Saturday, December 6, 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.

Here's the background of Mary's song. According to the story in Luke's gospel, while still in the early months of her pregnancy, Mary went to visit with 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 words of judgment. Within them can be found much of the meaning of Christmas.

The first words of Mary's song are 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. 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."

She is certain that through the birth of her son 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," more than a sentimental journey. 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.

All through her own people's history, Mary is aware that God identifies especially with those who suffer misfortune, the orphans, the widows, the homeless,

the outcasts and those who are oppressed in any way and that included women in that culture.

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, or lending money, or arranging sacrificial offerings, the poor are to be given preferential treatment. The prophets protest when the privileged take advantage of the under-privileged. 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,

it is then that you can begin to appreciate Mary's 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 of which Mary's song is an echo. "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 the recovering 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.

The words of Mary's song are words that you do not always want to hear. They are not as sentimental as many Christmas songs. They can make you uneasy. You would rather hear words that appeal to your preferences and prejudices. It's very tempting to only read and listen to points of view that reinforce your own opinions and views on life.

I know that when I read the Bible, especially the parables and other teachings of Jesus, I frequently find that my pet opinions and my assumptions are called into question. Jesus many times 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 enemies," 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 evil doer. 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.

There's another Christmas song connected with 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 your 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 ere blooming." In the carol, Away in a Manger, you 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 angel's 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 the 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 announce the birth of Jesus with their song of glory to God, 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 the birth of Jesus 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.

As an example, there's another Christmas song that uses no religious language or symbolism 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 the age of 81.

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

From this distance in time however, one might insist 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 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 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 s 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 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 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 that we think of as being religious. God's loving presence is also revealed in the common, ordinary joys of life. Amen.