

# **POETRY IN ADVENT**

**ADULT SUNDAY SCHOOL**

**NASSAU PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

**DECEMBER 23, 2018**





# The Annunciation by Denise Levertov

## Annunciation

*'Hail, space for the uncontained God'  
From the Agathistos Hymn,  
Greece, VIc*

We know the scene: the room, variously furnished,  
almost always a lectern, a book; always  
the tall lily.

Arrived on solemn grandeur of great wings,  
the angelic ambassador, standing or hovering,  
whom she acknowledges, a guest.

But we are told of meek obedience. No one mentions  
courage.

The engendering Spirit  
did not enter her without consent.  
God waited.

She was free  
to accept or to refuse, choice  
integral to humanness.

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Aren't there annunciations  
of one sort or another  
in most lives?

Some unwillingly  
undertake great destinies,  
enact them in sullen pride,  
uncomprehending.

More often  
those moments  
when roads of light and storm  
open from darkness in a man or 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.

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She had been a child who played, ate, slept  
like any other child—but unlike others,  
wept only for pity, laughed  
in joy not triumph.  
Compassion and intelligence  
fused in her, indivisible.

Called to a destiny more momentous  
than any in all of Time,  
she did not quail,  
                    only asked  
a simple, 'How can this be?'  
and gravely, courteously,  
took to heart the angel's reply,  
the astounding ministry she was offered:

to bear in her womb  
Infinite weight and lightness; to carry  
in hidden, finite inwardness,  
nine months of Eternity; to contain  
in slender vase of being,  
the sum of power—  
in narrow flesh,  
the sum of light.

                    Then bring to birth,  
push out into air, a Man-child  
needing, like any other,  
milk and love—

but who was God,

This was the moment no one speaks of,  
when she could still refuse.

A breath unbreathed,  
                    Spirit,  
                            suspended,  
                                    waiting.

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She did not cry, 'I cannot. I am not worthy,'  
Nor, 'I have not the strength.'  
She did not submit with gritted teeth,  
raging, coerced.

Bravest of all humans,  
consent illumined her.

The room filled with its light,  
the lily glowed in it,  
and the iridescent wings.

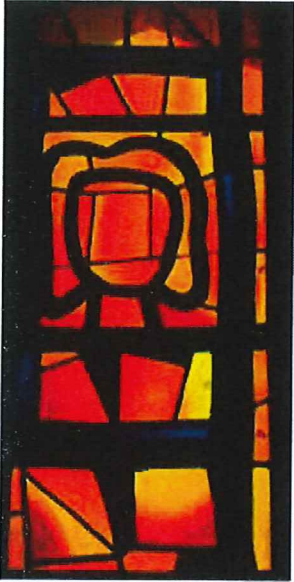
Consent,  
courage unparalleled,  
opened her utterly.



*Annunciation to Mary*

by Rainer Maria Rilke

The angel's entrance (you must realize)  
was not what made her frightened. The surprise  
he gave her by his coming was no more  
than sun or moon-beam stirring on the floor  
would give another, — she had long since grown  
used to the form that angels wear, descending;  
never imaging this coming-down  
was hard for them. (O it's past comprehending,  
how pure she was. Did not one day, a hind  
that rested in a wood, watchfully staring,  
feel her deep influence, and did it not  
conceive the unicorn, then, without pairing,  
the pure beast, beast which light begot, — )  
No, not to see him enter, but to find  
the youthful angel's countenance inclined  
so near to her; that when he looked, and she  
looked up at him, their looks so merged in one  
the world outside grew vacant, suddenly,  
and all things being seen, endured and done  
were crowded into them: just she and he  
eye and its pasture, visions and its view,  
here at the point and at this point alone:-  
see, this arouses fear. Such fear both knew.



### **After annunciation**

This is the irrational season  
When love blooms bright and wild.  
Had Mary been filled with reason  
There'd been no room for the child.

*Madeleine L'Engle*

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### **The risk of birth**

This is no time for a child to be born.  
With the earth betrayed by war and hate

And a nova lighting the sky to warn  
That time runs out and the sun burns late.

That was no time for a child to be born.  
In a land in the crushing grip of Rome;  
Honour and truth were trampled by scorn—  
Yet here did the Saviour make his home.

When is the time for love to be born?  
The inn is full on the planet earth,  
And by greed and pride the sky is torn—  
Yet Love still takes the risk of birth.

