

**Willing Bodies Awaiting the Divine Gift**  
**Advent 4 - December 21, 2008**

**Barbara Moyer Lehman**  
**Luke 1:26-38**  
**Luke 1:46-55**

In Luke's gospel, Mary receives the news from the angel, Gabriel, that she is to conceive and give birth to a son. At the end of that passage, Mary answers, "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me according to your word." Then the angel leaves. It is not hard to believe that after receiving that kind of news, Mary needs to talk, to process this information. She makes preparations and leaves to seek the listening ear, the wise counsel of aunt Elizabeth. The delightful poem by Joyce Rupp, called, **The Visitation**, captures what that encounter might have been like.

*Mary, you went hurriedly over hillsides,  
many of them, to be with aunt Elizabeth,  
whose womb also swelled with surprise.*

*You, the woman of youth and vigor,  
weary from the long road's rigors,  
wondering still about the mystery within.*

*Elizabeth, wrinkled and wise,  
weary from the child kicking inside,  
(already a hint of wildness in him)*

*The two of you, meeting at the door,  
weeping and laughing at the same time,  
each one gasping at the other's fertility*

*And leaping between and among you,  
those two frisky fetuses, yet to be born,  
the prophet and the One to be proclaimed.*

*Did they feel the love of your hospitality?  
Did they swim and sway with your voice?  
Did they listen with tiny, eager ears to all  
that passed between the two of you*

*in the days and weeks that swiftly passed,  
growing and feeding on your rich love?*

*I don't know which I'd have wanted more,  
to be in one of those glorious filled wombs  
or in the house of that woman-blessed place.*

—Joyce Rupp

Two women whose bodies become the dwelling place for rich treasure, the gift of new life. One woman, old and wise, but past her child bearing years. The other, young, innocent, engaged, but not yet married. What a conversation they must have had! Can you imagine? Two expectant mothers, both trying to understand, comprehend, absorb what was happening to them.....and Mary, still hearing those words from the angel, ringing in her ears, "Nothing will be impossible with God."

On the long journey across the Judean hills to Elizabeth and Zechariah's house, Mary probably had much time to think, to ponder this incredible turn of events in her life. At the mere sound of Mary's greeting, Elizabeth feels movement within her body as her baby leaps with joy. She exclaims in a LOUD voice to Mary, "God has blessed you more than any other woman..... The Lord has blessed you because you believed that he will keep his promise." And Mary, full of great joy, sings her song of praise. As one commentary writer put it, "**Mary, 'preaches' as the prophet of the poor. She represents their hope.**"

Mary's song, or "*The Magnificat*", is more than a beautiful passage of scripture. It proclaims in a powerful way that the one who is to be born will be and already is, **an agent of radical social change!** (as John Howard Yoder states in, **The Politics of Jesus**, p.27) The fact that God chose Mary, a young servant girl, a handmaiden, to be the willing body, the receptive space for the son of God to be nurtured, already indicates the nature of God and God's activity. God noticed her humble position and chose her. The upside-down kingdom, the reversal of fortunes is already at play. It happened in the past, happens in the present context and will continue to happen in the future.....the verbs indicate a timeless truth!

God brings down the powerful, lifts up the lowly.  
God fills the hungry with good things to eat, sends the rich away empty.

Mary proclaims, “*the Mighty One has done great things for me..holy is his name.*”

Caryll Houselander in her book, **Reed of God**, refers to Mary as the “*warm nest*”, who received Jesus into her life and nurtured him. In recent months I have read material from several different writers that use this image of the nest as a powerful symbol of how the word of God “was made flesh and dwelt among us.” Houselander writes, “*we are receivers of that word as nests are receivers of new life.*”

Joyce Rupp suggests that maybe we should call Advent the **season of nesting**. We prepare ourselves for the indwelling, for Emmanuel, for God with us. We sing, “*let every heart prepare him room,*” and “*be born in us today*”, and “*O come to us, abide with us, our Lord, Emmanuel.*”

In recent weeks, I have noticed lots more nests than I usually do. In the starkness of winter, leaves are stripped off trees, branches are bare, but often nests are seen cradled in arms of a branch or two. We can see them more clearly in winter without the green, lush foliage of spring and summer, but we rarely pay much attention to them. They are often empty, sometimes with icicles hanging from the varied grasses and feathers. But come spring, we notice the robins gathering bits and pieces of ordinary things to make a nest for their eggs. It becomes a warm, hollowed out, welcoming space ready to receive the gift of life.

As I look out into our back yard, I see several nests high in a tree at the edge of our property. On windy days, I am surprised that they continue to remain intact, as the branches bend to and fro. Another nest is outside a window in a large magnolia tree, as I look toward our neighbor’s back yard. I remember there was much activity in that nest last summer. Now I see more clearly the odds and ends gathered by some ambitious bird, grasses, feathers, even pieces of string.

Each year I place this “bird in a nest” ornament deep into the branches of our Christmas tree. It was added to our family collection years ago, probably bought at a 50% after Christmas sale. But it has taken on a new meaning for me this year, as I prepared for this sermon. It reminds me that we are to prepare a way for the Lord, to make a dwelling place for the Christ in our life. As a bird gathers everyday fragments, bits and pieces of ordinary stuff to create a nest, a home, it always leaves a hollowed out

center, a warm hospitable place for the new life that will come.

