

Open paths: 2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Luke 1:26-38, 47-55

by [Kathleen Norris](#) in the [December 13, 2005](#) issue

My favorite Christmas book is *The Donkey's Dream*, which is about the journey Mary and Joseph made to Bethlehem. Meant for young children, Barbara Helen Berger's story is a brilliant and subtle work of theology. Or perhaps antitheology, as it allows simple images to tell us more than words can convey about what the incarnation signifies. As the donkey ambles and dreams, we see that he is carrying a luminous city, with many gates and towers. Next we see on his back a sailing ship, rocking on the sea like a cradle, and then a flowing fountain, and then a rose. Finally we see what he has been carrying all along—a pregnant woman in a blue robe spotted with stars.

The child who trusts the wisdom of these pages has a head start on David, who had to be convinced by Nathan that it is not we who must build God a tabernacle, but God who chooses to dwell in and among us. Our job is to accept the burden. Human concepts of grandeur change—David's cedar house might today be a McMansion of fake stone, with chandeliers, central air and cedar-scented room fresheners—but God's designs endure forever. It is in people, and not things, that God wishes to live.

In the passage from Luke that replaces the psalm in this Sunday's readings, we see one result of God's insistence on human beings as tabernacles of the holy. When we know God's voice and answer his call, we sing, and as our soul "magnifies the Lord" we ourselves are magnified, becoming greater than the sum of our parts. Biblical scholars know that an illiterate peasant woman could never have made such a song, and we know that while Mary had little idea of what would be required of her, she could express her wonder and joy. This is one of those happy occasions when everyone is right. The point is that we need this hymn to restate and magnify our entire salvation history, to draw on Hannah's song in 1 Samuel, as well as on prophetic warnings about the day of the Lord as a time when all that we value will be called into question. One thing only is clear: God has promised to come to our aid and be with us always.

It is no wonder that Mary's song of praise has become one of the church's most potent prayers. Traditionally recited in the evening at the close of vespers, it prods

us to reflect upon how we have responded, this very day, to God's call. Have we tried to ignore it, relying instead on our status, wealth or power? Or have we been poor and simple enough to receive it and take it to heart?

We hear the Gospel readings in the wrong order today, but small matter, as both are essential to our understanding of Christmas. The annunciation of the good news to Mary makes it clear that she was able to sing her song because she had listened well and said yes to God. With all the wealth of mystery provided in these texts, we do still wonder if God is foolish to choose human beings as the foundation of his kingdom. We are not only mortal, we are fickle and unfaithful, and easily distracted. All too often, in the noise of our busy lives, we give God a deaf ear. And we are glad to do so, because listening to God requires more of us than we are willing to give.

Denise Levertov begins her poem "Annunciation" with a line from the Agathistos hymn, "Hail, space for the uncontained god," reminding us of the great mystery that is enacted in Mary. But Levertov disconcertingly puts us in sharp contrast with the young woman of scripture. While annunciations of one sort or another come to most of us, Levertov insists, there are all too often those strange and risky moments

when roads of light and storm
open from darkness in a man or a woman
are turned away from
in dread, in a wave of weakness, in despair
and with relief.

Ordinary lives continue.

God does not smite them.

But the gates close, the pathway vanishes.

And so it goes with us, much of the time. We cling to what we know, the ordinary life that pays the bills. But God keeps calling and, surprisingly, is often answered by the least among us, the most unlikely people from the provinces. It is the barren Hannahs, the young Davids and innocent Marys who hear and believe, and further God's reign on earth. As many times as we turn away from their witness, God has put us together on the road to Jerusalem. It is never the right time, and we are never ready. We have other, more important things to do and places to be. The burden is too great for us to carry. But once we say, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord," the angel will depart, and the path will open before us. We can trust that even in this

violent, unjust and despairing world, God's word of hope is true, and we will sing it
"from generation to generation."

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