

## **Sotto Voce at First Christian Church**

by Ruth Johnston

[*sotto voce* is a musical term for "in an undertone"]

See her there, your sister  
In the second bench from the back,  
Beside her children,  
Always there,  
Always smiling,  
Sometimes a little too quiet,  
Sometimes a little too loud.

What if they knew  
How he threatened me this week  
Or how he punishes me  
Because it's always my fault  
When things go wrong.

She comes in late, breathless,  
Hurrying the children past the feet  
Of those already seated.  
Why can't she get ready sooner  
And come with her husband?  
What patience he must have,  
To stand up at the front,  
To see her stumbling in,  
And still to lead the service  
With such dignity.

Last night, in a fit of rage  
He drove my car into a snow bank  
Because I parked in his way.  
I shoveled snow alone this morning  
While he left early to take his place  
Up at the front.  
I have no bruises, at least not outside  
Where they can be seen;  
No marks to show the world  
So that I can say,  
Surely I'm justified to leave.  
But if I go, he too will be hurt,  
The children won't understand,  
Our friends will take sides,  
And I will be condemned.

The text is read:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion;  
Blessed art thou among women.  
And Mary sings of mercy and strength,  
The angels sing of peace and goodwill,  
And the woman sings,  
In the second bench from the back,  
Beside her children.

Mary, did you hear  
The weeping of the mothers  
Who lost their baby boys  
When your son was born?  
Do you hear my weeping  
When my children are hurt?  
Do you see my low estate  
When I am hungry for love,  
Or protection, or forgiveness?  
Is there any blessing left for me  
After the first-born Adam  
Has taken his share?

The text is read:

He that dwelleth in the secret place  
Of the Most High  
Shall abide under the shadow  
Of the Almighty.  
And the woman takes comfort  
And sits a little straighter  
In the second bench from the back.

Oh God, I'd like to stay right here...  
This secret place is safe.  
But God, my faith, my church, my home,  
They are all bound in one, the same.

What shall I do?  
Leave and forever be cut off  
From all that comforts me,  
Or stay and suffer, until I long for death?

This secret place feels sometimes  
Like a jail.  
I need to know who holds the key  
Before I can go free.

The congregation rises for the benediction  
And at the back,  
In the second bench,  
The woman composes herself  
So that no one will see her pain  
And pity her,  
Or feel her anger  
And condemn her.

She wraps herself in a smile  
And carefully,  
Carefully,  
Tucks the edges in around her  
So that no tears can possibly  
Leak through.

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