

Sunday, December 14, 2014: Luke 1:46b-55

by [Wes D. Avram](#) in the [December 10, 2014](#) issue

The sanctuary of the congregation I serve is built into the ground, with two stories of windows rising from its lowest level. The glass windows—some lightly stained and some clear—show through to an area outside meant to evoke a canyon.

Using stretches of wall that cross the windows, an artist named Sam Terry created a complex work. It begins with large tree roots seeming to come up on one side from water rolling over boulders and on the other side from the base of the pulpit. The roots grow into a massive, gnarly, infertile-looking trunk that appears to be almost dying. She crafted it from random pieces of desert ironwood shaped with epoxy. As you look up, this trunk becomes a cross. The longer of its two arms stretches as far as it can, as if it is reaching for something it can't grasp. It is bent, just slightly, where an elbow might be. The end just slightly suggests a clenched fist.

To the left of that strong arm there is a narrow gap running diagonally. The crevice dips down into the trunk and stretches up toward the top, slicing across the cross's center. One has to jump over the gap to see the shorter arm, which looks nothing like its opposite. The left arm doesn't grasp. It isn't thin or knotty. It doesn't ache from weight or pain of death. It appears not in the heavy gray of ironwood but in the warm brown tones of African walnut. It is smoothed, polished, and alive.

Terry describes the piece as the tree of life grown into a cross showing the hardness of the human heart—which is then, again, transformed. It is the transformation of the heart in the face of the cross of grace.

This might not sound much like an Advent image at first. But perhaps young Mary walks through that crevice between the old and the new as she flees, with the weight of the world on her, to the arms of her loving cousin. There, loved, she hears words rooted deep in her tradition—words of calling to the prophets, of God's vision of compassion for the weak and victory against injustice. And she comes to terms. This girl you would not expect to be the hand of God now receives, accepts, and resolves to return home to do the work given her to do.

To psychologize the text, it seems to me that the song she sings shows the flow of the same spiritual transformation one sees in that cross. The song marks a transformation from seeing her condition's weight to receiving a new power within the situation, to recognizing that the giver is the actual gift. She is less an object of uncertainty and more a receiver of an empowering spirit. And then, finally, she is a participant in the work of that very spirit—God's spirit. Her life becomes part of a larger drama in which she both loses and finds herself. It's God's drama, and it's Mary's blessing.

The song begins by recognizing this blessing. It then jumps the gap, changes in tone, and rings with parallelisms that sing poetic images of the character of the one who blesses. The God who blesses does so with mercy, strength, purpose, and provision.

"His mercy is for those who fear him." Maybe mercy comes when we give up the dream of controlling God, or of reducing truth to our own size, declining to accept any mystery in God or God's creation. Maybe mercy comes when we stop trying to make it on our own, or to build new Babels, or to heal every ill by our own wit, or to shout judgment before listening.

"He has shown strength with his arm" to scatter the proud who have only their own dreams or their own goals, who are deaf to God's purpose. The arm in pain becomes the arm of strength, which becomes the arm of embrace.

"He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly." Mary, the lowly one, is now given her place, her throne—which is, of course, not hers but is the throne of one she carries. So too for all who are seen as lowly in the eyes of the powerful. We preach that there is no life that is finally godforsaken. The intrigues of power that fascinate us are insignificant to the work of love. They can even get in the way and may need to be set aside for that more purposeful way of life.

"He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty." In God's mercy, strength, and purpose, there is provision. There is no hoarding in what Mary imagines, no scarcity, no pain of empty stomachs. The movement between the old and the new is not a jump after all, but more of a giving over. Abundance is possible only when there is a true and broad sharing, a giving of grace, and a blessing.

Mary's song is part of the long history of how God has used those who will let their lives be larger than themselves, who will see their strength not in their own accomplishment but in accepting their place in that larger work, who will not grab power for themselves but will use power for good, and who see these blessings as reason enough for all to receive.

Somehow I hear this song not just as an Advent song but also as an Easter song at the foot of that cross. I hear in it a song of the heart's transformation, rooted by the waters of tradition and the power of blessing, seeing the beauty of a divine vision for all the world.