

Here am I, the servant of the Lord  
By Reverend Heather Miner

Luke 1: 26-56  
December 16, 2007

It was raining hard the moment the city bus left David and me on the Appian Way near Rome. It had been an uncomfortable ride, standing on a packed bus traveling a road first paved 2300 years ago, and seemingly improved infrequently since. Walking in a downpour, every step bringing more cold, more clinging wetness, we walked, heads down, looking for the catacomb I had seen in my Christian art history book. We weren't finding it. It was growing dark.

Why did we go see the Pope today? I yelled on the inside. I turned it over and over in my mind. David wanted to see the blessing in St. Peter's square, so we had spent valuable time on our last day in Rome gazing toward a very distant Pontiff whose head was only a white speck on a balcony in the distance. Trudging toward an uncertain destination, I eventually blurted out "If we hadn't gone to see the papal dot, then we would have found what I wanted to see today." My beloved David wearily pointed and said, "There's a catacomb over there." "It's not the right one," I said. I stopped in the middle of the rain. I stomped my foot, the puddle splashing high into the air. "I want to see the one that I've seen in the pictures."

Pompeii had Vesuvius; David had me. Like Pompeii, David was silent.

We ended up going into the wrong catacomb because it was the one we could find. There we were met by a Catholic priest who gathered together the tourists that he might guide us through the tunnels. The priest made small talk asking my husband what it is he does. Then he, in a surprise move, asked me what it was that I did. Reluctantly I answered, *I am studying to be a minister*, sure that I would be misunderstood, corrected, or hear again the silence of an exasperated man.

Instead, the priest warmed up to me. He said that I should wait at the end of the tour because he wanted to give me something. David spoke under his breath, "I told you so" sharing his conviction that this was the catacomb that the Holy Spirit meant for us to be in...after all, it was the only one he could find.

On the way back to the city sitting on the bus, the rain still coming down, I watched a woman praying her rosary. In my hands I cradled a picture of Mary, dressed in blue, veiled in that which sparkled like the stars, looking down into the face of the baby Jesus. The priest had given me this picture after the tour. Smiling, he had looked me in the eye and said "This is Mary, Mother of God." For

the first time in quite a few hours, I melted. The frustrated fight left me. I was able to recognize and to receive the gift the priest meant to give.

“Here am I, the servant of the Lord,” Mary says in response to the angel’s message.

How resonant these words are with scripture. Who shall I send? asks the voice whose big toe fills Isaiah’s vision. Isaiah dares answer, “Send me.” Or Samuel, who as a boy heard a voice call, “Samuel, Samuel,” and he ran to his master Eli and waking him said “Here I am!” Eli, upon being waken for the third time, tells Samuel to not come to him again, but rather say to the voice “Speak for your servant is listening.”

Here am I, the servant of the Lord.

Mary, like Abraham and Isaac and Jacob before her, like Isaiah and Samuel the prophets, stands in the place of Israel. She becomes the way God makes known God’s promises to the world. Mary receives the blessing; Mary is called into the covenant where not only God keeps God’s promises to us but we keep our promises to God.

To be “Mother of God” is to hold love in your arms; to look into the eyes of another and realize you are everything to him. But that’s not all. To be Mother of God is to be responsible for the one in your arms; to know that without your attention, this that is of God is certain to be lost.

During Advent we are drawn into the blessing and responsibility God has chosen to give us when he dared drop Jesus into Mary’s, Israel’s, our arms. Do you have room for him?

Some of us are so darn responsible, looking for places that we can send ourselves, needing to make a difference today and tomorrow and the next day. In the busyness of our work, in the performance of our duties, our hearts can slowly close.

Hair, the musical from the 60s, has a young woman sing to the young man she wishes would receive her love these words:

How can people be so heartless  
How can people be so cruel  
Easy to be hard  
Easy to be cold

How can people have no feelings

How can they ignore their friends  
Easy to be proud  
Easy to say no

And especially people  
Who care about strangers  
Who care about evil  
And social injustice  
Do you only  
Care about the bleeding crowd?  
How about a needing friend?  
I need a friend

How can people have no feelings  
How can they ignore their friends  
Easy to be hard  
Easy to be cold  
Easy to be proud  
Easy to say no

Some of us are so responsible that when that which is of God's love for us starts its descent into our lap, we run away in favor of building structures with our own hands.

