

## Silent Night, Holy Night

John 1:1-9

Page 1 of 7

There we were, literally halfway around the world, standing on the edge of a very steep hill, really, almost a cliff, and we were overlooking an expanse of well manicured fields. It was a great spot. We could see every corner of the wide canyon in front of us. We stood on one of the many rocky outcroppings – time seemed to stand still for a moment.

So this was the place. Of all the places in the area, this was the only possible place it could be. It wasn't a beautiful place. There weren't any significant geological features at the place - just dirt, large rocks, and acres of dried brown grass. There wasn't a river, or a lake or any source of water in sight. Nothing about the landscape would make any of us take a second glance, even the trees were unmemorable.

Yet we kept staring. Those of us who had ventured out to the edge of the steep hill ceased talking. We gazed on in silence. It is something to read about a place, and it is something to see a place in a photo – but to be in that place, that is a different thing altogether.

I saw the churches built to honor the event; I heard the lectures that gave fascinating details about the event and I saw the many trinkets stamped "Bethlehem" – I even saw the tourist directed "cave" where Jesus was born, which was filled with lavish ornate decorations, and to me, it was just stuff.

But standing in silence on that quite frankly, ugly hillside, that is what made things real for me that day, for here it was over 2000 years ago, shepherds watching over their flocks were the very first to hear the good news – God is here! He is here in town tonight! It was here at this rock outcropping that the good news was first heard.

It was a silent night. It was a holy night.  
It was a night unlike any other night.

Still....it was an ordinary town, that most certainly held only ordinary people, for anyone of significance would be living in nearby Jerusalem and Joseph and Mary were only ordinary peasants, so ordinary, that no one was willing to make room for them. They were so ordinary people had no problem turning away a woman who was nine months pregnant – and very much due.

You know, today, if you walk the streets of Bethlehem, people pretty much ignore you as they did so many years ago. I remember walking through the streets lined with different vendors selling shoes, vegetables, pirated DVD's – they had no interest in me. I was a tourist, why would I be interested in a pair of penny loafers, why would they waste their

## Silent Night, Holy Night

John 1:1-9

Page 2 of 7

time with an American tourist, which I'm sure they had seen thousands over the years, how was I of any benefit to them? Things haven't changed much over the years.

Ordinary people in an ordinary town on an ordinary night – you would think things would go smoother for the birth of Jesus Christ....but how could anyone have a clue that this night was to be different than any other night if things looked so ordinary.

Joseph and Mary, they appeared so...well, like everyone else.

The whole situation is rife with difficulties. Accusations of immorality, a very difficult journey, no place to stay, and you know, women who are nine months pregnant should not travel. Let me ask you, wouldn't you expect that people who were highly favored by God wouldn't have life so hard? I wouldn't expect that either.

Look. Mary is pregnant, who is going to believe her story? Have you ever been in a situation like that? It doesn't matter what the facts are, people will believe what they will believe.

Don't imagine for a moment that Mary's friends and neighbors supported her in her home town. Mary would be ostracized, ignored, gossiped about – and there was absolutely nothing she could do about it. Life would be very lonely and very hard for Mary during those nine months. You can probably forget about a baby shower for this woman. Isn't that a lot to ask of a 15 year old?

Joseph. He would have had an intense amount of pressure from his family to divorce Mary. (Understand that the custom was to enter into an engagement for a year and then have the wedding, but for all intents and purposes a couple was considered married at the engagement) Joseph's family would not want the stigma of a daughter-in-law who was thought to be immoral. They would demand that Joseph end his relationship with this woman. For Joseph to not divorce Mary, well, this would diminish his standing in the community, he would be thought of as a pushover, a fool, a man without wisdom.

Remember, later on Mary and Joseph move back to Nazareth. Jesus would not be considered a legitimate child by many and as a result, life would be a little more difficult for the family.

Still, even with all the rumors – this night was a holy night. It was probably best that Mary and Joseph were able to get away from the village.

