

January 1, 2015 – Feast of Mary, Mother of God
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Micah 5:1-4; Psalms 80:2-3, 15-16, 18-19; Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-45

The people of Zimbabwe, where I worked for more than 30 years, have many names for God. My favorite is *Chipindikure* – the One Who Turns Things Upside Down. It comes from the word – *kupinduka* – to be uprooted.

A young Jewish girl named Mary experienced this reality when an angel announced to her that she had been chosen to be God's mother. Imagine how this announcement upset her whole life. She would be uprooted from all she had known and the future she had imagined for herself. She said YES to being turned upside down. "Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be done to me according to your word." What an act of faith and love!

The angel told her that her cousin Elizabeth had also conceived through God's miraculous intervention and was six months into her pregnancy. Mary allows herself to be uprooted again as she rushes off to help Elizabeth in spite of her own situation. Luke tells us, "Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country..." There were no comfortable cars, buses or trains to take her there. Mary probably rode on the back of a donkey over the rocky countryside, setting aside her own worries to help another.

When she arrives and greets her cousin, Mary proclaims a magnificent hymn to God's transforming love. God raises the lowly and brings down the mighty, she says. God feeds the hungry and sends the rich away empty. God turns the values of this world upside down. This revolutionary message is the hallmark of our Christian faith.

In today's first reading, this option for the poor and the lowly is fulfilled in history. We are told that Bethlehem – Ephrathah, the smallest of the clans of Judah – will bring forth the ruler of Israel. His greatness shall reach "to the ends of the earth; and he shall be the one of peace." The contradiction between the world's vision of greatness and that of the Gospel is again made clear: the Gospel places value on peace rather than power.

The second reading from Hebrews reiterates God's desire for love and justice rather than for outward conformity to legal prescriptions such as sacrifice and burnt offerings. God again turns the values of the world upside down.

The beginning of a new year is traditionally a time to examine our lives. It is common for many people to look back over the past year to see what went well for them and to decide what changes they want to make. They also look forward to the coming year, with a fresh resolve to amend their lives for the better: to live with integrity and consistency. The new year then is a time to let God turn us upside down; a time to ask God to free us from what enslaves us and to embrace the uprooting that this might require. It is our time to say Yes to God.

Mary's "Yes" led her almost immediately to serve someone in need. Our Yes may also demand that we relinquish our own comfort to help our less fortunate brothers and sisters, wherever they may be.

Let us ask ourselves how we can be the servant of God. What will this commitment require of us? What needs might we be asked to meet? What changes will we be expected to make? Mary's courage can inspire us. A teenage mother without a husband was just as frowned upon in Mary's day as in our own. And yet her great faith led her to announce: "all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me..." Let us believe that God will do great things for us if we only say "Yes."