Sunday, December 21, 1997
THE FIRST SONGS OF CHRISTMAS
Luke 1:46-55

Christmas is a time for joy and singing. There are more songs about Christmas, both secular and religious, than for any other holiday. The religious songs are commonly called “carols.” Each of us has our favorites, both secular and religious.

The first song 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 about the progress of their pregnancies and 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 revelation, Mary was inspired and responded with the first Christmas song. Mary’s song is now traditionally called “The Magnificat,” because the first line of the text 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. Within them can be found 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 the praise of God; my soul is filled with joy, for God has chosen me, an unknown, ordinary woman.”

As Mary continues with 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 empty away.”

She foresees that with the birth of her son, Jesus, God is going to continue to bless creation and that God has a special love and care for the lonely, the down and out, the poor, and those who suffer. Her Christmas song is more than a sentimental journey. It is about God, who continues to turn the world upside down.

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

God’s interest in the unfortunate appears very early in Hebrew history and is written into the Hebrew law in the Old Testament. In dispensing justice, or 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 can we appreciate Mary’s Christmas song.

Thirty years later, when Jesus began his public ministry, he picked up the same theme. 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 first Christmas song 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 frequently among the religions of the oppressed, more 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 first Christmas song are words that we do not always want to hear. They’re not as sentimental as many Christmas songs. It’s the same with many of the words and teachings of Jesus. They make us uncomfortable. Many times we would rather hear words that appeal to our preferences and prejudices.

It’s very tempting to only read and listen to points of view that reinforce our own opinions and views on life. Liberals, conservatives — we all have the same tendency. We form opinions and then spend our entire lifetime validating what we believe to be true. We find it difficult to even consider another point of view that disagrees with ours.

When I read the Bible, especially the parables and other teachings of Jesus, I frequently find that my pet opinions and assumptions are called into question. Jesus often began his teachings by saying, “You have heard that it was said of old, but I say to you.” For example, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.”

There’s another 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 which Christmas brings to all of us.

“Glory to God.” I especially like the word “glory.” It’s a word we don’t use too much in our everyday conversation. The Christmas story and carols have some other words that are used only at this time of year: “hark,” “behold,” “lo,” as in “Lo, how a rose e’er blooming.” In the carol “Away in a Manger,” we sing, “The cattle are lowing,” and I’m still not sure what that means.

“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, and God’s glory is what makes our Christmas joy possible.

These two first songs of Christmas — the one by Mary and the other by the angels who sang to the shepherds — tell us that God most frequently works in and through common, ordinary, everyday people and events rather than in the spectacular and the sensational.

God’s choice of the lowly and the ordinary echoes through the story of the nativity. The choice of Mary to be the mother of Jesus, and Mary’s song, contrasts the proud and mighty with the humble and lowly. The angels announce the birth of Jesus with their song of glory to God not to the religious leaders in the temple or to political leaders in a palace, but to shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. Even the place of the birth lacked prominence. Bethlehem was a one-stoplight town out in the country that in no way compared with traffic-congested Jerusalem. At nearly every point in the nativity, God chooses to use not the strong and mighty but the humble and lowly.

Above all, the Christmas story illustrates that God enters our lives in the most common and ordinary ways — and that’s still true.

As an example, consider another Christmas song that uses no religious language, and yet it’s about the joy of Christmas. It was written by John Pierpont, a man who according to all of our human standards died a failure in 1866, at age 81.

Pierpont had a good start by graduating from Yale, a university which his grandfather helped found. He chose education as his first profession. However, he was a failure at school teaching. Then he became a lawyer but failed there also. He was too generous to his clients and too concerned about justice to take the cases that brought the highest fees.

Then he became a merchant and failed as a businessman. He was too easy 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. And so he decided to become a minister and went to Harvard Divinity School. He was ordained in the Hollis Street Church in Boston.

Because he favored Prohibition and was against slavery, he got in trouble with the influential members of his congregation and was forced to resign. Then he tried politics, and 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.

The Civil War came along, and he volunteered as chaplain for 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.

Someone found him an obscure job in the back offices of the Treasury Department in Washington, and he finished out the last five years of his life as a file clerk. He wasn’t very good at that either. His heart was not 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. And much of what he thought of as defeat in the short run became success in the long run. Education was reformed. Legal processes were improved. Credit laws were changed, and above all, slavery was abolished once and for all.

There is one other very important sense in which 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, and the word "God" is not in it. 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, and 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 minister.

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 the large majority of people have never done but can only 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 a failure. John Pierpont wrote this song as a small gift for his family, his friends, and his congregation.

What can we learn from this? Sometimes the things we do, which we think are the most insignificant and unimportant, turn out in the long run to be our most important contribution.

Christmas is a time for singing and the joy that goes with it. The message of Christmas, of God's loving presence in and among us, is not limited to songs that we think of as being religious. God's loving presence is also revealed in the common, ordinary joys of living.

The glory of God is in the jingle bells, in warm weather and cold, in sunshine and snow. It is seen in God's identification with the poor and the homeless, as Mary's first Christmas song reminds us, and it is seen in the song of the angels to the shepherds and in the baby in the manger. Amen.