I went earlier this week to see the new movie, "The Nativity Story." I can recommend it; it's a well-made interpretation of the stories in Matthew and Luke, beautiful, touching and inspiring. I particularly appreciated the good look it gives at the historical context of the Christmas story as well as the way it fleshes out the characters of Zechariah and Elizabeth, of Mary's parents, and especially of Joseph. Herod the Great and his son, Antipas, were both chilling: the elder as a wily egomaniac and the younger as a creepy opportunist.

Ultimately, though, I was disappointed in the portrayal of Mary. I had rather high hopes for the movie in this regard. The actress cast as Mary, Keisha Castle-Hughes, absolutely captivated me in her screen debut, "Whale Rider." I thought that this young Maori actress would undoubtedly bring an energy and verve to the role that I feel are essential to the character of this heroine of our faith. It seems to me that any actress portraying this Mary ought to have some of the same qualities as another famous Mary, the fictional character Mary Richards, qualities that inspired her television boss, Lou Grant, to say, "Kid, you've got spunk!"

But Miss Castle-Hughes' portrayal is, alas, for the most part, lacking in spunk. The young actress seems to be doing her best to play "holy" and "beatific," and ultimately just isn't very interesting even though she certainly adds to the beauty of the film as she moons about with her big, expressive brown eyes. It's just not clear enough what's going on behind them.

I'd contrast Miss Castle-Hughes' performance with a painting that I saw once and that has remained vivid for me ever since. It is without a doubt my favorite rendition of "Madonna and Child." It is by the Venetian painter Tiepolo and I saw it in the Museum of Fine Arts in Springfield, Massachusetts nearly 15 years ago. It is a work of the Italian Renaissance, so the characters, Mary and her baby, look like real people rather than like imagined archetypes. The toddler Jesus is a healthy looking little fellow with curly hair and a preternaturally wise and penetrating look in his eye. He is, however, clearly a little boy, not a grown-up rendered small. The mother is especially memorable. She sits erect, with a proud bearing and a fierce gleam to her eye. "Yes, my boy is special," she seems to be saying, "and if you mess with him, you'll be taking me on as well." The prospect is daunting.

It is this fierceness that is lacking in Keisha Castle-Hughes' acting, the formidable will and the deep pride of motherhood. All mothers are proud of their children but it is, of course, legendary that Jewish mothers are especially proud of their boys. There is, for example, the story of the elderly Jewish woman running to and fro along a beach, in great distress, screaming, "Help! Help!" When she saw rescuers approaching at a run, her appeal changed slightly. "Help! Help! My son, the doctor, is drowning!" There is also, of course, the old joke about three ways we know for sure that Jesus was Jewish. He went into his Father's business; he lived at home for 30 years; and his mother was sure he was God.

Those were silly exaggerations, meant to provoke laughter and we'll come back to the subject of laughter in a few minutes. But first, I want to look a little more at the seriousness behind those jokes. That pride in one's child that the jokes take to an extreme, the same attitude of pride that made Tiepolo's rendition of Mary so memorable for me, is the key to a side of Mary that we don't often consider. A recent article by Scot McKnight in "Christianity Today," adapted from his book, The Real Mary: Why Evangelical Christians Can Embrace the Mother of Jesus,

crystallized for me just what it was about Mary that I missed in "The Nativity Story." McKnight writes, "There are two Marys. One wears a Carolina blue robe, exudes piety from a somber face, often holds her baby son in her arms, and barely makes eye contact with us." This is the Mary of Keisha Castle-Hughes. "The real Mary," McKnight writes, "was a subversive." Or, as Jim Rice wrote after contemplating our scripture for this morning, "(Mary) sounds more like Mother Jones than Mother Teresa!"

