"FIRST COMING" (1987)
BY MADELEINE L'ENGLE

L'Engle, Madeleine. *The Ordering of Love* (Writers' Palette Book) (p. 343). Published in her collection *A Cry Like a Bell* (1987). The Crown Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

He did not wait till the world was ready,
till men and nations were at peace.
He came when the Heavens were unsteady,
and prisoners cried out for release.

He did not wait for the perfect time.
He came when the need was deep and great.
He dined with sinners in all their grime,
turned water into wine. He did not wait

till hearts were pure. In joy he came
to a tarnished world of sin and doubt.
To a world like ours, of anguished shame
he came, and his Light would not go out.

He came to a world which did not mesh,
to heal its **tangles**,[1] shield its scorn.
In the mystery of the Word made Flesh
the Maker of the stars was born.

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[1] The *Oxford English Dictionary* at the 17th century noun "**tangle**" – "A tangled condition or *concrete* a tangled mass; a complication of threads, hairs, fibres, branches, boughs, or the like, confusedly intertwined or interlaced, or of a single long thread, line, or rope, involved in coils, loops, and knots; a snarl, ravel, or complicated loose knot. Also *transferred* of streams, paths, etc. similarly intertwisted or confused." However, in the 14th century, there was the verb "**to tangle**" – "*transitive*. To involve or engage (a person) in affairs which encumber and hamper or embarrass, and from which it is difficult to get free; = entangle *v.* 2. Chiefly *reflexive* and in *passive*; also, to embarrass, confuse (the brain, mind, conscience, etc.)."

We cannot wait till the world is sane[2]
to raise our songs with joyful voice,
for to share our grief, to touch our pain,
He came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice!

PSALM 137

The last stanza reminds me of this Psalm 137. In the Psalm, the people who have lost so much, exiled for they know not how long, refuse to sing the songs that are their own, that make them happy, at the request of the Babylonians among whom they are now compelled to live and work and to raise their families. What occurred to me while praying with this Psalm years ago was that they must sing those songs, because it is those songs that bring them joy. It does not matter who requests them to sing; it only matters if singing their own songs make them happy.

[1] By the rivers of Babylon
    there we sat weeping
    when we remembered Zion.[a]
[2] On the poplars in its midst
    we hung up our harps.[b]
[3] For there our captors asked us
    for the words of a song;
Our tormentors, for joy:
    "Sing for us a song of Zion!"
[4] But how could we sing a song of the LORD
    in a foreign land? [3]

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[2] The *Oxford English Dictionary* at the adjective "**sane**" – "Sound in mind; in one's senses; not mad. Also, of the mind: Not diseased."

[a] Ez 3:15; Lam 3:48.

[b] Is 24:8; Lam 5:14.

[3] *New American Bible*, Revised Edition. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Ps 137:1–4.

I was reminded of this in L'Engle's choice of the word "tangles" in stanza 4 – "to heal its tangles".

Wikipedia – "The concept of Mary untying knots is derived from a work by St. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Adversus haereses* (Against Heresies). In Book III, Chapter 22, he presents a parallel between Eve and Mary, describing how 'the knot of Eve's disobedience was loosed by the obedience of Mary. For what the virgin Eve had bound fast through unbelief, this did the virgin Mary set free through faith.'"

Mary, Untier of Knots (around 1700 CE), painted by Johann Georg Melchior Schmidtner (1625-1700 CE)

Irenaeus of Lyons (120-202 CE), *Against the Heresies* **III.22.4** – 4. In accordance with this design, Mary the Virgin is found obedient, saying, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word."[2] But Eve was disobedient; for she did not obey when as yet she was a virgin. And even as she, having indeed a husband, Adam, but being nevertheless as yet a virgin (for in Paradise "they were both naked, and were not ashamed,"[3] inasmuch as they, having been created a short time previously, had no understanding of the procreation of children: for it was necessary that they should first come to adult age,[4] and then multiply from that time onward), having become disobedient, was made the cause of death, both to herself and to the entire human race; so also did Mary, having a man betrothed [to her], and being nevertheless a virgin, by yielding obedience, become the cause of salvation, both to herself and the whole human race. And on this account does the law term a woman betrothed to a man, the wife of him who had betrothed her, although she was as yet a virgin; thus indicating the back-reference from Mary to Eve, because what is joined together could not otherwise be put asunder than by inversion of the process by which these bonds of union had arisen;[5] so that the former ties be cancelled by the latter, that the latter may set the former again at liberty. And it has, in fact, happened that the first compact looses from the second tie, but that the second tie takes the position of the first which has been cancelled.[6] For this reason did the Lord declare that the first should in truth be last, and the last first.[7] And the prophet, too, indicates the same, saying, "Instead of fathers, children have been born unto thee."[8] For the Lord, having been born "the First-begotten of the dead,"[9] and receiving into His bosom the ancient fathers, has regenerated them into the life of God, He having been made Himself the beginning of those that live, as Adam became the beginning of those who die.[10] Wherefore also Luke, commencing the genealogy with the Lord, carried it back to Adam, indicating that it was He who

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[2] Luke 1:38.

[3] Gen. 2:25.

[4] This seems quite a peculiar opinion of Irenæus, that our first parents, when created, were not of the age of maturity.

[5] Literally, "unless these bonds of union be turned backwards."

[6] It is very difficult to follow the reasoning of Irenæus in this passage. Massuet has a long note upon it, in which he sets forth the various points of comparison and contrast here indicated between Eve and Mary; but he ends with the remark, "hæc certe et quæ sequuntur, paulo subtiliora."

[7] Matt. 19:30, 20:16.

[8] Ps. 45:17.

[9] Rev. 1:5.

[10] Comp. 1 Cor. 15:20–22.

regenerated them into the Gospel of life, and not they Him. **And thus, also it was that the knot of Eve's disobedience was loosed by the obedience of Mary. For what the virgin Eve had bound fast through unbelief, this did the virgin Mary set free through faith.**[4]

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[4] Irenaeus of Lyons, "Irenæus against Heresies," in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 1, The Ante-Nicene Fathers (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 455.