

“O HOLY NIGHT”

(Luke 2:1-20)

© 2009 Rev. Dr. Brian E. Germano

[East Cobb U.M.C.; 12-24-09]

–I–

1. Read Text: Luke 2:1-20 and Pray.

2. [STORY OF THE ORIGINS OF “O HOLY NIGHT”]

A–In 1847, a man named Placide Cappeau de Roquemaure was the commissioner of wines in a small French village.

1–And since he was known locally more for his poetry than his church attendance, he was shocked when a parish priest asked him to write a poem for a Christmas mass in Paris. But he took on the task, nevertheless.

2–So while traveling by coach down a bumpy road towards the capital, peering out at the night sky, using tonight’s Luke 2 scripture as his guide, Cappeau considered what it must have been like to witness that first Christmas night so long before.

B–And by the time he reached Paris, he had finished his poem and decided it needed a worthy musical score to go along with it.

1–So, he turned to a Jewish friend and composer named Adolphe Charles Adams.

2–Known throughout the world for his secular musical scores for opera and ballet, Adolphe considered his task and quickly wrote a hauntingly beautiful music score to a poem about a man that he (as a Jew) didn’t view as the Son of God, and for a holiday he didn’t even celebrate.

3–But nevertheless, at the midnight mass of a small Parisian church on Christmas Eve 1847, Cappeau’s poem – set to Adolphe’s music – was shared with the world for the first time.

C–The song, of course, was “*Cantique de Noel*” – or as we know it today, “*O Holy Night*.”

3. But that was only the beginning of this song’s checkered history, for while both its words and music were well-liked, their authors were considered to be less-than-worthy for such a task.

A–For one, Cappeau (the poet) was known to be an outspoken social radical and trouble-maker – one who would later walk away from the church, and who by some was considered to be simply profane.

B–And Adolphe (the composer), wasn’t much better – after all, he was *Jewish*, writing sacred music for a distinctly *Christian* audience.

C–And because of this background, the song itself was initially denounced because of its “*lack of musical taste*” and “*total absence of the spirit of religion*.”¹

4. In fact, it wasn't until a decade later that an American abolitionist named John Sullivan Dwight discovered the song, translated it into English, and published it in several magazines and songbooks. ²

A—It's popularity soon spread like wild throughout the English-speaking world (and was even eventually re-accepted in France), to the point where on Christmas Day 1906, "O Holy Night" became the first piece of music to ever be broadcast using a new communication technology called the "Radio."

B—Today it's been heard and sung by millions of people, and is one of the most popular and familiar Christmas songs of all time. ³

C—But lest we forget: it all began from people/things who were viewed by some to be *profane*.

—II—

5. Now, this really shouldn't surprise us at all, though, because throughout the scriptures we find that God's primary mode of operation is in taking things that the world considers "profane" and making them "holy."

A—You see, God isn't intimidated by what *we* humans sometimes consider to be the "unclean" people & things of our world:...the poor; the downtrodden; those who are snubbed or put down because of their skin color, or politics, or theology, or sexual orientation, or style of dress.

B—In fact, we find that time after time throughout the scriptures, God has cherished the opportunity to take the *secular and profane* and *sanctify* them.

C—He takes what the world considers to be "dirty" and "unfit" and "unworthy," and makes them "sacred" to him – "holy/set apart" for His divine use and purpose.

6. And just as God took the "*profane-ness*" of the song "*O Holy Night*" and turned it into something profoundly *sacred*, so He did the same with the incarnation and birth of *Jesus* on that first Christmas night so long ago.

A—For example, He took the small, poor, backwater village of Bethlehem – a suburb of the greater city of Jerusalem – and transformed it a town talked and sung about for ages to come.

B—He took a cold, dirty, smelly barn/cave, filled with animal excrement and rotten hay (and called a "manger"), and transformed it into the earthly birthplace of the ruler of the universe.

C—He took two poor, teenage peasants (Mary and Joseph), and transformed them into the earthly parents of Almighty God.

D—He took what one Christmas carol calls "*certain poor shepherds*" ⁴ and transformed them into the very *first* recipients of the greatest news ever told on earth!

E—So it shouldn't surprise us, then, that God would also take a socially and politically “incorrect” poet and composer to write one of the most popular sacred songs in all of history, ...

7. ...Because, you see, that's what Christmas is really all about... **Redemption**: the reclaiming by *God* of that which is considered by *humans* to be hopeless or lost.

A—Christmas is about learning NOT to put a *period* at the end of a sentence where God has only put a *comma* – to not be too hasty judging other people or situations or circumstances based solely on outward appearance, because *God* isn't done with them, yet (or with us).

B—Christmas is about learning that with God, *anything* is possible... even with those and with that around us that we consider to be *impossible*.⁵

–III–

8. So, let me simply ask: what “profane”, “unclean”, “hopeless” part(s) of *your* life need the transformation of God right now?

A—What part of your being is in need of the *redemption* of the Christ-child tonight?

B—Whatever it is, remember that God specializes in taking the *common* parts of our lives and using them for His *uncommon* glory – ...

1—...In taking the *ordinary* pieces of our existence, and changing it into something *extraordinary* – ...

2—...In taking our imperfect *human* behavior, and making them into something *divine*.

C—In short, God specializes (particularly at Christmas) in taking the *profane and hopeless* “nights” of our lives and transforming them into “*Holy*” nights.

9. [PRAYER]

10. [SPECIAL MUSIC: “O Holy Night”, followed by Christmas Eve Candlelighting]

ENDNOTES:

1. Shared in the background of this song by Dr. Kenneth Pell in his sermon “*O Holy Night: From Secular to Sacred*” found at www.sermoncentral.com/sermon.asp?SermonID=115123.

2. As an abolitionist, he was especially drawn to its lyrics in Verse 3, “*chains shall he break for the slave is our brother and in His name all oppression shall cease.*”

3. For more information about the origins of “*Cantique de Noel / O Holy Night*”, visit the following website: www.hymnsandcarolsofchristmas.com/Hymns_and_Carols/o_holy_night.htm.

4. Verse 1 of the carol “The First Noel.”

5. NOTE: Many of the themes and ideas for this sermon were inspired by the online sermon “*O Holy Night: From Secular to Sacred*” by Dr. Kenneth Pell (Potsdam Church of the Nazarene, Potsdam, NY; Advent 2007, Week #1), found at www.sermoncentral.com/sermon.asp?SermonID=115123.