

A sermon preached by the Rev. Robert L. Tate, Priest Associate, on 3 Advent B, Sunday, December 11, 2011, at the Philadelphia Episcopal Cathedral.

I.

Today is the Third Sunday of Advent. We are exactly halfway through the liturgical season of Advent.

In some places today is referred to as Gaudete Sunday, from the Latin for “praise” or “rejoice.” Today’s lessons and antiphons lift up the theme of joy, as in the Epistle lesson, where St. Paul tells us to “rejoice always.” For this reason, during the Middle Ages, it became the custom take a mini break on the third Sunday from the otherwise penitential season of Advent, to wear rose colored vestments, symbolizing hope, rather than the customary purple vestments, symbolizing penitence, and to light the rose candle on the Advent wreath.

So what is the key spiritual message for this day?

How about:

Only thirteen shopping days left until Christmas?

I don’t think so.

Or how about:

O! You better watch out!
You better not cry,
Better not pout,
I’m telling you why,
Santa Claus is coming to town!

I don’t think so.

No, as close as I can get, the key spiritual message in this pre-Christmas season of Advent is best expressed in the beautiful passage from Luke’s gospel, the Song of Mary, often called the “Magnificat,” from the first word of the passage in Latin.

“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.”

The Song of Mary is appointed for use either as a lesson or a choir anthem on both the Third and the Fourth Sundays in Advent. Today we use it in our liturgy as an offertory hymn and as a choir anthem.

II.

Most of us are aware that the Magnificat, the Song of Mary, in Luke's gospel, is an almost verse-by-verse parallel of the Song of Hannah, in the First Book of Samuel, in the Hebrew scriptures.

In the First Book of Samuel, the childless and aging Hannah prays to God for the birth of child. When she gives birth to a son, she is so overjoyed that she offers the child to the temple. Then, deep in prayer, she has a vision that her son will grow up to be Samuel, who will be anointed as God's first prophet, who will anoint Israel's first King, Saul. Hannah breaks into song.

In Luke's Gospel, the unwed maiden (or in some translations, virgin) Mary is visited by the angel Gabriel who announces that she will bear a holy child. Then Mary visits Elizabeth, who proclaims that Mary's child will be the long awaited savior. Mary understands in her heart that she is about to give birth to Jesus, who will be anointed as God's holy son. Mary breaks into song.

The Deuteronomist wrote First Samuel in the sixth century B.C., during the exile, hundreds of years after the events described. He was not purporting to write an historically accurate account of Hannah's exact words.

Similarly, Luke wrote his gospel in approximately 75 A.D., decades after the events described. He was not purporting to write an historically accurate account of Mary's exact words.

Rather, both writers, in their poetic and theological genius, were proclaiming a universal truth about the very nature of the one God of all creation.

III.

I propose this morning that we hear each of these songs again for the first time. Listen not just with your ears, but with your whole being, to these wonderful lyrics.

From the First Book of Samuel, Chapter 2, verses 1-10. The Song of Hannah:

Hannah prayed and said, "My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in my God. My mouth derides my enemies, because I rejoice in my victory. There is no Holy One like the Lord, no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God. Talk no more so very proudly, let not arrogance come from your mouth; for the Lord is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed. The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength. Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry are fat with spoil. The barren has borne seven, but she who has many children is forlorn. The Lord kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up. The Lord makes poor and makes rich; he brings low, he also exalts. He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor. For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's, and on them he has

set the world. He will guard the feet of his faithful ones, but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness; for not by might does one prevail. The Lord! His adversaries shall be shattered; the Most High will thunder in heaven. The Lord will judge the ends of the earth; he will give strength to his king, and exalt the power of his anointed.”

And from the Gospel According to Luke, Chapter 1, verses 46-55. The Song of Mary:

And Mary said, “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. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; 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. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

IV.

On the surface, both Hannah’s Song and Mary’s Song are simple folk songs giving thanks to God for the miraculous gift of a child.

On a deeper level, both songs are hymns of praise to a God who is intervening in human history, bringing forth a holy child who will be anointed by God for a special, divine purpose.

And on a still much deeper level, both songs are political anthems for a movement proclaiming that God is performing a cosmic reversal that will transform the whole world: raising up the poor and the powerless, breaking the bow of the mighty, and sending the prideful rich away empty. And that God is accomplishing this through the anointed one, literally, through the Christ: prophet, king, messiah.

Taken together, Hannah’s Song and Mary’s Song could be the theme song of our common Judeo-Christian religious tradition, the anthem of the one who is to come.

Happy Advent!

Amen

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