

Google gives an annual “Discover what the world was searching for this year,” summary, where I learned that in 2021 the world searched for “affirmations,” “soulmates,” and “how to maintain mental health” more than ever before. Do these Google searches indicate a growing need for personal affirmation, an epidemic of loneliness, and a decline in mental health in this country? Indeed, they may. But on a lighter note I’ve never seen a headline like the one I saw online a few weeks ago: “Dozens of camels barred from Saudi Arabian beauty contest over Botox.” Camel breeders compete in the annual King Abdulaziz Camel Festival for some \$66 million in prize money. Botox injections, face lifts, and other cosmetic alterations are strictly prohibited, but over 40 camels this year were *disqualified* for receiving Botox injections and such. Maybe we should make sure the camels in our nativity scenes look their best, too. You think so? But camels are not the only ones needing help to be more than they are. Where should human creatures like us look for the help we need?

Well tonight, people around the world will be looking to the manger in Bethlehem for the help they need. For many Christians a standing tradition of the Christmas Eve service is a rendition of the song, *O Holy Night*. The likes of Martina McBride, Céline Dion, and Josh Groban have recorded the song. The Choir of King’s College, Cambridge also performs it annually. The words to *O Holy Night* are based on a French poem written by Placide Cappeau, a French wine merchant and poet. Ironically, he wasn’t a particularly religious fellow. He’s described as having socialist and secular views. Yet, when asked by a local parish priest to write a Christmas poem, this is what he came up with. That was in the mid-nineteenth century and it has inspired us ever since. A Unitarian minister, John Sullivan Dwight, translated the poem into English in 1855.

The words were first set to music by Adolphe Adam, a French composer and music critic, known mostly for his ballets and operas. Adam was the son of a music professor at the Paris Conservatory, and it was his father’s greatest hope

that his son would follow in his footsteps. But Adolphe was a rebellious child, who preferred to improvise his own music rather than study the works of others. In the conservatory, he settled for playing the triangle in the school orchestra and writing vaudeville songs. He was an obstinate young man. In mid-life, he got crosswise with the director of the Paris Opera and walked out to start his own opera house. It lasted less than a year, leaving him bankrupt for life.

Circumstances notwithstanding, Cappeau's poem, *Cantique de Noël*, once set to Adam's music, became an instant success. There's an urban legend that it was the first piece of music ever to be broadcast on radio. And while that has been debunked, what remains undisputed is that, for over a hundred and seventy years now, *O Holy Night* has been one of the most beloved songs of Christmas. And so, I'd like us to ponder the meaning of its timeless message tonight. You can find it on page 187 in our hymnal. It begins, *O holy night, the stars are brightly shining; It is the night of the dear Savior's birth!*

I can imagine that, for the folks living in Bethlehem at the time, this night was, for the most part, like any other. Which is to say, who would have ever thought that the long-awaited Jewish Messiah—the Savior of the World—would come into this particular place and time?

Yet, that's the way God works. God pours out his blessings of grace and love when we least expect it, wherever we happen to be, without warning, and without ostentation. In which case, who knows? Maybe God has a blessing in store for us this very night. You never know. The song goes on to say, *Long lay the world in sin and error pining, Till He appeared and the soul felt its worth.*

A common image for the sinfulness of the world—and the sinfulness of people like us, for that matter—is darkness, and that's the image we get when we hear these words. The darker the night, the brighter the stars. And that, in a word, is the Good News for us all. The more we recognize our sinfulness, the more we can appreciate the gift of God's grace and love. Remember the sinful woman

who washed Jesus' feet with her tears and dried them with her hair in Luke 7? The other guests objected, but Jesus came to her defense. He said that, because her sins were many, she showed great love. She knew and appreciated the power of forgiveness better than they ever would.

For Cappeau, the world on the night of Jesus' birth was very dark, pining in its sin and error. I kind of like the word *pinning*. It means *yearning*, a deep *longing* for something we don't have and could never get on our own. Like forgiveness, love and affection, pining has to do with something you cannot buy or demand but can only hope to receive as a gift.

And that's what the Good News of Christmas is all about. The long-awaited Messiah came to earth, the "*Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*" God's promise of salvation was fulfilled in Jesus Christ. The power of sin and death was broken once and for all. And because of that, the soul felt its worth. Cappeau goes on to write, *A thrill of hope, the weary soul rejoices, For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn.*

This echoes what we heard just a moment ago. The more we know our unworthiness to kneel before the Christ-child, the more we are ready to sing, "Joy to the World! the Lord is Come." There's no place in the nativity scene for those who are arrogant and proud. Only those who come in humility and gratitude for God's amazing grace—folks like shepherds from the fields and magi from the East are drawn to worship the Child born of Mary.

It's the weary soul that rejoices, not the soul that's caught up in its own self-importance. This is what Jesus would later tell the Pharisees and religious leaders who criticized him for eating with tax collectors and sinners. He said, "*It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.*" (Mark 2:17)

It is in this spirit that Cappeau writes, *Fall on your knees, O hear the angel voices! O night divine, O night when Christ was born! O night divine! O night, O night divine.* Now, before all that "divine" talk gives us the wrong

impression and fills our heads with a myth of the perfect Christmas, we can do ourselves a huge favor by going back to the very beginning. We can recognize that the first Christmas was *far from perfect*. Think about it...

Christmas in a barn is far from perfect. The circle around the manger is made up of people with problems. But Christmas in a barn is *real*. The baby is born and laid wet upon the blankets. Hard-living shepherds hurry to meet him. The small stable becomes a large enough place to encompass the entire world, a world of imperfect people like you and me. The gospel makes clear that there's room at the manger for imperfect and broken people. The perfect Christmas of our imagination is something we try to accomplish on our own. If we could just bake more cookies, give more presents, smile more convincingly, then it is sure to happen—or so we imagine. Christmas has often been frustrating. We try to live up to some fictional standard and we wind up deeply disappointed.

Earlier I asked the question, “Where should human creatures like us look for the help we need?” Truth is, the Good News of a baby born for us comes as an awkward surprise, a Christmas gift we did not foresee. God in Christ accepts us in our imperfection and our brokenness. We want to believe that it's “the most wonderful time of the year,” but for some of us it's a messy and depressing time of the year. Yet God in Christ comes to each one of us, in the messiness of a baby born in a barn and put to bed in an animal trough. He relates to us by becoming smaller, less powerful, more dependent than any of us who are old enough to walk and talk.

The Good News is that God knows our imperfect lives, yet God loves us just as we are. God does not require perfection from us. God only asks that we become real, as real as the baby in that Bethlehem stable, as real as his divine love. What we need to do is remarkably simple. Stop searching for the *perfect* Christmas and accept the *real* Christmas, this *holy night*, this *night divine*.

Friends, look to the manger. *It is the night of our dear Savior's birth!* Amen.

(Thanks to Philip McLarty for sermon ideas)