And then there times when we, content to hold the baby, content to cling onto God's love, never leave our comfortable rocking chairs. "Here I am," you shout, "love me." "Here I am, listen to me. Do what I ask. Provide what I need." And somewhere during the monologue Jesus crawls away. You are left rocking yourself until eventually you forget what it was like to hold God's love.

It is possible for us to rock ourselves for so long that we no longer find comfort or peace, and we stop believing in God's love.

There is much that claims our mind, our heart...much that pushes away our faith. It is an old story, told again and again throughout our Bible. You are not alone. Israel, God's chosen people, are both those who earn God's wrath and those upon whom God chooses to rely.

Isaiah records God's speech...with heartbreaking clarity..."What more was there to do for my vineyard (read God's people) that I have not done in it? When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?"

And yet Isaiah records the promise that is of God's people...

Many peoples shall come and say,  
“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD  
To the house of the God of Jacob;  
That he may teach us his ways  
And that we may walk in his paths.

For out of Zion (read out of God’s people) shall go forth instruction  
And the word of the LORD from Jerusalem (that is temple/church).

Faithfulness will reign...and they will beat their swords into plowshares, their  
spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither  
shall they learn war any more...O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of  
the LORD!

The world is made right by the faithfulness of people. God comes into the world  
through the faithfulness of people; people, like Mary.

I must admit I like that, for once, a young woman’s story is told. So many of the  
other women of our Bible, like Sarah and Elizabeth are older, past the time of child  
bearing. Here we have a girl, who, like Sarah and Elizabeth, can’t bear children  
without God’s help, but one whose faith will not just leave behind descendants or a  
legacy, but one who is to be active in raising up that which is of God.

The drama that the author of Luke/Acts creates is unparalleled in its emphasis on  
the movement of Holy Spirit, that is the movement of God among the people of  
faith. He alone tells the story of the angel Gabriel. He alone tells of Mary’s visit  
with Elizabeth. He alone gives Mary a song.

The Magnificat, Mary’s song, stops the narrative. It is a song written for her. Like  
the 11<sup>th</sup> hour song in a musical, it is meant to capture the essence of what has come  
before, her emotion of the moment, and hope in what is to come. It is meant to  
entice our hearts, to speak to the inner core of our being, for our understanding of  
Mary, the lone character on the stage, to inform our understanding of ourselves.

Next week you will hear the song sung. This week, hear the words.

*My soul magnifies the Lord,  
And my spirit rejoices in God my Savior*

Magnifies, rejoices...an explosion of joy.

My soul, my spirit, my Savior...

*For he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant  
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;*

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven  
Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth  
Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God (Matthew 5)

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

People of God, remember, so that you would sing the words with Mary.  
Remember, rejoice, you are blessed. God has done great things for you.

You can't claim these deeds as your own. You can't magnify yourself and magnify the Lord. You can't believe in your own power and be blessed. You can't claim the responsibility before you've claimed the gift.

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

*His mercy is for those who fear him  
(not those who try to get him on their side)*

*His mercy is for those who fear him  
(for those who wonder at times if they have done right by God)*

*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.*

God's power scatters earth's power

*He has brought down the powerful  
From their thrones,  
And has lifted up the lowly;  
He has filled the hungry with good things  
and sent the rich away empty*

Brought down...lifted up  
Powerful...the lowly  
Hungry...the rich  
Filled...empty

*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 has lifted up the lowly;  
He has filled the hungry with good things  
and sent the rich away empty*

Note how Mary gives way to Israel.

*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 descendents forever.*

Mary, in the historical iconography of the church, sits high above the saints beside the throne of God. It is a young ordinary person God chooses to exult. Mary is an icon for the faithful Israel. Mary is an icon for the faithful church. Mary is an icon for every single one of us who, when we are willing to let go of the power of this world, gives birth to a new part of God's plan.

When I beheld the picture of Mary that rainy cold day long ago, the bus clunking over one pothole after the other, I beheld my hope for the future. I looked into the icon of what I want to be...one who is faithful, one who God could reach inside and touch even on one of my least holy days, one who God would give the precious responsibility of lifting up the name of Jesus into a world in need of mercy.

On my bookshelf, above my computer, sits an icon of Mary holding Jesus. On this particular icon, even as Mary holds Jesus in her arms, Jesus has his tender hand on her face.

So may it be for you  
That even as you find the courage  
To believe, to trust in the faith,  
To allow your soul to magnify the Lord

That even as you receive Jesus into your arms  
You might feel his tender touch  
his promise  
his hope  
for you...for the world.