Mary, a revolutionary? It sounds absurd when we consider the quiet figure with folded hands and cast down eyes that we all know so well from both high art and the commercial kitsch of plastic nativity sets and "Mary in a Bathtub" grottoes. But let's listen again to the words of the Magnificat, especially the second half: "God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever." Don't be confused by what sounds like the past tense in English. In the Greek in which Luke recorded these words, the tense is what is known as the gnomic aorist and it denotes habitual action. In other words, God is going to keep on doing what God always does – rescue the downtrodden. Mary is rejoicing because she understands that God, through her, is about to keep the promise that the poor have longed to see come to fruition. Justice is coming, the corrupt regime will be brought down, the established order will be turned on its head. *Viva la revolucion!*

These were dangerous words, as Scot McKnight's article reminds us: "If you were a poor woman in the first century, if you were hungry, if you had experienced the injustices of Herod, and if you stood up in Jerusalem and announced that God would yank down the proud, the rulers, and the rich from their high places, you likely would be tried for subversion. If you were Herod or one of his ten wives or one of his many sons or daughters with (unexpressed, of course) hopes for the throne, you would conclude that Mary was a rebel, a revolutionary, a social protester." In short, Mary could have been in serious trouble. Our pious little Mary, however, was no stranger to trouble at this point and that is something that the film of "The Nativity Story" makes clear. As an unmarried, pregnant woman, she was subject not merely to the gossiping tongues of her friends, not merely to ostracism from the good people of Nazareth, but to a death sentence. Had Joseph been a less compassionate man, Mary and her unborn baby could well have ended up at the bottom of a pile of stones in a ravine outside Nazareth. But this teenaged girl who is, as we used to say, "in trouble," this potential enemy of the state, this poverty-stricken unwed mother, lifts up her voice and sings!

This is part of the remarkable nature of Mary, part of what makes me insist that pride and spirit and spunk must have been part of her character. She comes from the bottom of a harsh and feudal society, she has more troubles than many of us could bear and yet she thanks God for sending her those troubles and proclaims that she sees God's future of Good News for the downtrodden dawning in her very experience. Mary's love for her unborn child and for God comes bursting through. "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name."

The audacity of Mary's vision echoes down across the centuries. William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury from 1942 to 1944 and sometimes called the most brilliant man to hold that post since St. Anselm in the 12th century, is said to have warned his missionaries to India never to read the Magnificat in public. Christians were already suspect in that country and they were cautioned against reading verses so inflammatory. What about us? Are we comfortable with Mary's song? Not just the personal gratitude of the first half, which I often heard sung in Ragan Courtney and Buryl Red's modern version when I was a teen, but the part that promises complete upheaval in what may be our very comfortable lives? Do we participate in the revolution? In this passage, as many commentators have pointed out, the Good News is "a word of hope to many and a word of challenge to some." James F. Kay of Princeton Theological Seminary asks, "Can the God who is going to knock the powerful off their peacock thrones, their stock exchange seats, their professional chairs, and their benches of judgment really be our God? Can we really praise this God -- Mary's God?" Or will we turn away, seeking comfort where our culture tells us we will find it, in excessive consumption and self-seeking behavior? Will we, like Mary, rely on God to fill us with the truly good things? Or will we go on gorging ourselves on what we can make and get under our own human power, even though we are killing ourselves and our planet in our mad hunger, trying desperately to fill the emptiness that only God can bless. When we are so self-satisfied, what room do we make in our most inward parts for the indwelling of the Prince of Peace, Love Incarnate? Reflecting on such questions, Kathleen Norris has written, "As I pray the Magnificat, I am asked to consider how I have done in this regard. Have I been so rich, stuffed full of myself, my plans, and my possessions, that I have in effect denied Christ a rightful place on earth? Or am I poor and despairing, but in my failures, weakness, and emptiness more ready and willing to be filled with God's purpose?"

These are hard questions, especially for the morning of Christmas Eve, and I promised some more reflection on laughter. I am greatly indebted for my musings of the comedy of the Magnificat to Conrad Hyers, the retired Chair of Religions at Gustavus Adolphus College and also to one of my favorite books from my seminary days, Frederick Buechner's classic Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy and Fairy Tale, although Buechner doesn't mention this passage. Mary, Hyers points out, is not just a revolutionary: she is also a comedienne. Oh, not a comedienne like Lucille Ball or Rosie O'Donnell or Kathy Griffin, but an exemplar of a far older and deeper mode of comedy. "The themes of 'scattering the proud' and 'putting down' the mighty, while elevating the lowly in their stead," Hyers writes, "are an important part of the symbolism of comedy, and of the ancient repertoire of clowns and fools." The idea that this insignificant peasant girl could stand up and belt out such an improbable manifesto of universal revolution is, frankly, pretty silly and silly in much the same vein as the news delivered to an aged couple by a group of strangers that they were soon to become new parents. The old woman in that story laughed so hard at this news that her miracle baby was named Isaac, "laughter."

