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Liturgical Reading for Christmas

LEE MAGNESS

This dramatic interplay between the Christmas story and the Crucifixion story calls for ten readers, sharing their reflections as mirrored pairs—Mary of Nazareth and Mary of Magdala, etc. Pairs stand in the center while speaking, then move to the outside as the next pair steps to the center. Readers 1, 2, 9, and 10 should be female voices; Readers 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8 should be male voices. The boldface lines should be read in unison by both readers.

Part One—Mary of Nazareth (Reader 1); Mary of Magdala (Reader 2)

1 I am Mary of Nazareth.

2 *I am Mary of Magdala.*

1,2 I saw him first.

1 I saw him carried, all bloody, from my empty womb to the cradle.

2 *I saw him carried, all bloody, from the cross to an empty tomb.*

1 I heard him cry out—it sounded like “Mama.” He knew my name...already.

2 *I heard him cry out—it sounded like “Mary.” He knew my name...still.*

1 I had seen the people with stares in their eyes, heard the hushed whispers,
as I bore him all those months.

2 *I had heard the cutting cries, Sinner, Friend of sinners,
as I bore with him all those years.*

1 I saw the shepherds with their sheep-eyes, wondering and wandering away.

2 *I saw his flock, his followers, denying, doubting, forgetting, fleeing.*

1 I saw the men who made their way from the misty east,
their gold gone dull in the glow of his body,
their frankincense, their myrrh, sour on his sweet breath.

2 *I made my own way, anyway, through the morning mist,
the golden glow of dawn, now dim in the glory of his body,
my spices, my myrrh, set aside, in the presence of his presence.*

1 And I will ponder these things, because...I am Mary,

2 *And I will proclaim these things, because...I am Mary,*

1,2 and I saw him first,

1 He was mine.

2 *I was his.*

Part Two—Joseph of Nazareth (Reader 3); Joseph of Arimathea (Reader 4)

3 I am Joseph of Nazareth. I held him first.

4 *I am Joseph of Arimathea. I held him last.*

3 I wrapped his lively form with birthing bands.

4 *I wrapped his lifeless form with burial shrouds.*

**3,4 I provided the place to place his body,
though I hardly knew what I held, or what would become of him.**

3 After the agony, after the screams subsided, after the bleeding abated,
there was a great emptiness, as if I could not contain him.

4 After the agony, after the somber songs, after the burial party departed,
the tomb was full of emptiness, as if it could not contain him.

3 Then shepherds and strangers and soldiers, amazement and anger,
wonder...and weeping.

4 *Then soldiers and Sadducees and dazed disciples, anger and amazement,
weeping...and wonder.*

3 I tell you this, because...I am Joseph,
and I held him first, though he was not mine.

4 I tell you this, because...I am Joseph,
and I held him last, though he was not mine.

Part Three—King Herod the Great (Reader 5); Pontius Pilate (Reader 6)

5 I am Herod. I ruled when he came to light.

6 *I am Pilate. I ruled when the darkness descended.*

**5,6 It was really much ado about nothing,
but that's how I kept the peace, the power.**

5 Merely a peasant, you say?
Yes, but even peasants can be dangerous.

6 *Merely a pretender, you say?
Yes, but even pretenders can be dangerous.*

5 I had killed before—my sons and the mother of my sons—
and I would kill again.

6 *I had killed before—thousands of Jewish sons—
and I would kill again.*

5,6 Innocent? Of course.

5 But the strange story of those starry-eyed mages
and the wrinkled brows of my scripture-thumping sages—
it was enough. It was time to put it to an end.

6 *But insistent scribes and incensed priests,*
the look in Antipas's eyes, the clamor of the crowds—
it was enough. It was time to put it to an end.

5,6 So I sent the soldiers.

5 It was a small town. Once the dust was wiped off their sandals,
and the blood off their swords, no one would remember.

6 *It was surprisingly short work. Once the dust had settled,*
and the dark blood had dried, no one would remember.

5 I can assure you of all this, because...I am Herod,
and I ruled when he came to light.

6 I can assure you of all this, because...I am Pilate,
and I ruled when the darkness descended.

Part Four—The Scholar (Reader 7); The Soldier (Reader 8)

7 I am a scholar. I journeyed to Judea from the east.

8 *I am a soldier. I journeyed to Judea from the west.*

7,8 We came under compulsion, against our will, as it were.

7 The sudden star was not to be ignored.

8 *The sudden orders were not to be ignored.*

7 We came for a king, but they mumbled about a Christ,
and sent us to Bethlehem.

8 *We came for the Caesar, but there were rumblings about a Christ,*
so they sent us to Jerusalem.

7 We found ourselves at the foot of a cradle,
worshipping, weirdly enough, a child.

8 *I found myself at the foot of a cross,*
honoring, oddly enough, a criminal.

7 Where was Herod, who heard our story with a stony face?
Where were the rabbis who knew all about Bethlehem?

8 *Where were his devoted disciples, petrified by his predictions?*
Where were the crowds who cloaked his path into Jerusalem?

7 But there we were, out of place in this out-of-the-way place,
uttering, muttering, stuttering those weird words,

- King of the Jews, to a peasant child.
 8 *But there I was, out of place in this out-of-the-way place,*
 uttering, muttering, stuttering those weird words,
Son of God, to a political criminal.
- 7 Still we gave our gifts—gold that would never gild a crown,
 incense to sweeten the smelly stall,
 myrrh to soothe his soft skin—and then we were gone.
 8 *Their gifts grated—crafting a crown out of thorns,*
 wearing robes reeking of incense,
offering wine to soothe his parched throat—and then I was gone.
- 7 I am a scholar. I journeyed to Judea from the east.
 8 *I am a soldier. I journeyed to Judea from the west.*
 7,8 **But, though I left, it has never left me.**

Part Five—The Shepherd (Reader 9); The Disciple (Reader 10)

- 9 I am a shepherd, the first to hear he had at last arrived.
 10 *I am a disciple, the first to hear he had at last arisen.*
- 9 We lived in the fields, and, like our sheep, had anywhere to lay our heads.
 10 *We lived on the road, and, like our shepherd, had nowhere to lay our heads.*
 9 But then one starry night we glimpsed the glory, shook from the shining,
 greeting the good news with fear—Savior, joy, all, now, here.
- 10 *But then one dark dawn we saw the light, still shaken from the quaking,*
greeting the good news with doubt—Lord, joy, you, not here.
- 9 Let's go, we heard ourselves saying, and found it all as the angels said,
 a baby in birthing bands, lying in a hovel that looked like home—
 a child in a manger, a pondering girl, and a wondering man.
- 10 Let's go, we heard ourselves saying, and found it the way the women said,
 no body in funeral shrouds, lying in a cave that could not be home—
 a strangely familiar gardener, petrified guards, and wondering women.
- 9 We could not stay at the stable,
 10 *We could not stay at the tomb,*
- 9,10 **returning with burning ears and brimming eyes,**
 glorifying, glorifying, glorifying God.

9 Clueless as we were, sheepless shepherds, we told it through the town,
10 *Clueless as we were, shepherdless sheep, we told it through the towns,*
9,10 **heralding what we had heard, shouting what we had seen.**

9 I am a shepherd, the first to hear he had at last arrived,
and the first to tell his tale.

10 I am a disciple, the first to hear he had at last arisen,
and still with a tale to tell.

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