

Welcome To The Advent Spiral

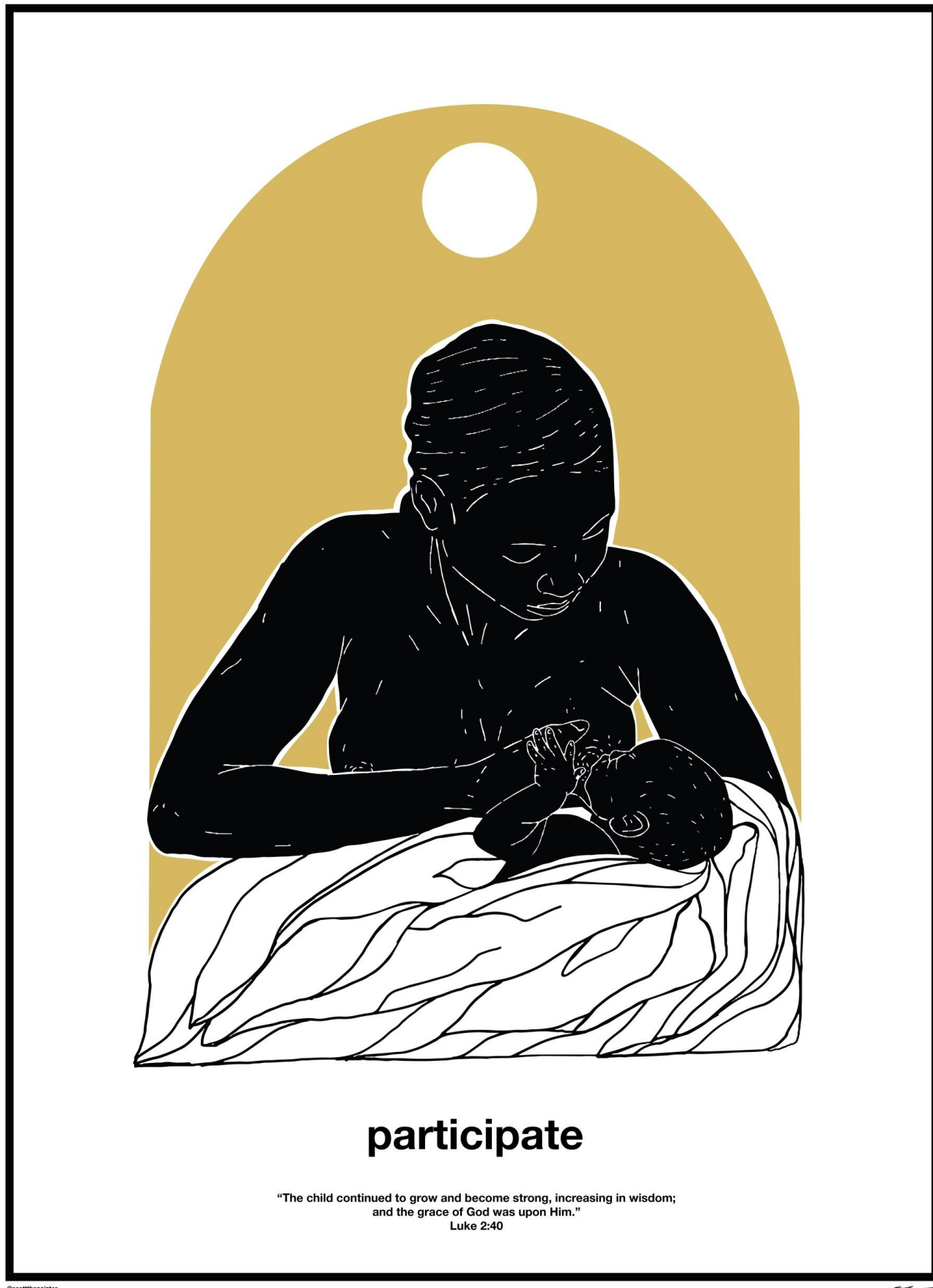


Image: Scott Erickson

“Christmas is about the vulnerability of God, about the revelation that God is the servant of the universe, that if we too serve the creation with God then we join God’s smallness, an insignificance that displays for all to see the mystery of a profound divine weakness, a humility that casts down all greatness and arrogance and elevates poverty and lowliness.” - Kenneth Tanner

As we prepare for the annual feast of Christmas this year, we bring heavy hearts, filled with worry and fear, longing and anticipation, worn down by the weight of sickness and death in our world. The Church sets aside Advent as a whole season leading up to Christmas - the time when we remember and anticipate the coming of God in the human One, Jesus.

