Sunday, December 22, 1991
THREE CHRISTMAS SONGS
Luke 1:39-55

John Pierpont died a failure. In 1866, at age 81, he came to the end of his days as a government clerk in Washington, D.C., with a long string of personal defeats. He had a good start, graduating from Yale, a university his grandfather helped found, and he chose education as his profession. However, he was a failure at school-teaching. He was too easy on his students. So, he turned to the legal world for training but was a failure as a lawyer. He was too generous to his clients and too concerned about justice to take the cases that brought the highest fees.

Next, he took up a career as a dry-goods merchant. He was a failure as a businessman. He did not charge enough for his goods to make a profit, and he was too lenient with credit. In the meantime, he had been writing poetry, and though it was published, he didn't collect enough royalties to make a living. He was a failure as a poet. So, he decided to become a minister, went to Harvard Divinity School, and was ordained as minister of the Hollis Street Church in Boston. However, because he favored Prohibition and opposed slavery, he got into trouble with the influential members of his congregation and was forced to resign. He was a failure as a minister. Politics seemed a place where he could make some difference, so he was nominated as the Abolition Party candidate for governor of Massachusetts. He lost. Undaunted, he ran for Congress under the banner of the Free Soil Party. He lost again. He was a failure as a politician.

When the Civil War came along, he volunteered as chaplain of the 22nd Regiment of the Massachusetts Volunteers. Two weeks later, he quit, having found the task too much of a strain on his health. He was 76 years old. He couldn't make it as a chaplain.

Someone found him an obscure job in the back offices of the Treasury Department in Washington, where he finished out the last five years of his life as a file clerk. He wasn't very good at that either. His heart wasn't in it.

John Pierpont died a failure. He had accomplished nothing he set out to do or be. There is a small memorial stone marking his grave in Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The words on the stone read: Poet, Preacher, Philosopher, Philanthropist.

From this distance in time, however, one might insist that he was not, in fact, a failure. His commitments to social justice, his desire to be a loving human being, his active engagement in the crucial issues of his times, and his faith in the power of the human mind — these were not failures. Much of what he thought of as defeat became success. Education was reformed, legal processes were improved, credit laws were changed, and above all, slavery was abolished once and for all.

Why am I telling you this story during the Christmas season? Because in one very important sense, John Pierpont was not a failure. Every year during the Christmas season, we celebrate his success. We sing a Christmas song. It's not about angels, or Jesus, or Santa Claus. It's a simple song about the joy of riding through the cold white dark of winter's gloom in a sleigh pulled by one horse, with the company of friends, laughing and singing all the way. No more, no less. "Jingle Bells." John Pierpont wrote "Jingle Bells" in 1857 for a Sunday School Christmas program in the church where he was the pastor.

To write a song that stands for the simplest joys, to write a song that millions of people around the world know — a song about something they've never done but can imagine, a song that every one of us can sing, no matter what our age, a song that celebrates the joy of living — that's not failure. John Pierpont wrote this song as a small gift for his family, his friends, and his congregation.

Christmas is a time for joy and singing. There are more songs about Christmas (many of them called Christmas carols) than any other holiday. No doubt all of us have our favorites.

One of the first songs connected with Christmas is attributed to Mary, the mother of Jesus. While still in the early months of her pregnancy, she went to visit her older cousin, Elizabeth, who was also pregnant. As the two expectant mothers talked with each other about the coming birth of their babies, Elizabeth had a vision that Mary's child was to be the Savior of the world. As she described her dream, Mary was inspired with the words of the first Christmas song. The words she spoke have come to be called the "Magnificat," because the song begins with the phrase, "My soul magnifies the Lord."

Years later, the words of Mary's song were set to music by Johann Sebastian Bach, and what a song it is. The words of Mary's song are both a confession of her faith and prophetic. They are words of comfort and joy and words of judgment, and within them, we find much of the meaning of Christmas. The first part of Mary's song is an exclamation of praise: "My soul magnifies the Lord!" A paraphrase might be, "I am overflowing with praise of my God; my soul is full of joy, for God has chosen me, a humble servant!"

As Mary continues to recite her song, we see that she knows the history of her people and what God has done and continues to do. "God has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. God has put down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of low degree. God has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich God has sent away empty."

Mary's song is consistent with the record of what God has done in both the Old and New Testaments, and she foresees that with the birth of Jesus, God is going to continue that work and expand it. Her Christmas song reminds us that Christmas is something more than a sentimental journey. It is God turning the world upside down.

All through the Old Testament, it is made plain that God identifies with those who suffer misfortune: the orphans, the widows, the homeless, those in prison, the poor, the hungry, the sick, and those who are oppressed in any way.

This concern of God for the unfortunate appears very early in Hebrew history and is written into Hebrew law. In dispensing justice, lending money, or arranging sacrificial offerings, the poor are to be given preferential treatment. All through the Old Testament, the prophets protest when the privileged take advantage of the underprivileged. Isaiah quotes God as saying, "What do you mean by crushing my people, by grinding the face of the poor?"

Only when we understand the totality and depth of God's identification with the poor and suffering, the oppressed and the homeless, can we appreciate Mary's Christmas song.

Thirty years later, when Jesus began his public ministry, he picked up the theme of Mary's song. After his baptism and when he was certain of his vocation, he described his ministry by quoting the prophet Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because God has appointed me

to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed."

While carrying on his ministry, he summed up much of his message in the Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy."

It is especially noteworthy that the words of the Magnificat come from the lips of Mary, a woman. Throughout Christian history, Mary has always had a special attraction for the poor and the suffering. Historians have pointed out that we find women leaders and female imagery more frequently among the religions of the oppressed than among the religions of the privileged.

Liberty itself is often portrayed as a woman. Our own Statue of Liberty is an outstanding example.

The words of the Song of Mary, the Magnificat, are words that we do not always want to hear. And many of the words and teachings of Jesus are equally uncomfortable. Sometimes we would rather hear words that appeal to our preferences and prejudices.

Indeed, this is the difference between a false Messiah and the true one. A false Messiah, like any false leader or cheap politician, caters to and inflames the fears, hates, angers, and resentments of people. On the other hand, Jesus often calls our values into question, shows us our errors, makes us uncomfortable, yet at the same time, by appealing to our highest motivations, causes us to want to be better, not stronger or richer.

There's one more Christmas song connected with the Christmas story in Luke's Gospel. It's the song the angels sang after their announcement to the shepherds: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among people with whom God is pleased." The song of the angels underscores the good news that Christmas brings to all of us.

I especially like that word "glory." "Glory to God." The Hebrew word for glory means majesty; it means to give great respect, to honor. The angels' song acknowledged that God is all-powerful. God's glory is what makes our Christmas joy possible. One of the wonderful things about Christmas is that it is an annual reminder of the importance of seeing the glory of God in our midst. The glory of God is in the jingle bells, it is seen in God's identification with the poor and the homeless as Mary's song reminds us, and it is seen in the song of the angels and in the baby in the manger. Amen.