## Silent Night, Holy Night

John 1:1-9

Page 3 of 7

But still they had to get to Bethlehem. Bethlehem which is quite a distance from Nazareth. Forget about the donkey, Mary walked. Mary riding on the donkey makes a nice Christmas card, but it is never mentioned in the bible that Mary rode a donkey. Most likely Joseph was so poor that he could not afford a donkey anyway. Nine months along, all the way on foot. It is like walking from here to Seward, except it is all uphill.

And forget about a tranquil walk. There were a large number of wild animals that could and would attack people as they traveled from town to town in Palestine. Lions were not uncommon. This wasn't a highly populated region, there was a lot of wild space between cities. There were also bandits that would lay in wait for travelers, the Roman army stayed mostly in the cities – a man with a pregnant woman would make an easy target. It was dangerous, it was dusty, it was arid, it was up hill all the way – they were all on their own.

When Joseph and Mary get to Bethlehem (which is right outside of Jerusalem) they have to be exhausted. And what awaits them? Nothing. No bathroom, no bed, no meal, no welcome, no hot shower – no one cares who they are.

Now most likely Joseph would have expected a relative to take him in as was the custom of the day – but no relative helps out. Now there would be a relative for sure in Bethlehem, for this is where Joseph's family came from. There is no doubt that Joseph would be known to the relatives living in Bethlehem. Perhaps Joseph even sent word that he was coming. But there was nothing there for them. Why? We are not told, but it is very possible that Mary and Joseph were shunned by the relatives in Bethlehem because she had become pregnant before the wedding. Welcome to Bethlehem.

So Joseph sets out to find a place. Bethlehem is a small town today, and in Jesus' day it was a small village – so there were not many options. Joseph would have covered the town in just a few minutes, they knew they had little hope. When Mary and Joseph are given the option of a stable, it would really be one of the many caves in the area. Many times a family would build their house over a natural cave so that they could have a place keep their animals safe from thieves. Essentially the cave they built the house over would be the basement of the house. Today we see many examples of this in both Bethlehem and Nazareth. Most likely the cave would have goats in it as sheep were left outside at night and goats were always brought in at night.

So Joseph and Mary enter the cave.....that I'm sure didn't smell so good nor I'm sure it wasn't sanitary by a long shot. Still, this was better than birthing a baby on the dirt street, which would have been their only other option. Mary, Joseph and the goats. Well Merry Christmas Joseph and Mary.

## Silent Night, Holy Night

John 1:1-9

Page 4 of 7

By the looks of things, it appears that God is not with this family. By all appearances Joseph and Mary are not in God's favor. Anyone who knew them, anyone who saw what was happening in their life could certainly say, "God is not with this family"

Life has turned against them, things have gone from bad to worse. They are alone in a town far away from home. They have no comforts, no friends, no family. The first Christmas isn't shaping up so well.

Still...It was a silent night. It was a holy night.  
It was a night unlike any other night.

Have you ever had that feeling that God has left you out in the cold?  
That He's too busy?  
That He is ignoring you?

You know, Mary and Joseph were two people who were close to God. Mary is even called favored of God by an angel who visits her. Now if these two are people who are close to God, certainly they would have lifted up prayers to God about each of these situations. Without a doubt Mary had to have prayed about her social isolation; Without a doubt Joseph would have prayed about the housing situation. If these two people are close to God, even favored by God, then why doesn't God answer their prayers?

Why do things go from bad to worse?

When bad things happen to you, does that mean, God has turned way from you?

The reality is, that God does not promise to take all the pain from our lives. God does not promise to make our lives easy if we follow Him and God does not promise that others will understand what He is doing in our lives. We make a mistake when we think that good times mean God loves us and bad times mean God has turned away from us.

Look, for Mary and Joseph, they couldn't control what people think, they couldn't control what people say. People will gossip, make wrong assumptions, and say things that are not true. People around us sin, but because they sin and God doesn't step in and stop them from their sin, that doesn't mean God is looking away.

God has created us all with a free will. The people of the village of Nazareth decided on their own free will to make assumptions about Mary – yet God still cared for Mary and Joseph.