This really is a deeply silly story when we think about it. There's this nice Jewish girl, see, (the joke might start) a real Princess type. She's just a kid from a blue-collar family, from a nowhere working class town, (Nazareth? Can anything good come out of Nazareth?) but she's convinced that she's going to be the mother of the greatest King in the world. So she gets engaged to this local kid, a nice guy, a *mensch*, but he's just a carpenter. And still, she's convinced that her baby's going to be a king. Well, there's some kind of hanky-panky and she gets "in a family way" and they head out of town together in a beat up old VW, stopping every few miles to put

water in the busted radiator. So, they're still on the road and the baby starts to come. And the boy, he looks everywhere for a place for her to have her baby but the hospital is too far and the hotels are all full because it's the holidays and finally he ends up taking her into a farmer's barn. So she has the baby right there in the middle of all the animals and they tear up some old clothes to wrap him in and the girl says, "Look, the King of the World has been born." What a lulu!

Of course, this sort of foolishness is common in our Bible and from our God. Remember the words of Paul to the Corinthians: "For consider your call, brethren; not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth; but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God." "In the world of the Bible," Hyers writes, "everything is turned upside down," and he compares God to the mysterious Man with the Blue Guitar in Wallace Stevens' beautiful poem of the same name:

They said, "You have a blue guitar,
You do not play things as they are."
The man replied, "Things as they are
Are changed upon the blue guitar."

The important thing about seeing Mary's incongruous Magnificat in the tradition of foolishness, Hyers writes, is that it allows us to also place her revolutionary and intemperate words in the context of compassion. This is, after all, the Advent Sunday of Love. "As we know too well from experience," says Hyers, "this business of "scattering the proud" and "putting down the mighty" can become rather vengeful and vicious without the mellowing of the comic perspective. The proud are replaced by the proud, and vanquished inhumanities beget new inhumanities. But the prerequisites for entering *this* kingdom and its salvation are, in fact, the very opposite of those qualities seen in the triumphal entry of conquering heroes: childlikeness, meekness, humility, tenderness and compassion."

And so the question comes, not only "are we ready for the revolution?" but "are we in on the joke?" Are we ready to work with Mary's God to overthrow the proud and powerful in our world and to spurn the pride and power in our own lives, not with violence but with humility and compassion? Can we accept the power from God to be weak, to stand against injustice with love? Are we ready to abandon our carefully cultivated social positions to embrace the foolishness of our loving God? Are we ready, like the defeated and captured Lear in Shakespeare's great work to say to One Who Loves Us, "Come, let's away to prison; / We two alone… / so we'll live,/ And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh…" Are we ready to sing Mary's song of revolution and love and laughter?

I want to close with a poem from that remarkable writer John Donne. It captures far better than I ever could this sense of wonder in a world turned upside down by love, of the absurdity that sets us free from brokenness and sin. It is called "Annunciation."

Salvation to all that will is nigh;
That All, which always is all everywhere,

Which cannot sin, and yet all sins must bear,
Which cannot die, yet cannot choose but die,
Lo, faithful virgin, yields Himself to lie
In prison, in thy womb; and though He there
Can take no sin, nor thou give, yet He will wear,
Taken from thence, flesh, which death's force may try.
Ere by the spheres time was created, thou
Wast in His mind, who is thy Son and Brother;
Whom thou conceivst, conceived; yea thou art now
Thy Maker's maker, and thy Father's mother;
Thou hast light in dark, and shutst in little room,
Immensity cloistered in thy dear womb.

For that blessed, spunky girl and for the fruit of her womb, Jesus, whose coming we celebrate this night, thanks be to God!