*Madeleine L'Engle*

## Advent visitation

A beautiful Advent Sunday-poem from Luci Shaw:

*Advent visitation*

*Even from the cabin window I sensed the wind's  
contagion begin to infect the rags of leaves.  
Then the alders gilded to it, obeisant, the way*

*angels are said to bow, covering their faces with  
their wings, not solemn, as we suppose, but  
possessed of a sudden, surreptitious hilarity.*

*When the little satin wind arrived,  
I felt it slide through the cracked-open door  
(A wisp of prescience? A change in the weather?),*

*and after the small push of breath-You  
entering with your sir of radiant surprise,  
I the astonished one.*

*These still December mornings  
I fancy I live in a clear envelope of angels  
like a cellophane womb. Or a soap bubble,*

*the colors drifting, curling. Outside  
everything's tinted rose, grape, turquoise,  
silver-the stones by the path, the skin of sun*

*on the pond ice, at night the aureola of  
a pregnant moon, like me, iridescent,  
almost full-term with light.*



## Portrait of the Virgin Who Said No to Gabriel

This is the one Giotto never painted.

She looked up from baking that morning, hearing  
his feathers settle and his voice scatter like gold coins  
on the floor. He told her, his forehead sweaty  
from the long trip. *Me?* she breathed, *Oh sure!*

But after he walked away, she couldn't forget his look,  
the strange way his feet rang like horseshoes on the stones.  
What she'd been wanting before he interrupted  
was not the Bach *Magnificat*, I can tell you, not stained  
glass. Nothing risky. Just to keep her good name.

Small as she was, how could she keep in her heart  
those centuries of praise? But I praise her  
anyway for wanting a decent wedding  
with napkins folded like hats and a good Italian wine.  
I praise her name, Lenora. I praise the way

she would practice carefully, making the *L*  
like a little porch, where she could imagine standing  
to throw a red ball to some children she loved.  
I praise the way, year by year, she let herself see  
who that visitor was. Think of her collecting

belief slowly, the way a bird builds her nest  
in an olive tree. Then finally how one year,  
after the leaves fell, she was an old woman  
looking at the truth, outlined against  
the salmon sky, knowing it was true.

For not despising her own caution then, I praise her.  
For never feeling envy. And for the way, once,  
she stepped past her fear to hand a cup of water  
to a thirsty carpenter fainting by her door.

In every room of this gallery I think I see her picture.

—For Henry William Griffin

Jeanne Murray Walker



## Christmas Poem

by: *Mary Oliver*

Says a country legend told every year:  
Go to the barn on Christmas Eve and see  
what the creatures do as that long night tips over.  
Down on their knees they will go, the fire  
of an old memory whistling through their minds!

[So] I went. Wrapped to my eyes against the cold  
I creaked back the barn door and peered in.  
From town the church bells spilled their midnight music,  
and the beasts listened –  
yet they lay in their stalls like stone.

Oh the heretics!  
Not to remember Bethlehem,  
or the star as bright as a sun,  
or the child born on a bed of straw!  
To know only of the dissolving Now!

Still they drowsed on –  
citizens of the pure, the physical world,  
they loomed in the dark: powerful  
of body, peaceful of mind,  
innocent of history.

Brothers! I whispered. It is Christmas!  
And you are no heretics, but a miracle,  
immaculate still as when you thundered forth  
on the morning of creation!  
As for Bethlehem, that blazing star

still sailed the dark, but only looked for me.  
Caught in its light, listening again to its story,  
I curled against some sleepy beast, who nuzzled  
my hair as though I were a child, and warned me

# Advent

BY MARY JO SALTER

Wind whistling, as it does  
in winter, and I think  
nothing of it until

it snaps a shutter off  
her bedroom window, spins  
it over the roof and down

to crash on the deck in back,  
like something out of Oz.  
We look up, stunned—then glad

to be safe and have a story,  
characters in a fable  
we only half-believe.

Look, in my surprise  
I somehow split a wall,  
the last one in the house

we're making of gingerbread.  
We'll have to improvise:  
prop the two halves forward

like an open double door  
and with a tube of icing  
cement them to the floor.

Five days until Christmas,  
and the house cannot be closed.  
When she peers into the cold

interior we've exposed,  
she half-expects to find  
three magi in the manger,

a mother and her child.  
She half-expects to read  
on tablets of gingerbread

a line or two of Scripture,  
as she has every morning  
inside a dated shutter

on her Advent calendar.  
She takes it from the mantel  
and coaxes one fingertip

under the perforation,  
as if her future hinges  
on not tearing off the flap

under which a thumbnail picture  
by Raphael or Giorgione,  
Hans Memling or David

of apses, niches, archways,  
cradles a smaller scene  
of a mother and her child,

of the lidded jewel-box  
of Mary's downcast eyes.  
*Flee into Egypt*, cries

the angel of the Lord  
to Joseph in a dream,  
*for Herod will seek the young*

*child to destroy him.* While  
she works to tile the roof  
with shingled peppermints,

I wash my sugared hands  
and step out to the deck  
to lug the shutter in,

a page torn from a book  
still blank for the two of us,  
a mother and her child.



