

His Law is Love and His Gospel Peace
Christmas Eve Message
Rev. Loren McGrail
Irondequoit United Church of Christ
December 24, 2020

Now that we have literally and figuratively let go of our security blankets in response to “Do Not Fear”, we are invited to put our vulnerability to use by wrapping up all the scrawny Charlie Brown Christmas trees in our lives that need our imperfect offerings of love and mercy. In addition, on this Holy night, we are also invited to sing out like Mary for a world that does not exist yet but is on the way. Towards this end, let us explore together one our most beloved carols, O Holy Night, for in its creation and history I believe we can find a way to live into our command to love one another beyond all else.

As you may know or not O Holy Night is one of the most beloved and most sung Christmas carols in the world. You probably don’t know much about its origins, and how it was banned once and later censored.

In 1843, a French wine merchant named Placide Cappeau was commissioned to write a Christmas piece to celebrate the renovation of a church organ in his hometown. He liked the idea even though he himself was an atheist. He wrote *Minuit, Chrétiens* or “Midnight, Christians.” The music was written by a Jewish composer named Adolphe Adam. The song became a hit in France in spite of or because of its author’s socialist leanings.

When the church authorities learned that the song was written by two non-Christians, they tried to have it cancelled or banned. Verse three struck these authorities as particularly provocative with lines like “Chains shall he break, for the slave is our brother” and “in his name, all oppression shall cease.” The song was criticized for “lack of musical taste” and its “total absence of the spirit of religion.” These authorities must not have listened very closely to Mary’s Magnificat when she called for revolution: He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and has lifted up the lowly,” or “He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty handed.” What was most offensive on the carol was the idea that all people have souls and that we share this with each other. They also did not like the fall on your knees part, finding it excessively humble.

In 1855, a Unitarian minister and musician named John Sullivan Dwight translated the lyrics into English, renaming it “O Holy Night.” Dwight was an abolitionist. Soon the carol became a favorite of Christian

abolitionists—particularly that third verse with its lyrics like “Chains shall her break, for the slave is our brother.”

In 1871, during the Franco-Prussian war, it is said that a French soldier stood up on Christmas eve and sang the carol from his trench. The Germans then stood up and sang carols of their own trenches. The cease fire and the singing went on for a full 24 hours.

Dear Ones, on this Holy night in the year 2020, after a hellish year of multiple pandemics: climatic catastrophes, Covid 19, economic and political upheavals, and systemic racial inequality and injustice being brought to the light, I invite you to join with others in not only singing this carol but making it your anthem beginning with these affirming words: “His law is love and His gospel is peace.” From this, everything else flows including the breaking of chains for those enslaved and the cessation of oppression for all.

Dear Ones, our Christmas stories, carols, poems, and prayers show us how God is with us, fully immersed in the messiness of daily life, in our experiences of vulnerability and our struggles at the mercy of unjust and heartless leaders. Rev. Bruce Epperly says, “The incarnation brings heaven to earth and it brings earth to heaven. A stable---and our own homes---become chockful of divinity.”

On our Winter Solstice, we celebrated the conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter becoming the Bethlehem Star once again. I invite you this soggy Christmas Eve to become bright with the conjunction or your story with this sacred story of birth and redemption.

You do this by listening to all the angels around you telling you to not be afraid to not only let go and let God but to join God by saying Yes to God’s plans for salvation, and by recognizing that on this night the God of love is born again here in the stable of our hearts. And because of this, all chains must break, and all oppressions cease. Let us rejoice and sing. Amen.