Sunday, December 7, 2003
MARY'S SONG
Luke 1:46-55

The first song connected with the coming birth of Jesus — in other words, the first Advent and Christmas song — is attributed to Mary, the mother of Jesus. It is traditionally called "The Magnificat," because of the first words in the song, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior." I'm sure you will not be surprised to know that following Mary's first Christmas song, more songs have been written about this holiday than any other. There are now more than 5,000 Christmas songs, some secular and others religious.

According to the story in Luke's gospel, while still in the early months of her pregnancy, Mary went to visit her older cousin Elizabeth, who was also pregnant. As the two expectant mothers compared notes on the progress of their pregnancies, Elizabeth had a vision that Mary's child was to be the long-awaited Messiah. As she described her vision, Mary was inspired and responded with the first Christmas song. The words of this poem have been set to music by many different composers over the years.

The words of Mary's song are prophetic and a confession of her faith. They are words of comfort and joy, and also of judgment. Within them can be found much of the meaning of Christmas. It is a song 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. I am delighted, surprised, and overwhelmed that God has chosen me."

As Mary continues with her praise of God, it is obvious that she is aware of the history of her people. She knows 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." In her song, Mary expresses the belief that through the coming of Jesus, God is going to continue to bless the creation and all human beings. She knows 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 "dreaming of a white Christmas"; it is about a loving God who continues to surprise us, a God who reverses many of our commonly held values. Those who consider themselves to be first, find that they are last, and those who consider themselves last are made first.

Throughout her people's history, Mary is aware that God identifies especially with those who suffer misfortune, the orphans, the widows, and the homeless.

The love of God for the unfortunate appears very early in Hebrew history and is written into the law in the Old Testament. In dispensing justice, lending money, or arranging sacrificial offerings, the poor are to be given preferential treatment. 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?"

When you understand the totality and depth of God's identification with the poor and the suffering, you begin to see why Mary sings such a powerful song.

Thirty years later, when Jesus began his public ministry, he emphasized the same theme. After his baptism and when he was certain of his vocation, he described his ministry by quoting the

prophet Isaiah, echoing Mary's song: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because God has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and the recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed."

Throughout his ministry, Jesus repeated the themes of Mary's song: "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. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."

Throughout Christian history, the poor and the suffering have had a special attraction to Mary. Historians have pointed out that you find women leaders and female imagery most frequently among the religions of the oppressed. Liberty itself is often portrayed as a woman. Our own Statue of Liberty is an excellent example.

But the themes in Mary's song are not always what we want to hear. They are not as sentimental as many Christmas songs. They can make us uneasy. 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.

I know that when I read the Bible, especially the parables and teachings of Jesus, I frequently find that my own 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," and he would propose an alternate vision. 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."

God's alternative vision for human beings and for creation is portrayed throughout the Christmas story. The child is born in a stable. The angels announce the birth with their song of glory to God, not to the religious leaders in the Temple or to the political leaders in a palace, but to shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flocks by night.

This brings us to the second song in the story of the birth of Jesus in Luke's gospel. It's the song the angels sang to the shepherds after they told them about the birth of Jesus: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among people with whom God is pleased."

"Glory to God." I especially like the word "glory." It's a word you don't use very much in everyday conversation. The Christmas story and songs 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 acknowledges that God is all-powerful, all-loving. God's glory is what makes your Christmas joy possible.

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

God's choice of the lowly and the ordinary echoes through the story of Christmas. The choice of Mary to be the mother of Jesus and her song contrast the proud and mighty with the humble and lowly. The angels' message of glory to God comes not to the religious leaders in the temple or the political leaders in their palaces, but to shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flocks by night. Even the place of Jesus' birth lacked prominence. Bethlehem was a small town that in no way compared with the splendor of Jerusalem. At nearly every point in the nativity, God chooses to use not the strong and the 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 today.

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

Pierpont had a good start in life by graduating from Yale University, a school that his ancestors helped found. He chose education as his first profession, but he was a failure as a teacher. Then he became a lawyer, but failed there too. He was too generous to his clients and too concerned about justice for the poor, so he had no cases that brought high fees.

He next tried being a businessman. He was too easy with credit. In the meantime, he had been writing poetry, and though it was published, it didn't produce enough royalties to make a living. 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 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.

He became a chaplain for the 22nd regiment of the Massachusetts Volunteers. Two weeks later, he quit, finding 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 D.C., 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 wasn't in it. John Pierpont died a failure. He 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 gravestone read: Poet, Preacher, Philosopher, Philanthropist.

From this distance in time, however, one might insist he was not a failure. His commitments to social justice, his desire to be a loving human being, his active engagement in the crucial social issues of the times, and his faith in the power of the human mind — these were not failures.

Much of what he thought of as defeat in the short run became a success in the long run. Education was reformed. Legal processes were improved. Credit laws were changed. And above all, slavery was abolished.

There is one more 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, with 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 compose 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 everyone can sing, no matter their age, a song that celebrates the joy of living — that’s not a failure. John Pierpont wrote this song as a gift for his family, his friends, and his congregation.

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