

used in
celebration
secular times -
Boston
RC & Pres
fest

THE BISSECTING MESSENGER

Micah 5:2-5a; Luke 1:47-55; Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-45

A sermon preached by the Reverend Theodore S. Atkinson

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The fourth Sunday in Advent, December 24, 2000.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Our Gospel lesson contains a song that the Virgin Mary sung when her cousin Elizabeth greeted her as the mother of the Lord. It's called the *Magnificat* from the opening word in the Latin version of the Bible. From a very early date it has been sung every evening at vespers in Catholic churches. The world's greatest musicians have set it to music. There is Bach's majestic and bombastic *Magnificat*. And there is the simple metrical version of the *Magnificat* in our own Presbyterian hymnal. Beth will sing (just sang) a beautiful contemporary rendition of the *Magnificat*. I love them all.

There's one problem. The music is so beautiful we may miss the disturbing message of the song. "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 sent the rich away empty." The Song of Mary reminds us of a Christmas that we don't usually celebrate. I recently read an article in *Presbyterian Outlook* by William M. Paul entitled *Three Christmases*. First, there's the secular Christmas. Secondly, there's the Christmas of faith and family. Thirdly, there's the Christmas of the blessed Virgin Mary.

The secular Christmas begins well before Thanksgiving. Kay and I walked through stores early in November and noticed all the Christmas decorations. Santa Claus had already taken his place in a little Santa Claus village in the mall. The loudspeakers played secular Christmas music - *It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas*, *Chestnuts roasting on an open fire*, *Jingle Bells*, Gene Autry singing *Here Comes Santa Claus* and Bing Crosby singing *White Christmas*. I love those songs. I love secular Christmas music. But these secular Christmas songs, for the most part do not touch on controversial subjects like powerful people being toppled and rich people being sent away empty.

Secular Christmas is egg-nog and Christmas wassail. It's Christmas office parties and too much eating and drinking. It's Santa Claus and Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer. "Ultimately" secular Christmas is "measured by sales and profits." Many business owners tell me that they rely on the Christmas season to make

a profit for the year. In a brochure I receive from the Musical Heritage Society, something like half of all their sales take place in the two months before Christmas. Secular Christmas is crucial for our economy.

I love the secular Christmas but there's a downside to the secular Christmas. We often find ourselves buying things that others don't really want or need with money that we don't have. The secular Christmas too often sends the poor away empty. And, sadly, the secular Christmas is the only Christmas some people know about.

The second Christmas is the Christmas of faith and family. This is the Christmas of church cover dish suppers and the hanging of the greens. It's the Christmas of children's pageants and live nativity scenes. Above all it's the Christmas Eve service and singing, "Silent Night" in the soft glow of the candlelit sanctuary. The Christmas of faith and family is the Christmas of family gatherings and traditions – like the retelling of the Christmas story. This Christmas of faith and family is deeply rooted in parts of the Biblical Christmas story. This is the Christmas most of us like best and means the most to us. Even those of us who enjoy the secular Christmas realize the meaning of Christmas is more deeply experienced in the Christmas of faith and family. This is the Christmas that stirs memories of childhood and the one we want to pass on to our children. But as good as the Christmas of faith and family is it's incomplete unless it leads to the third Christmas.

The third Christmas is the Christmas of the Virgin Mary. In contrast to the warm feelings evoked by the Christmas of faith and family the Christmas of Mary is unsettling. It's the Christmas of Mary's Magnificat, a song sung by a young girl, maybe as young as fourteen, pregnant, engaged but not married. She lives in a world where women are chattel – living pieces of property. And had Joseph not been a righteous man he would have shamed Mary and broken the engagement. So Mary sings, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant."

Mary sang of how God has brought down the powerful from their thrones but not soon enough for Rachel weeping for her children slaughtered by King Herod. We can imagine how Judean mothers and fathers felt about this atrocity that accompanied the first Christmas by reading the news and seeing the anguished faces

of Jewish and Palestinian mothers weeping for their children. Mary's song does not let us ignore the grittier aspects of life at Christmas time.

Many South American countries do not allow this passage of Scripture to be read in church. Priests have been thrown in jail for defying the law and reading the song of Mary. There's something about the words of this beautiful song that rich and powerful dictators don't want poor and hungry people to hear. One South American priest told me that a soldier, upon hearing the words of Mary's song, asked him, "Where did you get that poem? It was written by a Marxist wasn't it? Who wrote it." The priest shocked the soldier by showing him the song in the Bible. "You should be ashamed of yourself" he told the soldier. "What kind of Catholic are you -- calling the Blessed Virgin a communist?" The song of Mary is disturbing -- especially when it's read at Christmas time. The words kind of break the Christmas mood with a heavy dose of reality -- if not politics. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty."

Most of us will celebrate the first two Christmas, the secular Christmas in office parties and secular Christmas music. We will celebrate the second Christmas of faith and family by attending the Children's pageant tonight at 6.30 p.m. and the candlelight Christmas Eve service at 10 p.m. But if we want our celebrations to include the Christmas of Mary and her song we'll go out from here to work for a world where the hungry are fed, the oppressed are freed from their bondage, the little people are lifted up and the self-important have their bubbles popped.

Come to think of it -- many of us have already celebrated the Christmas of Mary. I think of the gargantuan efforts of the Deacons over the last month gathering food and toys for the poor and hungry. Last weekend many of us gathered in the fellowship hall to fill food baskets. Last Sunday many of you delivered the food baskets. The Deacons provided 150 families in our area with food. Thank you for your generous gifts of cash, time, donations and service. Especially, thank you Deacons for helping our Christmas celebrations to be complete. We have seen the words of Mary's song partially fulfilled. "He has filled the hungry with good things."