

**“The Unexpected”**  
Christmas Eve 2011  
Rev. Shannon Rye Wall

The story goes like this: It was Christmas Eve, 1818, at St. Nicholas Church, in Oberndorf, Austria. It was the mice’s fault. As the organist, Franz Gruber, was getting ready for Christmas Eve services, he discovered that the organ didn’t work—at all! It turns out that the mice had chewed through the bellows, and there would be no organ for the evening services.

Franz went quickly to tell his friend, Father Joseph Mohr, the priest of the church. “What will we do?” he asked. They probably prayed—and prayed hard. Now, one version of the story says that Father Mohr was then called away to visit a family that had just had a baby; he saw the newborn in his mother’s arms and, on his way back to the village church, he conceived of and then wrote this hymn: “Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht” (that’s German, which they speak in that part of Austria). Later, it was translated into English: “Silent Night, Holy Night.” That evening, Joseph sang the carol, and Franz played it on his guitar. It wasn’t the music they had planned—but it started a wonderful tradition that is dear to many people—to sing Silent Night on Christmas Eve.<sup>1</sup>

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Sometimes, things don’t turn out as we expect them to, and we can get disappointed and grouchy. I wonder if Mary and Joseph felt that way when they got to the end of a long journey and found only “no vacancy” signs everywhere they went. The baby was about to be born! Not only did they not have hospitals and doctors and nurses to help them, they couldn’t even find a room or a bed. This was no way for any baby to be born, let alone the son of God!

In the end, they found a stable and a manger—a trough where the animals ate their food. Imagine putting a baby on top of some Cow Chow or Sheep Supper! But they wrapped him up and put him there, and we might imagine that it turned out better than they expected. If they had been closed up in a room, how would the shepherds have found them? Even in the beginning, Jesus was there for all the world to see, and to praise and to worship. Not in the ways they expected, perhaps, but in God’s ways, new ways.

Last Sunday, we had an all-church Christmas pageant and retold the story of Jesus’ birth, reenacting all that the Bible tells us happened that night. And it seemed to me that our little pageant recreated a small bit of God’s ways here on earth.

It was open to all ages—little Michaela Hartman carried the big star, and Tracy Slack, age 94, was a majestic magi. We ate well—all were fed and, even though the Parish Hall was crowded and we used every chair, we made room at the inn. People of all musical abilities sang carols with gusto, just like the heavenly host of angels. The shepherds looked a bit confused, but hey, they had just seen a lot and didn’t quite know what was expected of them. And—who would have expected it? -- newcomers, strangers even, took part as angels and kings.

That day, and this night, God was indeed made manifest and walked among us, full of grace and light. It is a holy night, indeed, with room for all, with songs of praise, perhaps with more joy than even we expected. May all be calm and bright in your heart. May you sleep in heavenly peace and wake to a joyful Christmas morning. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Debbie Trafton O'Neal, Before and After Christmas," (Minneapolis, MN, Augsburg Fortress, 1991), 39.