

Meditation – Interlude of Joy
Christmas Eve, 2018
The Rev. Dr. Blythe D. Kieffer
Westminster Presbyterian Church
Springfield, IL

The title of the meditation: Interlude of Joy

Let us pray. Loving God, as we reflect together this Holy Night, may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable to you. Amen.

On Christmas Eve two hundred years ago the carol “Silent Night, Holy Night” was introduced at St. Nicholas Church in Oberndorf, Austria. After the church organ was damaged that December, the young priest, Father Joseph Mohr, brought the words he had written to Franz Gruber, a schoolmaster and organist in a nearby village and asked him to compose a melody and guitar accompaniment for the Christmas Eve mass. On this night in 1818, the two stood in front of the church’s nativity display and performed a song that began with the words “Stille nacht, heilige Nacht.”

This simple carol of peace and the lullaby of our Savior spread throughout Europe as a folk song during the years that followed. The Rainer Family, a traveling singing group from Austria, brought the carol to America for the first time in 1839 performing it at New York City’s Trinity Episcopal Church. This beloved carol has been translated into more than 300 languages and sung by people of faith around the world to welcome the Christ child.

However, the power of this carol was never so clear until almost a century after it was written on the cold Christmas Eve of 1914, when a soldier’s voice on a battlefield in Belgium silenced the guns of the Great War. German officer, Walter Kirchhoff, a tenor with the Berlin Opera, came forward in the dark and sang “Silent Night, Holy Night,” first in his native tongue and then in English, to both his comrades and his combatants as they lay that night in the cold, damp trenches of war. The shooting had stopped, and in that silence, his strong, clear voice inspired a round of songs echoing from both sides across the battlefield.

According to Stanley Weintraub in his book, Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce, men on both sides of the trenches laid down their arms and joined in an interlude of joy, a spontaneous celebration. Despite orders to continue shooting, the unofficial truce spread across the western front. Even the participants found what they were doing incredible. Germans placed candlelit Christmas trees on trench parapets, warring soldiers sang carols, and men on both sides shared food parcels from home. They climbed from the trenches to meet in “No Man’s Land” where they buried the dead, exchanged gifts, ate and drank together, and joined in an impromptu game of soccer.

Throughout his narrative, Dr. Weintraub uses the stories of the men who were there, as well as their letters and diaries, to illuminate this extraordinary moment in time...this interlude of joy in the midst of deep sorrow and horrific suffering within the Great War which would continue for another four years and enlist men from this congregation. November 11, 2018 marked the 100th anniversary of the end of World War I. Westminster’s bell tolled to commemorate this momentous moment at the eleventh hour on the eleventh day of the eleventh month. We paused in a moment of respite to give thanks and to pray for peace on earth, goodwill toward all.

Tonight we gather on the eve of Christmas culminating a year of anniversaries to celebrate an interlude of joy in the midst of our full, noisy lives, to be still, and to welcome our Savior with a lullaby, grateful for the peace and renewal that comes with silence, rest, and a sleeping child.

Christ's life was an interlude of joy during an extraordinary time in human history. When the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, when we saw the glory of God's son, full of grace and truth, meeting us in "No Man's Land," even the participants found what they were witnessing incredible. Although an interlude, this moment in time has inspired all of human history.

Our lives and those of our loved ones are interludes of joy in the scope of Creation – our journeys are small segments that joined together create a long, rich history of life and faith. The interludes of joy we experience along the way, the pause, the respite, the deep breathes, the hiatus, the lull, the peace and quiet for which we long sustain and strengthen us for the times of sorrow, suffering, struggle, discipline, hard work, and monotony that are also a part of our lives. The interludes of joy and the gifts of faith and grace are the threads that weave together the tapestry of our lives.

Tonight we gather with friends, family and loved ones to share an interlude of joy, to remember who we are, and to celebrate the God whose humble birth changed the world so long ago by entering into the cold and lonely places of our humanity, through the backdoor of a stable.

On this Christmas Eve may our lives be silent, holy, and composed. May this interlude of joy enlighten, sustain, and empower us for the year to come. Amen.