## Silent Night, Holy Night

John 1:1-9

Page 5 of 7

Their Journey to Bethlehem was long and hard, but not at all unusual for the day. See Mary and Joseph knew that God had promised that this baby would be born, they knew that they would be able to brave the danger and the difficulties of the journey, because the baby was promise to be born.

Things can become very difficult for us, but difficulty does not mean the absence of God.

Mary and Joseph were given a cave to stay in. But you know, all the houses they would have stayed in would be very crowded. In fact, without a doubt, if they had stayed at a house or an inn, they would have shared the space with one or more families. The cave the family moved into actually wasn't that much different than some of the houses of the day where families kept their animals inside with them at night, it was not unusual to have animals in the house....yet the cave was a private, it was protected and they could have visitors come and go freely.

So let me ask, what was the important thing that first Christmas Eve?

Did it matter that night the some people back home didn't think too highly of Mary?

Did it matter that night that it took a long time to get to Bethlehem?

Did it matter that night that the accommodations weren't the best?

No. There in the arms of Mary is this new born baby peacefully asleep. This child is at peace because this child is not just any child – this child is Emmanuel, God with us. Jesus Christ is the Lord, He is God, at His birth. He is not a baby who later is enlightened as an adult. No Jesus is Lord at His birth.

This is the one who has come to save us from the thing we can not save ourselves from, Jesus has come to save us from our sins

What matters is that the one who was promised long ago has arrived.

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Now, you can imagine that Joseph helps Mary with the birth of this child Jesus, and you can imagine that they look at this child and say to themselves – is this true – is it true what the angel has told us? You know, life has been quite hard for the past nine months, and they must be wondering if God is really with them.

## Silent Night, Holy Night

John 1:1-9

Page 6 of 7

And then the shepherds show up unannounced saying that they are looking for the promised messiah, they are looking for Christ the Lord. Now, if there was any doubt, those shepherd certainly washed all that doubt away.

The difficult times, the pain, the suffering, the prayers that seemed to go unanswered, none of that meant that God had left them out in the cold.

None of those things meant God left Joseph and Mary out in the cold, and none of those things mean that God has left you out in the cold.

Jesus comes to us on this silent night, this holy night. Jesus looks past all the circumstances in your life, all the failures, all the false starts, all the mistakes and He looks only at your heart. Circumstances are not a measure of our faith. If circumstances are a measure of faith, then you will win and lose you faith a thousand times over....and never really have found faith at all. Faith is not belief in circumstances....good or bad...faith is belief in a person – belief in the person of Jesus Christ who is very real and very much alive.

Tonight I want to encourage you, especially if life hasn't been all its cracked up to be this year, I want to encourage you to set aside those circumstances, for they do not mean God has lost interest in you. God knows exactly where you are at in life, and He knows exactly what will give you the peace you are seeking. God is always there, Jesus will be with you if you call on Him. God will not give up on you, you can always, always turn to Jesus.

Every time on Christmas Eve that I light my candle, I catch myself staring into the flame – I can't seem to help it. There, I hold one small ordinary candle with a small flickering light. In of itself, my little flame doesn't cast much light, but I don't know, somehow I find that flame comforting. The flame, small as it is, casts aside the darkness, with my flame I know that I am no longer alone....I know this flame is not just a flame, it represents the light of our Lord Jesus Christ – He has come to me and given me hope.

I know that in a few short minutes I will have to return to the difficulties of my life, health issues, financial worries, problems I know deep down will not go away on their own. But right now, I as I stare into the flame I realize again that I do not have to bear it all on my own, I as I stare into the flame, I know that Jesus Christ has the ability to see me through. I just need to call on Him.

Then I look up and I see a whole congregation full of light. It is not that each of us are a light, rather, each of us can hold the light of Jesus in our hearts. There is a flame among

## Silent Night, Holy Night

John 1:1-9

Page 7 of 7

us, the flame that moves silently among us until there is not a person unaffected by the light – It is then that I finally understand the powerful words of the Apostle John:

John 1:1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was with God in the beginning.

John 1:3 Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. 4 In him was life, and that life was the light of men. 5 The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.

John 1:6 There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. 7 He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. 8 He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. 9 The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.

May the true light, come into your life and fill you with the peace that you have been searching for.