

A Poetic Prophet

Luke 1:39-56

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Leave it to God to choose a poet. Of course, Mary was not the only one. Amos was no prophet, nor a prophet's son. But when God called this simple shepherd, his words were transformed into poetic metaphors of God's own justice rolling like rivers and righteousness like streams that always flow.

Another poet, Martin Luther King, Jr., echoed the prophecy of Amos thousands of years later in another era of injustice. His sonorous tone and imaginative verse brought national institutions of bigotry to their knees in confession of sin.

When Dr. King was only a child, God called Dorothy Day to speak divine words on behalf of the poor and oppressed, and so the Catholic Worker Movement began. Adapting the words of the young Galilean peasant woman, Day wrote, "I firmly believe that our salvation depends on the poor."¹

It is no surprise that God would choose these poets to speak divine words from very human positions. Poets have a way of seeing the world that is not bound by reality. They see beyond what is apparent to the eye. Perhaps, this is why God works through poets. And this is why the powers and principalities must destroy them. In the words of one poet, "Do not feel safe. The poet remembers. You can kill one. But another is born."² God, it seems, keeps raising up poets to speak holy truth to those in power.

Mary's vision, like all good poetry, opens our eyes to what is true. Like the beatitudes that her son will speak later in Luke, the Magnificat of Mary does not predict the future. It re-describes the present. It is not that the poor and lowly will be blessed in some heavenly realm beyond death—the poor and lowly *are blessed*. God comes to them, God speaks through them, God's work in the world depends on them.

Mary's is not an otherworldly vision; it is her response to the incarnation. Gabriel has paid Mary a visit with the news of God's coming embodiment in the world, and Mary's response is poetry. The words, it seems, mystically come to her. And so she speaks God's truth to the world. Like Isaiah, who spoke of a coming messiah for Israel, Mary speaks hope to those who need it most and warning to those who stand on top. Mary's words outline a program of apocalyptic reversal—the hungry are filled and the rich leave with nothing. The lowly are lifted high and the mighty are brought down. This may not seem good news to those of us who are rich and powerful and filled already, those who find themselves with homes and food and education and comfortable surroundings.

In Mary's words, we too can find comfort in the midst of challenge. Because of Mary's prophecy, we know that our salvation depends on the wellbeing of all humanity. We are freed to serve. We are freed to release our stranglehold on money and possessions and to trust the abundance of God's grace. Because we believe Mary's poem, we can free ourselves of worldly attachments and work for justice for all. The rich who are sent empty away are blessed. God comes to us in our emptiness. Our fate and our future are undeniably joined to the wellbeing of all. Mary's poetic words create the world that we long to see...where all those who hurt and cry out are delivered.

Where those who have nothing are given the kingdom. Where those who are servants are called blessed by all generations. Where those who are lowly are lifted up. Where those who are hungry are filled with good things.

God fills the hungry with good things—and so we come to this table hungry for the birth of Messiah. We come in our richness of possessions, hoping to be emptied of this burden. We come in our poverty of soul, begging to be filled with the presence of God. We come in despair, hoping for a sign of the time when all God’s children live in justice and in peace.

Before he was destroyed for his poetic words of prophecy, Bishop Oscar Romero wrote, “No one can celebrate a genuine Christmas without being truly poor. The self-sufficient, the proud, those who, because they have everything, look down on others, those who have no need even of God—for them there will be no Christmas. Only the poor, the hungry, those who need someone to come on their behalf, will have that someone. That someone is God. Emmanuel. God-with-us. Without poverty of spirit, there can be no abundance of God.”³

And so to this table of abundance we come empty-handed. As we approach the bread and wine, we are keenly aware of the spiritual catastrophe in which the rich live. We need someone to come on our behalf. We need to be fed. We are no more prepared for the birth of the Messiah than Mary was. But her words give us hope.

This semester I met a woman whose five-month-old twins have still not left the hospital. Every morning, she is there. Every night, she is there. Holding. Praying. Crying. Waiting. I asked her, “What gives you strength?” With a look that showed wisdom beyond her nineteen years, the woman simply responded, “I see a new world coming.”

Her own Magnificat, her own poetic prophecy. Mary sees a day that is surely coming, and so she speaks her hope into existence—the mighty one has done great things for me, she says defiantly. God has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. And then she waits, expectantly, for signs of this time to come.

Advent is a season of waiting. Mary’s poem reminds us that the whole world is waiting. Waiting for justice. Waiting for food. Waiting for peace. Waiting for redemption. Waiting, all of creation waiting. Into this waiting, groaning world, the Messiah comes.

Notes

1 Robert Ellsberg, ed., *Dorothy Day: Selected Writings* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 271.

2 Czesław Miłosz, “You Who Wronged,” *Selected Poems: 1931-2004* (New York: Ecco Press, 2006), 103.

3 *Watch for the Light: Readings for Advent and Christmas* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 141-142.