

LET THERE BE LOVE

LUKE 2:1-20

DECEMBER 24, 2002 – CHRISTMAS EVE

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If you didn't make it to the Buffalo Philharmonic Christmas Pops concert this year don't miss next year. Marvin Hamlisch is the conductor. Hamlisch, of *Chorus Line* fame to mention just one of his many Broadway hits, is a brilliant musician, composer, showman, and self-conscious Jew...the perfect person to conduct a Christmas Pops in today's interfaith world.

Not long into the concert he turned at the podium and asked, "You know why you Christians own December?" Then answering his own question he said, "It's the songs. It's because of the songs!" And you know what? He's right. From Bach to Brittain to Bing Crosby, from Mozart to Mendelssohn to Johnny Mathis songs of Christmas are among the best in our repertoire.

Jesus said the greatest commandment is to love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength. If we are truly to do that, prose, speech, words alone are not enough. We need music to express the rich emotion and deep reality of our faith. Christmas Eve reminds us of that like no other night.

What is the rich emotion and deep reality of our faith? The story of God's gracious, unending love for each member of the human family, for you and me. A story the human family hungers for as much tonight as when angels first sang of it long ago:

"Do not be afraid; for see I am bringing you good news of a great joy for all the people: for unto you this day is born in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord."

What I propose tonight is that keeping Christmas means singing not only the songs in this festival service. It means singing songs of kindness and mercy and understanding. Songs of justice and courage and faith each day. That is keeping Christmas. That is keeping the great commandment!

Charles Ives the great American composer tells the story of his father, who led singing at camp-meeting services where the younger Ives learned his love of music. When his father was asked by an overly pious individual, "How can you stand to hear old John Bell (the best stone mason in town) bellow off-key the way he does? The elder Ives replied:

"Old John is a supreme musician. Look into his face and hear the music of the ages. Don't pay too much attention to the sounds. If you do you may miss the music. You won't get a heroic ride to heaven on just pretty sounds!"ⁱ

Keeping Christmas means singing God's love not only this night but throughout the year in our church and private lives, like old John Bell.

Or like Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City. High school and college buddy Tom Tewell is pastor. He reports that just recently FPC went to federal court to stop police from enforcing a new city ordinance ejecting homeless people from church property, and to protect the 20-30 people who sleep overnight on the steps of the church.ⁱⁱ

Keeping Christmas means singing the song of justice.

Or the song of tough love. I heard Mel Levine world authority on learning disorders lecture at Chautauqua this summer. He credits his high school teacher Mr. Fields with teaching him to write. Fields was the most prestigious teacher in the school, says Levine. But, he remembers Fields didn't like him. Fields liked the other kids. To make matters worse Fields was faculty advisor to the student newspaper of which Levine was editor-in-chief. Everything Levine turned in for class or the newspaper Fields ripped to shreds. Levine says, "he ruined my senior year."

Graduation came. Levine was sitting among classmates with cap and gown. When the winner of the English prize was announced his name was read. He couldn't believe it. "Fields did that," he thought. That fall he went off to college.

At Brown, Levine got straight A's. Everything he wrote for English or history or sociology was an A. He never had a professor as single-minded and rigorous as Fields. Eventually, writing became his vocation. In his medical practice and landmark research Levine's writings are renowned.

Years passed. Levine's high school reunion came around just in the past year. He received a directory in the mail with names and addresses of classmates and former teachers. The first name he looked up was his old English teacher Mr. Fields and found that he was living in a retirement community in Connecticut.

Then, he said, he got a huge carton and filled it with all the books and articles he had ever written and sent it to Mr. Fields. "You don't remember me," he wrote to his old teacher, "but you were my creative writing teacher. You were faculty advisor to the newspaper. You and I never got along. You were friendly with all the other kids. You never said anything nice to me. You made my senior year sheer misery. But I have to tell you that no one has had any more influence over me. You are always standing at my shoulder when I write anything."

Two weeks later a letter arrived from Mr. Fields. "Dear Levine, The first mistake in your letter was saying I wouldn't remember you. Of course, I remember you. I remember you had potential as a writer. I also remember you had plenty of friends in your senior year and I had plenty of friends in your senior year and neither one of us needed more friends but you needed a mentor. You needed someone who would drive you and that's what you got. And by the way, your letter has to be the most gratifying thing that has happened to me in my professional life. And do me a favor. Let's please not correspond anymore, it would just be anti-climatic."ⁱⁱⁱ

Keeping Christmas means singing the song of tough love.

Or the song of trust and transformation. A colleague, pastor of a small church in Montana, tells the story of a woman who used to be a terrible drunk and drug addict. She gave herself to anyone who could provide her with booze or cocaine, or the slightest bit of attention.

When she finally sobered up, she joined AA and started attending church with other AA members. With her reputation this took lots of courage. Not everyone greeted her with enthusiasm, but a few did, including the pastor and her husband, and so she kept coming back.

Even before she became a member of the church she started to volunteer for everything, including committees that most people had to be begged to join. She signed up for all the Bible studies, worked on all the projects, visited shut-ins, taught vacation Bible school.

She couldn't get enough of it, or of the new relationships that all these activities led to. Salvation took such hold in her, the pastor said, that she wondered if Christians don't underrate promiscuity. Because, you see, she was still a promiscuous person, still loving without discrimination.^{iv}

The difference was she was no longer self-destructive but a bearer of good news, a bringer of new life to others. *Keeping Christmas means singing the song of trusting our lives to God, and allowing God to transform us.*

What we proclaim this night in scripture and song is that the God who created us and came to us in the manger is the God who enters our lives and so changes the course of history through our actions.

Not as kings and rulers and armies change the course of history. But only as the holy, humble love of God coming to earth as a peasant baby on a cold winter night could change human lives and renew human hearts....

There is a difference between feeling sorry for homeless people and going to court on their behalf. There is a difference between being a casual acquaintance with a young person and striving to serve as an example or even mentor for him or her. There is a difference between just wanting to turn from old self-destructive habits and letting God heal our wounds and send us in paths of service and healing for others.

There *is* a difference...and the call to each of us this night is to *be* that difference and to *make* that difference....

Not just with pretty sounds but like old John Bell and so many others through the ages with the songs of Christmas etched across our lives. Amen.

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ⁱ The Rev. Robert John Weingartner, "Decent Shouting and Orderly Praise," sermon preached at First Presbyterian Church, Middletown, Ohio, May 23, 1993.

ⁱⁱ The Rev. Dr. David John McFarlane, "What Do We Know About God," sermon preached at The Presbyterian Church, Sewickley, PA, December 23, 2001.

ⁱⁱⁱ Dr. Mel Levine, story told in lecture entitled, "One Mind At A Time," given at The Chautauqua Institution, summer, 2002.

^{iv} Kathleen Norris from her book Amazing Grace. Story told by The Rev. Dr. Peter W. Shidemantle in sermon preached at Pebble Hill Presbyterian Church, Syracuse, New York, entitled, "Reckless in Love," September 29, 2002.