



# O Holy Night!

## Sermon Series: Get Into the Spirit: The Songs of Christmas

Christmas Eve  
Monday, December 24, 2007  
Rev. Dr. David E. Gilbert

Well we have glad tidings here at Poland Presbyterian. We've received a beautiful gift. Tonight our Boy Scout Troop here at the church has set out luminaries – and they grace the drive and walks around the church with a beautiful touch, don't they? Won't you join me in expressing our thanks to our Boy Scouts?

Welcome to the holiest night of the year on the Christian calendar. The crucifixion took place in the afternoon. The resurrection took place in the morning. But Christmas always takes place in the darkness of night.

Well, the luminaries out there tonight look just great! I love them! They seem

to just shimmer ----- shine with the glory of God!

It occurred to me that something like that's true for everyone one of us. In John's Gospel he says the true light that enlightens every man (and woman and child) was coming into the world.

Have you ever walked through a campground in the summer at night and seen the lanterns inside the tents? --- Sort of glowing like jewels inside those tents all over that campground, shining through the fabric of the tent. – Well, in the same way the glory of God shone in Jesus Christ, and tonight by faith in him you and are like those luminaries. We shine with the glory of God.

That's why we sing the great carol, "*O Holy Night!*" During these recent weeks of Advent we've been looking at favorite Christmas carols. I've saved my very favorite one for tonight, and that is: "*O Holy Night, the stars are brightly shining. It is the night of our dear Savior's birth.*"

I don't know if you realize it or not, but if you listen when you're driving in your car with the radio on, or if you've been walking through shopping malls, this seems to be one of the Christmas carols that makes it through all of the filters of political correctness. And I have to confess – sometimes as I'm walking through a shopping mall I will suddenly feel a sense of SHOCK as I hear someone like Celine Dion or Mariah Carey or Michael Bolton singing this uncompromisingly Christ-centered song: "*Christ is the Lord! O praise His name forever! His power and glory forevermore!*"

Did you know that *O Holy Night!* was the very first song ever broadcast over radio? It was on Christmas Eve 1906 and an assistant scientist to Thomas Edison by the name of Reginald Fessendon put a new transformer on some device and he suddenly BROADCAST it – and it shocked all the radio operators and ships all around the world.

Up until then they'd only been able to hear Morse Code and all of a sudden they heard a human voice. And Reginald Fessendon picked up his Bible and he read the Christmas story of Luke 2 and then when he'd finished he put down his Bible and he picked up his violin and he played *O Holy Night!* – the very first

song ever broadcast over radio waves --- in 1906, Christmas Eve.

Tonight I want to simply take three of my favorite phrases from that great Christmas carol and tell you why they move me so much.

### I.

The first line comes early in the carol – and I just love it! – It says: "*When He appeared and the soul felt its worth.*" -- CHRIST APPEARS!.....AND THE SOUL FEELS ITS WORTH!

Tonight is a night of FEELINGS. There is a time when we want a logical explanation of the doctrinal truths of the incarnation, but not on Christmas Eve! Christmas Eve is a night when we just want to FEEL the presence of God.

I read one time that you will often forget a person's name. You will forget their phone number. You will forget their address. You will forget where you met them. But the one thing you will never forget is how that person made you feel. Locked forever in your memory is how you felt in the presence of another person.

My friends, what launched the Christian faith was simply how people felt in the presence of Jesus Christ. He never wrote a book! I don't know --- if I ever would have started a religion, I probably would have done it by writing something, by writing a book. – Jesus simply went around touching people and let them write books about how it felt to be in his presence. And what they said was, "*When He appeared, my soul felt its worth.*"

And friends, it's not just the exalted; it's also the lowly who felt their worth in the presence of this marvelous person, Jesus Christ. If you're feeling a bit low/inferior – perhaps struggling with those feelings tonight – think what it means and what God was saying -- when the very first people who heard the news of his coming were lowly shepherds.

Palestinian shepherds were the “low-lives” of Jewish society in the first century. They were not able to keep the dietary laws of their faith and so they were looked down upon. Another reason they were looked down upon was that they just smelled bad. I mean, they slept right alongside the sheep and they were fragrantly ODIFEROUS! And you didn't get too near, or you could gag in the presence of a shepherd.