# Christmas Eve: My Mother Dressing

BY TOI DERRICOTTE

My mother was not impressed with her beauty;  
once a year she put it on like a costume,  
plaited her black hair, slick as cornsilk, down past her hips,  
in one rope-thick braid, turned it, carefully, hand over hand,  
and fixed it at the nape of her neck, stiff and elegant as a crown,  
with tortoise pins, like huge insects,  
some belonging to her dead mother,  
some to my living grandmother.  
Sitting on the stool at the mirror,  
she applied a peachy foundation that seemed to hold her down, to trap her,  
as if we never would have noticed what flew among us unless it was weighted and bound in its mask.  
Vaseline shined her eyebrows,  
mascara blackened her lashes until they swept down like feathers;  
her eyes deepened until they shone from far away.

Now I remember her hands, her poor hands, which, even then were old from scrubbing,  
whiter on the inside than they should have been,  
and hard, the first joints of her fingers, little fattened pads,  
the nails filed to sharp points like old-fashioned ink pens,  
painted a jolly color.  
Her hands stood next to her face and wanted to be put away, prayed  
for the scrub bucket and brush to make them useful.  
And, as I write, I forget the years I watched her  
pull hairs like a witch from her chin, magnify  
every blotch—as if acid were thrown from the inside.

But once a year my mother  
rose in her white silk slip,  
not the slave of the house, the woman,  
took the ironed dress from the hanger—  
allowing me to stand on the bed, so that  
my face looked directly into her face,  
and hold the garment away from her  
as she pulled it down.

Toi Derricotte, "Christmas Eve: My Mother Dressing" from *Captivity*. Copyright © 1989 by Toi Derricotte. All rights are controlled by the University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh, PA 15260, [www.upress.pitt.edu](http://www.upress.pitt.edu). Used by permission of University of Pittsburgh Press.

Source: *Captivity* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1989)

*Christmas Bells*

I HEARD the bells on Christmas Day  
Their old, familiar carols play,  
And wild and sweet  
The words repeat  
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

And thought how, as the day had come,  
The belfries of all Christendom  
Had rolled along  
The unbroken song  
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

Till ringing, singing on its way,  
The world revolved from night to day,  
A voice, a chime,  
A chant sublime  
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

Then from each black, accursed mouth  
The cannon thundered in the South,  
And with the sound  
The carols drowned  
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

It was as if an earthquake rent  
The hearth-stones of a continent,  
And made forlorn  
The households born  
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!



And in despair I bowed my head;  
"There is no peace on earth," I said;  
"For hate is strong,  
And mocks the song  
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!"

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:  
"God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;  
The Wrong shall fail,  
The Right prevail,  
With peace on earth, good-will to men."

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow  
(1865)



## JOURNEY OF THE MAGI

'A cold coming we had of it,  
Just the worst time of the year  
For a journey, and such a long journey:  
The ways deep and the weather sharp,  
The very dead of winter.'  
And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory,  
Lying down in the melting snow.  
There were times we regretted  
The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,  
And the silken girls bringing sherbet.  
Then the camel men cursing and grumbling  
And running away, and wanting their liquor and women,  
And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,  
And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly  
And the villages dirty and charging high prices:  
A hard time we had of it.  
At the end we preferred to travel all night,  
Sleeping in snatches,  
With the voices singing in our ears, saying  
That this was all folly.

Then at dawn we came down to a temperate valley,  
Wet, below the snow line, smelling of vegetation;  
With a running stream and a water-mill beating the darkness,  
And three trees on the low sky,  
And an old white horse galloped away in the meadow.

Then we came to a tavern with vine-leaves over the lintel,  
Six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver,  
And feet kicking the empty wine-skins.  
But there was no information, and so we continued  
And arrived at evening, not a moment too soon  
Finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory.

All this was a long time ago, I remember,  
And I would do it again, but set down  
This set down  
This: were we led all that way for  
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,  
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,  
But had thought they were different; this Birth was  
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.  
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,  
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,  
With an alien people clutching their gods.  
I should be glad of another death.

T. S. Eliot