

Double vision: Luke 1:39-55

by [Joanna M. Adams](#) in the [December 12, 2006](#) issue

Of all the people I worry about this time of year, from harried sales clerks to ho-ho-ho weary Santa Clauses, none have my sympathy more than the people who deliver the Christmas catalogues. How their backs must ache, how their jaws must clench as day after day they open our mail boxes and stuff them with L. L. Bean and J. Crew catalogues, not to mention pet supply, natural fiber and computer parts catalogues. May the mail carriers' Christmases be bright, and may their January mail bags be light!

What is it with catalogues by the pound? The contents fall into three categories: things we neither need nor want, things we want but do not need, and things we might need, whether we know it or not. A recent case in point is a gadget my husband couldn't resist. It is a combination lighting and magnifying device, no thicker than a credit card. You keep it in your wallet, and when the waiter brings you the check in some romantic, candlelit restaurant, you take the device, aim it at your bill and, Voilà!—all becomes clear. The light illuminates the numbers while the magnifying glass makes them larger. What more could you ask for?

The glad song Mary sings to her cousin Elizabeth in Luke's Gospel functions in a similar way. It illuminates, making possible the discernment of something that was there all the time, but difficult to see without aid. Mary sings of the whole new order of things that God is creating all around us, one in which the hungry are filled with good things and the rich, who have unwisely filled up on so much that does not satisfy, are emptied so that they can have their real hungers met at last.

As Mary sings, can you see the lowly being lifted, and the proud being scattered and set free from the vanity that is in their hearts? Can you see the promises of God made through the prophets being fulfilled by means of the child Mary will bear? When he is born, she will name him Jesus, which means "God has saved." In our shadowed world, the song makes brightly visible what someone has called "the great process of transformation being wrought by the creative energy of the triune God."

I admit that I am having trouble with my verb tenses here. “The Mighty One has done great things for me,” Mary sings, but her baby hasn’t even been born yet. God has filled the hungry already, she implies, but millions of stomachs are still empty. Either she has lost her mind, or she has been blessed with double vision. She believes that heaven and earth are on an unavoidable convergence course. With eyes of faith and a hopeful ear, she is able to discern that the future God has planned is bleeding back into the here and now.

Throughout the ages, artists have tended to give Mary ruby lips, batting eyelashes and a demure manner. Those artists must have closed their Bibles before they got to the song Mary sings, “The Magnificat,” named after the first word in the Vulgate translation. What wonderful nomenclature. The Lord is magnified as Mary offers her exuberant praise; Mary is magnified by her act of adoration. The power and grace of God actively at work in the world are magnified. We are magnified. The tiny shoots of salvation springing up all around us are magnified. Signs of the great reversal are everywhere. The Mighty One is in charge, and “holy is his name.”

Looking through the lens of Mary’s hope, we see things that on our own we would not have dared to dream of.

Luke did not write his account of the events of Jesus’ birth in a vacuum. He looked back at everything through the viewing device of the cross. On a trip to the island of Patmos, I visited a small Greek Orthodox church and looked up at a ceiling covered with ancient frescoes. One of them depicted Mary sitting by her baby’s cradle. I am afraid it would not qualify for the front of a Christmas card. The cradle was shaped in the form of a sarcophagus, or burial casket, and the swaddling clothes were a funeral shroud.

What God did at Jesus’ birth was no different in meaning and method from what God was doing at Jesus’ death. God is able to create new possibilities out of what appear to be impossibilities. The forces of death and hopelessness are vanquished. How does God do it? By the power of vulnerable love.

One chilly Saturday, I stood in a circle on the front lawn of a young mother and dad’s new house in a low-income neighborhood. We had helped paint the house a welcoming blue and trimmed it with white. We had spread straw on the ground to cover the mud and to keep newly sown grass seed from washing away. “Praise God from whom all blessings flow,” we sang lustily. We thanked God for giving us the

privilege of holding caulking guns, hammers and paintbrushes and being able to do our little part in setting the world right again, at least for one family in our community.

Someone once asked southern humorist Roy Blount if he believed in infant baptism. He replied, "Believe in it! Shoot, I have even seen it!" We will be blessed if we can see, as Mary saw, the possibility of transformation for our often unjust and loveless world. We will be blessed if we can move, as Mary did, from seeing to doing, joyfully joining in God's ongoing shakeup of things as they are.

I do not know of a better viewing device than Christmas. Behold the majesty of God in a manger.