

“The Challenge of a Gentle Song”

Fourth Sunday of Advent December 18, 2011 Trinity UCC, Gettysburg
Luke 1:47-55 Rev. Kenneth S. Heasley

Christmas is the time for happy thoughts, pretty things, words of hope, gifts of love, deeds of comfort, carols of joy. Thus says the tradition and the culture. A seasonal song proclaims, and we agree: “It is the loveliest time of the year.” Drab streets sparkle with decorations, children are aglow with expectation, adults strain to show a better side of human nature. The sound of Salvation Army bells and familiar carols replace the sounds of family quarrels. We seek to hear and visualize once again the wonderful, the beautiful and the poetic. A starlit silhouette of Bethlehem town, a meek and tired yet beatific virgin, a stoic and perhaps bewildered father, a soft, cuddly and wrapped up baby, angels, kings, sheep and a docile donkey. Yes, these are the images of Christmas that come quickly to mind in these latter Advent days.

Christmas is a cherished moment and an instant recall of precious memories. It is that day, or if we are lucky, even several days, when the whole complex, maddening and aggravating world goes on HOLD and we are permitted to sample, (even if but briefly) the simplicity, the peace, the hope, the heaven sent joy of life invaded by God’s love. Amidst the din of issues, the prattle of political posturing, problems, conflicts, challenges and threats—there is a truce and we can smile, and sing and share in a mood of holy innocence.

This is the Christmas we want and to a greater or lesser extent, this is the Christmas we try to create. And most of this is not very directly related to the Biblical accounts! The happy, the soft, and the pretty are there *only* if we read our ideas and feelings back into the story.

Sometime in this coming week, read Matthew 1 and 2 and Luke 1 and 2. Read only and exactly what is there—as if hearing it for the first time. Matthew gives only a few sentences about the birth. The majority of the story in Matthew’s account deals with frightening dreams, some wandering seers, a jealous king so precariously perched on his throne that he orders the slaughter of children, and then a hasty flight of new parents to a foreign land as refugees.

Luke also paints a picture of harsh realities. A legal decree which pays no heed to the special condition of birth, a long journey, an exasperated innkeeper, a smelly cave-barn, shepherds frightened out of their sheep, and finally an old prophet who speaks to a new young mother about pain and suffering in her future!

Much of what is beautiful, cuddly and soft in this story has been added by our own imagination and by the imagination of people down through the centuries. I am not criticizing this—for they and we have, in this way, sought to show the highest regard for the whole story, embellishing it and filling it out with images that are not there.

The New Testament writers did not have Christmas in mind when these events were committed to the papyrus scrolls. Christmas was the invention of later generations. It was not until the fourth century that a Christ Mass was celebrated to cast a Christian aura over a pagan holiday and thus to vividly recall the birth of Jesus. Since then we have combined the two words Christ Mass into Christmas and we have added characters, symbols, traditions and meanings.

What the original story sought to convey was not what happened, but to tell all who would believe Who This Is—this child become Man messiah—Jesus.

The text in Luke’s gospel for today contains the Magnificat—Mary’s gentle song spoken to Elizabeth. Magnificat is the Latin word for the opening words, “My soul magnifies.” Listen to these words without the added images of little peasant girl in blue and white, surrounded by a heavenly light with hands clasped under her chin. The New International Version gives this reading:

My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm, he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers.

This gentle song is not about Mary or Jesus or Bethlehem. It is about God—what God is doing in the world, has been doing and will do. This gentle song challenges our faith to see God in the thick of things, in the midst of transitions, in the center of situations of need and change and upheaval. God is there—not as detached companion or observer, but as the prime mover behind it all.

Do we hear, with trembling, the challenging assertion, “God has performed mighty deeds with his arm; God has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts?”

God challenges our pride, our self-centeredness, our self-sufficiency, our smug complacency, our presumed all mightiness and rightness. Here in this gentle song is the declaration that there is a tide in the midst of time and space that sooner or later sweeps even into the inmost thoughts and schemes of all—to scatter and dismantle.

The mighty arm of God can bring down cities in an instant, maroon boats in a breath, level mountains in a rumble, and raise up new peaks in an exclamation. This mighty arm can idle armies or mobilize masses as we have seen in the past year. This same might, means to bring us face to face with ourselves, this same might knows our inmost thoughts, and scatters the proud. This same might makes room for the humble and gives voice to the gentle song. The challenge of the gentle song is to us—to be the gentle ones who perceive the humble birth and to be challenged by it. The challenge of the gentle song is to see the beauty of the birthed one at Bethlehem as the mighty arm of God, marching on through human history with power. The challenge of the gentle song shakes creation and jostles our inmost thoughts.

Mary’s words also point to a challenge of the social order. There are some who proclaim a message that God is identified with success and power and wealth—TV evangelists and others promote this with audacity. There is the mis-guided perception that power and place are divinely ordained and will last forever. We, too, sometimes fall down in obeisance before prestige, titles

and the presumption of power, exploiting who we know to get favor or privilege, hence the ‘industry’ of Washington lobbyists. But history seems rather to forever fulfill the words of Mary. “God has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.” History is littered with those who have sought, by their own guile and wit to rule: Napoleon, Khrushchev, Mao, Hussein, Jim Crow, Gaddafi, Mbaarak, and we could go on. The mighty have been put down from their thrones and the humble have been raised up.

The challenge of this gentle song goes on, “He has filled the hungry with good things, but has sent the rich away empty.” These are fear-filled words if we are the rich; hope filled words if we are the hungry. Either way, they are words of challenge to the status quo.

William Barclay years ago commented on these challenging words of Mary’s gentle song: “A non-Christian society is an acquiring society where each person is out to amass as much as possible. The one with the most at the end wins. How absurd that sounds,” (but that is precisely where we have drifted in the past several decades). “A Christian society is a society where no one dares to have too much while others have too little, where everyone must get only to give away. That sounds ideal—and beyond anything we want to risk”, concludes Barclay.

There is a loveliness in this gentle song—but in that loveliness there is an awesome power. In these words are challenges for every person individually, for every society and for every economic order.

We would prefer to stay with just the gentle images of Christmas: a sweet little baby, cattle lowing, angels singing, a pervasive peace and calm which leaves everything as it is. But that is not to be. It is through that baby, it is because of a shining star, it is through the message of gentle songs that we are aware that God is here—in the thick of things. That is what incarnation—in the flesh—means. God invades this human sphere to challenge all the “as it is” conditions of society, of the powerful, and of our hearts. That which we are preparing to celebrate, (the birth of a son to this gentle singer, Mary) this which we are preparing to celebrate is a challenge of tremendous proportions. God comes into the midst of things—into our humanity, with a mighty arm, with an insight into our thoughts, with a desire to topple the corrupt and to lift up the humble. God comes into our humanity—and nothing can be the same ever again. Amen.