In the Dec. 16 issue of **The Mennonite**, Isaac Villegas, pastor at Chapel Hill Mennonite Fellowship, wrote in an excellent piece on the inside cover, “*Mary shows us how to extend hospitality to God....She made room for God’s life within her own. She opened her life, her very body, to bring Jesus into the world.. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, the Son received life in Mary’s womb.*”

I believe that God desires for us to be willing and receptive bodies to his in-dwelling. Jesus needs a home. We need Jesus. Jesus wants to abide with us, to make a nest in us, but we need to prepare the place, to make a space, to open up and hollow out a welcoming center! If our schedule is too full, our minds too distracted, our energy depleted, then there will be no room in our inn.

Isaac Villegas states, “*God desires people who offer their lives as spaces where good news is born.*”

Are you and I willing to ‘hollow out’ a welcoming center within us where Christ can dwell and be born in us each and every day? What would that look like for you? How does God continue to dwell among us, to empower us, to transform us, so that we can become part of the shining transformation of the world? How does God’s face shine in us? Do our faces reflect the light of God as we embrace the way of Jesus, as we work for peace and justice, as we become ‘salt and light’ in our communities?

Every year about a month before Christmas, I receive an e mail or phone call from Hannah Lapp, asking me if I would like to ring bells again for Salvation Army. Almost every year, I have said, “YES.” Do I do it to help out Hannah fill one of her slots, or to make myself feel good, or because it is so much fun? Well, I do like to help Hannah when I can, it does give me a good feeling, and whether it is fun....? I am not sure I would describe it as fun. It is interesting, fascinating, but what I have come to understand, is that it has become for me an Advent spiritual discipline. It is one way I carve out, hollow out, a bit more room for the Christ to dwell. For two hours I deliberately, intentionally, pay attention to people, most of whom I have never seen and will probably never see again. I can smile, greet them, thank them, engage in small conversation, bless them, maybe even murmur a silent prayer. It isn’t much, a few

hours, a few words, a few thoughts, a few dollars. Nevertheless, in a small way, it helps me open up, and hollow out that welcoming center. It reminds me that the One whose birth is announced every year at this time came to lift up the lowly, to fill the hungry with good things to eat, while the rich and powerful are brought low and sent away empty.

Come, Lord Jesus, dwell with me this day. Come, Lord Jesus, be born in us today.

I will end with a poem posted on the Sojourners blog. It is a contemporary take on the Magnificat.

### **Mary's Song: A Poem**

by Lisa Sharon Harper (12-17-2008)

Dark times  
Regime change.  
“How are we gonna make it?”  
“How are we gonna live?”  
Tomorrow?

Fear for breakfast  
Trembling for brunch  
Despair for dinner.

Dark thick air  
Full of fumes  
Can't breathe.

Thick over the man on the street  
With feet sticking out of his shoes.  
Shoes wrapped in muslin.  
It does not cover him  
He lay cocked to one side.  
In a fetal position.  
He was a baby once.  
Once — he cried and cuddled and coo-ed  
Now he knows evil of this world.  
His eyes have been baptized in the warped world of war.  
They stare — numb.

Dead eyes.  
Murdered by drugs and guns and blood  
Murdered by full metal jackets  
Innocent eyes stolen  
Stolen, too, the man's soul.  
Now  
He lays in a fetal position  
Waiting...

And the woman on the train  
Across the aisle from me.  
Her hand stretches forth  
Rests on the carriage  
Rocking a sleeping baby.  
Innocent in all things.  
Deserving of nothing  
Deserving of all things  
Baby lay waiting  
In a fetal position  
Baby waits to breathe above 125th street.  
Fumes hover in her neighborhood  
Where bus depots pepper the map.  
Cancer fumes  
Asthma fumes  
Fumes that shape life  
Limit life  
Steal life  
But for now she sleeps  
And her momma rocks her carriage.

And the GM  
And the Hedgefund  
And the free-market giants  
Three of them  
Jolly and Green  
They lay now  
Tears trickle from baptized eyes  
Dead eyes  
They stare — numb  
Ransacked by green greed and time catching up

Now ... nothing -- or at least it feels like nothing.  
They have what feels like nothing.  
And for fear of feeling fear  
The giants lay feeling nothing.

Darkness hovers over the deep  
And we wait.

We watch with dead eyes  
Eyes that have seen too much.  
Eyes that have known too much evil.  
Redeem! Lord, Redeem!

Watch for the light.  
Wait for the light.  
It pierces darkness  
And unfurls curled bodies  
It covers twisted limbs.  
It replaces fumes with blankets of breath  
Mixed with love and sacrifice.

Mary watched and waited  
The powerless, harassed young girl -- 13.  
Barely a foot in the world  
On the run  
Chased down by power  
Death surrounded her  
Wrapped in the stench of King Herod's dying babies

But

Into the darkness Mary sang!

“My soul doth magnify the Lord!  
My soul doth magnify the Lord!  
The one more mighty than darkness has done great things!”

For resting in her belly  
Turning in her belly  
Pressing on her belly

Light was being born

“God scatters the proud in the thoughts of their hearts,”  
Mary says!  
“God brings down the powerful from their thrones and lifts the lowly,”  
Mary proclaims!

And the man with feet peeking from his shoes will be lifted up.  
He will stand up!  
And the baby covered in fumes will be lifted up.  
She will stand up! Up!  
And the green giants laying with dead eyes -- yes, even they will be  
lifted up!  
They will stand!  
Blessed are they now, for they are ready to be lifted up.  
They will lock hands  
With their sisters and brothers and ...

Our souls will magnify the Lord.  
Our souls will magnify the Lord.  
Our souls will magnify the Lord ...  
... together!  
And our spirits will rejoice in God our savior!

Amen.

(poem posted at: <http://www.sojo.net/blog/godspolitics/?p=4790&title>)