

“Singing the Christmas Song”

Micah 5:2-5a Hebrews 10:5-10 Luke 1:39-55

I wanted to begin my sermon today by asking the rhetorical question, “What kind of sermon would you like to hear today?” However, I have learned my lesson about doing that, because once when I began a sermon in that way in a former parish, one of my good friends who was sitting behind me in the choir answered the question of what kind of sermon she would like to hear that day by saying, “A short one!”

Since this is Christmas Day, I am sure that you are expecting to hear a Christmas sermon, but what kind are you eager to hear? Would you like the sermon to dwell on the beautiful story of Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem, with the detailing of the angels’ singing and the visits of the shepherds and wise men? Perhaps you could really go for a sentimental homily on sweet baby Jesus, born in a barn. Or would you prefer it if the sermon came down hard against the crass materialism and commercialization that we see so attendant upon this season in our country? You might enjoy it if the sermon attempted to make you feel guilty for not being in the Christmas spirit, or you might be hoping that this sermon would pep you up with a good infusion of that Christmas spirit. Should the sermon bemoan the lack of peace in our world twenty centuries after the

birth of the Prince of Peace? Or maybe the thrust of the message should be to encourage us to make room in our hearts for the One who could find no room in the inn.

The Gospel lesson we have heard this morning centers around Mary and how she dealt with the awesome news of her expectant condition. Mary is certainly the primary player in this scriptural account, but the point must be made that God is the chief actor. The words Mary spoke and the deeds she performed are all in response to God's initial action. The good news from the Bible this morning is that God has acted within our world's history—God has acted to change history and to influence the lives of all people.

We preachers are sometimes guilty of trying too hard to get folks to react in certain ways. To be sure, it is the function of preachers to elicit responses from people, but sometimes we are so zealous to do it that we come close to manipulation. This morning I hope that I do not just jerk you around and get you to feel some warm glow in your stomach. Rather, I hope that you will realize the glorious truth of God's great act of sending his Son to us, and that this truth will lead you to open your hearts to the coming and the indwelling of Jesus Christ in your lives.

The action of God is always the primary theme in the Bible. We may think of the Bible as stories and descriptions of the ways that men and women have sought to know God. But, not so! The

Bible is the story of how God has sought to reveal himself to humankind. To be sure, we can learn a lot from the human characters in scripture, but the Bible is for us primarily the faith story of how God has and is revealing himself to you and me. Take the story of Mary, for example. Surely she is a wonderful person, full of faith and hope. But do you suppose that we would know anything about her if God had not chosen her for a special mission? Jesus would never have been born had it not been for the activity of God! It is the Holy Spirit that causes Mary to become the Mother of our Lord. This is quite simply what the Doctrine of the Virgin Birth means—that Jesus is the Son of God. Does this doctrine give you any trouble? In this scientific age, some ideas of religion come in for denial or even ridicule. However, the idea of Jesus having been born of a virgin is a simple truth that says, “This One is special.” This person is sent by God to be the Christ, the Lord, and the Savior of all people.

Our understanding of the saving work of Jesus Christ depends on our belief that Jesus is at once both human and divine. Jesus is the God-Man, who is able to bridge the gap between God and humanity, able to bring the grace of God into our lives to save us from sin and to assure us of abundant and eternal life. All of the Messianic prophecy of the Old Testament looks forward to the time when God will intervene in human history and send the One

who is to be the Messiah, the Christ, the Lord. The passage we heard from the prophet Micah looks for the one to come from Bethlehem, who will reign in Israel. This ruler will stand in strength and in majesty and will make his people secure. This God has done for us in Jesus. Jesus is the Son of God and the son of a woman, Mary; he is God with us, for help, for security, and for salvation.

The central theme of this sermon then is that Christmas is the celebration of the great truth that God has broken into our history and into our lives by sending his Son, Jesus, to be with us. The advent of Jesus Christ into our world brings joy and hope and peace and gladness. It tells us that God cares for us and that he wants good for us. But, as always, the secondary theme of the sermon is that God's primary action calls for a response from his people.

Look again to Mary and consider her response to the message of Gabriel. When the angel greeted her by saying, "Hail, O favored one, the Lord is with you," Mary was troubled and considered in her mind what sort of greeting this might be. But then upon being told that she would bear the Son of God, Mary responded by saying, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." This is the proper response of any person to God—simple obedience. The most perfect prayer that

anyone can pray is, “Thy will be done.” Mary was obedient to God’s will—she recognized that she was a servant of God, and she willingly did what God told her to do.

We also see this obedience in Jesus, who was obedient to the Father, even unto death on a cross. Examine again what Paul said of Jesus in our scripture lesson from Hebrews. Jesus did not come, Paul said, to offer animal sacrifices and burnt offerings. No. Paul quoted Jesus as saying, “Lo, I have come to do thy will, O God.” Whenever you or I hear God speaking, whether it be through an audible voice, through the vision of an angel, through the beauty of a choral anthem, through a quiet moment of meditation, through reading the Bible, or through hearing a sermon; whenever we hear the Word of God, we ought to say, “Let it be to me according to your word.”

Finally, let us note the words of the Magnificat, that beautiful hymn of praise Mary sang when she visited Elizabeth. Mary truly knew that the only reason that she would be called blessed was because of what God had done for her. Mary was rightly boasting in the Lord. Going on, Mary said, “He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts, he has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away.”

When we think about it, that is very radical and revolutionary talk, is it not? But Jesus did come to earth to bring a revolution, to turn the hearts of women and men away from worldly concerns and toward the will of God. Jesus came to bring conversion; and is not a conversion a revolution?

Where do you fit into the framework of Mary's Magnificat? Are you among the scattered proud or the put down mighty? Are you one of the rich sent away empty, or one of the hungry who is now satisfied? I cannot help but think of one of the Beatitudes which Jesus spoke. He said, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled." This Christmas, if we are eager, indeed hungry, to receive Christ, he will come unto us and bless us with a joyous holy day and season. But if we are only looking for a good time this Christmas, only hoping to satisfy our greedy wants, then Christmas will be a hollow observance and a spiritual desert.

Our festival of Christmas celebrates the love of God in sending his Son, Jesus, to be born into our world. The spirit of Christmas is love, with kindness, generosity, and a true seeking of God thrown in. Again, this year, the gift of God will be given into the world. Jesus has come and is coming into our world. Open your heart and invite him in. Let us keep a holy festival. In the

name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.