

Forever

(Sermon by Rev. John Dieterly, December 20, 2009)

No other holiday sings like Christmas. Of course we have a number of good, patriotic songs for the 4th of July and other national holidays. There are a few Thanksgiving songs, and a couple for New Year. Easter has quite a few songs in our hymnal, but there aren't very many that the public has created to go with Easter. I could only think of "In My Easter Bonnet" as a secular Easter Song, but then I couldn't even think of one Halloween Song. There may be some, but if you combined all the songs for all the holidays except Christmas, you would only have a small number compared to the many, many Christmas songs, both Christian and secular. And there are more being written all the time. Oh, I know, most of us prefer the "good old" Christmas Carols, but how many of those songs were written in our own lifetime? If you think of more recent secular songs you could include "White Christmas" and "The Christmas Song" (Chestnuts roasting on an open fire...). And there are some new songs that are quite Christian, such as "The Little Drummer Boy." Go back only one more century and you find a number of songs that were composed at that time, such as "Silent Night" by Joseph Mohr and Franz Gruber of Germany, or one from our own country, "O Little Town of Bethlehem" by Phillips Brooks of Philadelphia. The century before that produced "O Come All Ye Faithful" "Joy to the World" and several written by Charles Wesley, such as "Hark the Herald Angels Sing." Did you ever wonder what folks 100 years from now might remember from what we are singing today? I certainly hope that "Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer" is not one of them.

Four years ago Christmas happened to be on a Sunday, and for that occasion I prepared a special service of carols which provided some of the history of each of the songs we sang. A few of those songs went back to the 15th Century and originally were just seasonal ballads but were rewritten to incorporate a Christian message. "What Child is This?" is one example with words written for the older folk song called, "Greensleeves." But this morning I want to go back even further, to some of the original Christmas Songs, songs that were sung even before the birth of Jesus. Maybe you don't think of them as songs because they predate what we call tunes or melody, although the words have a lyrical quality, or what might be called a poetic nature. I am referring to the three songs that are our assigned lessons for this morning. If you had the opportunity to read these lessons before the service, you might have recognized the one reading as a song, in fact, in my Bible it has the heading, "Mary's Song of Praise," or as it is sometimes called, from the first Latin word in this song, the "Magnificat."

But there are two songs that I want to bring to your attention that occur even before the "Magnificat." The first is the song that the angel sang to Mary about Jesus when she was told that she would give birth. The second is the song that Elizabeth sang to Mary when Mary went to visit her. Most Bibles do not recognize them as songs, but if you have Peterson's interpretation, and I am sure others do this as well, you will see that these verses are laid out in a poetic form, which was the style of songs in ancient times.

Listen to the first one, and I will be reading from the NRSV with the more familiar words: "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. (This is like the introduction to the song.)

³¹And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son,

And you will name him Jesus.

³²He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High,

And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David.

³³He will reign over the house of Jacob forever,

And of his kingdom there will be no end."

Do you sense a bit of poetry? Some of it is in the form of ancient Hebrew poetry, which is not written to rhyme, but to restate a point by using different words. For example, verse 32 starts by saying, "He will be great" and then continues by saying "...and will be called the Son of the Most High." And then it restates the theme of greatness again with the words, "The Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David." Remember that the ancient Israelites remembered David as the greatest king to ever rule over Israel. All of their hopes for a Messiah were connected to the promise that some day, there would again be a king like David. So to call the one to be born as the one who will receive the throne of David is to attribute greatness. But then verse 33 raises the angel's message to an even higher level when he says, "He will reign over the house of Jacob forever." Again then the second half of the verse is the poetry, "And of his kingdom there will be no end." Some might say that this repetition provides emphasis. As a conclusion we might also say that this is the high point of the

song, or maybe we could call it the chorus, the main point, repeated to be sure we get the point: “He will reign forever – his kingdom will have no end.”

The next song is the song or poem that Elizabeth sang to Mary when she came to visit. Verses 39 through 41 provide the setting, telling us that Mary went to visit Elizabeth, and as soon as she entered the house, Elizabeth’s baby “leaped in her womb.” And then Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and with a loud cry said,

“Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.

⁴³And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?

⁴⁴For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy.

⁴⁵And blessed is she who believed

That there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”

This song has an interesting conclusion: “There will be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.” What was spoken to Mary by the Lord? Not just that she was going to have a baby. No, babies are born all the time, although having a baby can be an exciting time for the family. What the Lord spoke to Mary, through the angel, was that this was going to be the fulfillment of the promise, this was going to be the king that would receive the throne of David, except that this king would rule forever, without end.

Our third song is Mary’s Song, the Magnificat. We recognize this as a song; through the centuries many tunes have been written for this song, but listen again – and most important, listen for what may be the chorus, the main point:

“My soul magnifies the Lord, ⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

⁴⁸ for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

⁵⁰ His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;

⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,

⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

Did you hear it? “Surely FROM NOW ON all generations will call me blessed.” “His mercy is for those who fear him FROM GENERATION TO GENERATION.” “...according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants FOREVER.” Is that the chorus to the song, or is this repetition done for emphasis – FOREVER. We are not just talking about a baby that will be born, live and at some point die, but one who will be great and live and reign FOREVER!

In his very famous “Hallelujah Chorus” George Frederick Handel repeats the word “Forever” as well. In the bass line we sing “forever” 23 times. In addition, we sing “...and ever” 16 times, for a total of 39. Is all of that just to match the notes that Handel wrote, or is it for emphasis? Is it important to remember that this baby whose birth we celebrate is the fulfillment of God’s promise, FOREVER?

I can remember hearing it said, and maybe even I said it sometimes, as we come to the end of the day on Christmas Day, “...well, now, it’s over for another year.” Let me tell you the good news – it is NOT over, not at bedtime on Christmas Day, or on Monday when we have to go back to work, or when we take down the tree and the decorations, or even on the twelfth day of Christmas, Epiphany. At Christmas we celebrate the fact that God came to dwell with us, not just for a day, or a season, or even a lifetime, but forever, and ever.

May this be the chorus in your song; May you sing a variation of this Christmas Song all year, every year: The kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ. And he shall reign forever, forever, and ever. Amen.