And not only that, these were the night-shift shepherds! People who owned the sheep worked during the day! So these were the minimum-wage hirelings.

And yet, friends, I'll tell you something. If a shepherd were to walk in here tonight from rural Columbiana County there would be a bee-line to that shepherd! You'd have an instant celebrity. Why? Because tonight, even shepherds, shine with the glory of God! Shepherds feel their worth in His presence.

Are you feeling all the things that God wants you to feel of your worth to Him? If not, perhaps tonight you should become like a little child for a few moments. Maybe you should become like a little girl I recently heard about – a little two and a half- year old girl named Madeleine. Her mother wanted to

surprise her by showing the trees out in front of their church (a church down in the South) – and this tree has large, beautiful Magnolia trees – that every Christmas they light up with thousands of lights. Well, these trees positively shimmered and glowed – and so Madeline's mother took her down the road in front of the church and told Madeline to look at the church. When suddenly all those lights came into view Madeline said, “O mommy, Jesus came and put up those lights!”

Now, who of you are going to argue with Madeline? If Jesus hadn't come, those lights wouldn't be there. And when he appeared, even a two-and-a-half year-old felt her worth.

Are you there tonight?  
Do you feel your worth to our Creator?

## II.

The second line I love is in the next stanza. “*Chains He shall break for the slave is our brother and in His name all oppression shall cease.*” Our Creator came to a hardened and cruel world – a cruel world in which a pregnant woman could be forced to walk on foot for several days and also on the back of a donkey in order to comply with a taxation decree of an occupying army. A world in which a mad tyrant could destroy the lives of scores of infants in a region on a word of some astrologers.

But friends, the purpose of Christ's coming was so that in His coming --- in His name – ALL OPPRESSION SHALL CEASE! Did you know that the man who wrote the words to *O Holy Night*, Placide Clappeau, was a French wine merchant who was a leader in the abolition movement? For he had heard

Jesus say, “*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to set the captives free.*”

And so it is not just our own worth that God wants us to feel tonight. He wants you to feel the worth of every human being around this world. For in Africa every minute two children die from Malaria. And in that same minute a woman dies from complications in pregnancy, nine people are infected by the HIV virus, and three people die of TB.

Two years ago *Time Magazine* announced their persons of the year. Remember? It was Bill and Melinda Gates and the Irish rock-star Bono. Bono especially makes no secret of the fact that what motivates him to care for those poor is his love for Jesus Christ. In a G-8 Conference Bono got to speak and he said to the presidents, “There are so many things where we struggle to know what the will of God is about, but when it comes to helping the desperately poor we know God will bless us.”

And so tonight we pray that the homeless and the downtrodden will feel their worth. We’ve printed a list of simply some of the local mission agencies that our church supports. They’re listed on that green insert in the bulletin this evening. And of course we support the larger shared mission of the Presbyterian Church. And a large part of that goes as our way of sharing and carrying the light of Christ to those who are downtrodden – that they may feel their soul’s worth.

I got a phone call last night from some good friends of Cathy and I. Our older son Geoff grew up “best friends” with a boy named Brandon Carter. I was

talking with Brandon’s mom last night and Brandon is serving with the U.S. Marines in Iraq. His parents haven’t been able to speak with Brandon for over three weeks. So we also pray tonight for our servicemen and women in Iraq and Afghanistan and around the world --- and their loved ones here at home --- that they also may feel their worth to God.

### III.

The third line in the song I love is “*O fall on your knees and hear the angel voices.*” That’s probably the line in the song that a lot of us can remember best. I remember as a boy walking around the house repeating that line over and over again, and it drove my older brother crazy. “*Fall on your knees...and hear the angel voices!*” – *Fall on your knees....Fall on your knees*” I sang. I remember my older brother saying, “Would someone PLEASE teach him the whole song or shut him up?”

But faith is in some sense about falling on our knees, isn’t it? And that’s what we’re doing tonight – we’re falling on our knees with the angels in worship of the One who was born in the manger. So let us do that now as hear this great carol, *O Holy Night* sung ....once again.

<p><i>O Holy Night was then sung magnificently by Matt Miles, tenor.</i></p>
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