night like no other. Not just because it was Christmas Eve, but because on that night, the priest, Father Joseph Mohr, was faced with a difficult situation. Their Christmas Eve mass, he feared, would be a very silent night, indeed. You see, in the nineteenth century, this region of Austria had experienced recurrent river flooding, during which the church organ had incurred some damage. Not wanting

their worship to be without music, Father Mohr brought the lyrics to a new song he'd written and asked organist, Franz Xaver Gruber to set it to music. As the organ was out of commission, Gruber proposed a guitar accompaniment. The result of this crisis and subsequent collaboration was the birth of a Christmas carol we have grown to know and love over the last two centuries, one that all of us, I think, would miss if we weren't able to at least hear it on Christmas Eve.

As a minister, I always find the Christmas Eve sermon a unique challenge. What more is there to say? Doesn't the story preach itself? How can I tell this ancient story in a new way? Surely in the long and illustrious history of this church, it's all been done before!

Perhaps. But as I sat down to write *this* sermon, seeking the leading of the Holy Spirit, I looked over at that family painting, which sits in my home office. I gazed at that little chapel and thought about what Father Mohr must have been feeling. The Christmas season is a busy, hustling, bustling time. And here he was, an ordinary clergyperson, not just facing the usual holiday stresses, but also the heartbreak of a broken organ on Christmas Eve! Reflecting on the scriptures for his homily, did he worry about retelling this story he must have told dozens of times? Did he wonder what more there was to say, especially if the music would be untraditional?

Somewhere amid all that struggle, Father Mohr made enough room for the Word of God to speak to him and produced the lyrics to one of the most well-loved Christmas carols of all time. His organist, Gruber, having lost the church's organ, made enough room within him for the Spirit to move as he set those lyrics to music and made a melody so beautiful that even in a pandemic, we found a way to hum it together. The Christmas story, the birth of Jesus, the incarnation of the living God, is a story of people making room for wonders to happen in unexpected ways.

The Christmas story is the story of a woman, willing to take on social scorn for the sake of the gospel and making room within herself for the incarnate God to come into the world. It is the story of a man who trusted God enough to make room within his mind to

hear the wise angelic council when all he wanted to do was quietly dismiss himself from a shameful situation. It is the story of a stranger without any rooms, who yet made room for the holy family, so that Mary might deliver her baby in some kind of shelter, even if it was one meant for animals. It is the story of lowly, shepherds tending to their flock, who make room in their lives to hear the good news, and make haste to see the birth of the Messiah. It is the story of all of us, who live in the world, and who make room within our hearts for the Spirit of God to stir that we might know and love Christ as our Savior, and through him, learn to love the world.

It's tempting to get hung up on sentimentality this time of year and miss the good news inherent in this story. It is good news that goes beyond the joy of a new baby or even the hope of heaven. It is good news that shows us that when we make room for God, God shows up in unexpected ways. When we make room for God, God shows up in a manger in a little town off the beaten path. When we make room for God, God shows up at the eleventh hour in a church with a water-damaged organ to create a noble, beautiful song for the ages. The good news of this story is that God shows up, in ways big and small, in the grand beauty of music in worship and the humble quietude of a manger in the middle of the night. Sometimes, we don't notice when God shows up, so busy are our lives. Father Mohr must have prayed that night for God to show up. When God did, Mohr and the entire church sure noticed. This Christmas, as we gather around our own trees to open our gifts and celebrate with family, my hope is that we will remember to make room for God and that, when God shows up in those sacred family moments, whether in silence or boisterous noise, we notice! Amen.