

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered.²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria.³All went to their own towns to be registered.⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David.⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child.⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

⁸In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.¹⁰But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people:¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.”¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,¹⁴“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”¹⁵When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.”¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger.¹⁷When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child;¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.¹⁹But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

“Silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright, round yon virgin mother and child -- holy infant so tender and mild sleep in heavenly peace, sleep in heavenly peace.”

How we long for such a night, such a moment, such a peace! I remember how Simon and Garfunkel sang that hymn with the evening news playing in the background – the report of a murderer – of war – of a world gone mad. And what would play in the background of our newscast this night? Shock waves from September 11 – soldiers searching for those who plotted that day of destruction. LTV Steel no more. Layoffs – fear – uncertainty.

How we long for a night when everyone might sleep in heavenly peace.

Depending on how I tell the story this night you might think that such a night never was. Eighty-five miles is how far Mary and Joseph traveled. Just so some ruler far away in Rome could have some official numbers. Tradition says they traveled with Joseph walking, Mary riding a donkey. Luke says not a word of how they got there. Maybe they both walked – it depends on how poor they were - how much they suffered. The poor in this world are always suffering, even today.

And when they arrived in Bethlehem “no vacancy” signs were posted at every lodging. No room for you was the message – there are more important people here than you.

So Mary, weary from her journey, was left out in the cold. Where calf had been born, and lamb, where animals fed, is where the son of Mary entered this world. That first night his head rested where cattle licked and slobbered. Who would want her baby to lie there? Certainly not Mary – but she had no choice. Her child got what was left.

Silent night, holy night? All is calm, all is bright? We might better sing “trying night – difficult night – dark and cold, nothing right.

What’s life coming to? Mary must have wondered.

We don’t do ourselves any favor when we imagine a time back there when everything was easy and perfect and fine. We don’t do ourselves any favor when we imagine Christmases where every piece of tinsel was perfectly hung, every gift just the right one, every dish on the table a culinary marvel. The evening news is always playing in the background when Silent Night is sung and every year for some that news is about long hard journeys and no room in the inn.

But out in the fields that night shepherds were keeping watch over their flock. And a messenger from heaven appeared suddenly and those shepherds were terrified. Terrified. Fear filled night, terrified night shepherd’s hearts are filled with fright.

But God's messenger said, "Do not be afraid, for see - I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you; you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger."

Could it be believed that in all the world and for all time God would send the messenger to that very hillside that night?

"Suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace among those whom he favors!'"

The shepherds believed. They went and saw all the angels had announced. And for them it was a silent night, a holy night - a praise filled night, a faith filled night. They saw only a baby but they believed he was their Savior. And when Mary heard their report she added it to an earlier message brought by Gabriel. God's own Son rested in that manger - who would save us all from our sins - and from death - who would bring us to God for all eternity.

And now this night I am the messenger from God who takes the place of the angel - I am sent to you to say, "To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ, the Lord." The love that is in him is greater than all the hatred reported on the evening news, the life that is in him is greater than all the destruction poured out by terrorist acts and bombs falling from the sky - and his power to bring peace and reconciliation is greater than all the planning and plotting of this world's wisest.

Silent night, a holy night - all is calm - all is bright round you virgin mother and child. Holy infant so tender and mild sleep in heavenly peace, sleep in heavenly peace.

Trust in him - hope in him - his peace will be yours.