Reflecting on these ancient stories of the baby Jesus, we are struck with this mysterious and compelling vision of divine vulnerability. God did not come among us surrounded with great armies - but rather, surrounded with amniotic fluid. God’s coming was not heralded with a broad social media campaign but rather, with the witness of shepherds tending flocks in the hillsides, with unexpected foreign guests, and with the confusing whispers of angels.

How might God be coming to us in this time of social isolation and fear? How, if God “casts down all greatness and arrogance and elevates poverty and lowliness” do we expect Christ to be known in our midst?

We invite you to walk this ancient story with your feet through these images and texts, to stop and ponder how you find yourself drawn into this sacred world - our world! The world God continues to love, even and especially through the depths of our pain and despair. May Emmanuel (God-with-us) be present to you with hope, peace, joy and love.

Station One: In The Beginning



Image: Scott Erickson

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” - John 1:1-5

...In the beginning. Every story, every journey, every life has a beginning. Every culture has a sacred origin story. In this beginning, the Christian story, we encounter a sacred Word, where life comes into being - and a light that shines for all creation.

Who, or what in your life has reflected that Divine light for you? Feel free to name them now. God, we give thanks for those who have reflected your light in our lives. Amen.

Station Two: Gabriel Visits Zechariah



Image: Alexander Andreyevich Ivanov

“Zechariah was on duty with his division of priests. As he served in God’s presence, he was chosen by priestly custom to go into the Lord’s temple to burn incense. All the people were praying outside while he was burning incense. Then, to the right of the incense altar, an angel of the Lord appeared to him. Zechariah was troubled and overcome with fear. The angel said to him, “Don’t be afraid, Zechariah! God has heard your prayer. Your wife Elizabeth will have a son, and you will name him John... He will go ahead of the Lord with the spirit and power that Elijah had. He will change parents’ attitudes toward their children. He will change disobedient people so that they will accept the wisdom of those who have God’s approval. In this way he will prepare the people for their Lord.” Zechariah said to the angel, “What proof is there for this? I’m an old man, and my wife is beyond her childbearing years.”The angel answered him, “I’m Gabriel! I stand in God’s presence. God sent me to tell you this good news. But because you didn’t believe what I said, you will be unable to talk until the day this happens.

Everything will come true at the right time.” - Luke 1: 8-18, select verses.

In this year of pandemic, where have you struggled to hold onto the hope of good news? As you accept the invitation to meditate in silence, what might God be bringing to birth in your life?

Oh God, we know that at times we are slow to believe, because good news in the midst of despair seems impossible. We lose hope too readily, grow weary of waiting and turn aside from the way we should follow. Teach us to know the hope and the grace of your timing in all the twists and turns of our path. Amen

Station Three: The Annunciation



Image: [The Annunciation \(1898\) by Henry Ossawa Tanner](#)

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.' Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her - Luke 1:26-38

The story of God coming begins with the most amazing announcement - so amazing that Mary, the one who first hears the news, replies, "How can this be?" And so it is down through the ages - we ponder how can this be - a young virgin giving birth to the Son of God... God becoming human in Jesus Christ.

Even so, through this divine encounter, Mary moves from this important place of questioning to one of receiving and acting on this news. "Let it be with me according to your word." *How might God invite you to respond to this news?*

Oh God, we ponder these things. We have so many questions. So many concerns. The simple faith of our childhood works for us and then.... It doesn't. God we invite you to come as only you can and announce your good news to us. Amen.

Station Four: Gabriel's Annunciation



Image: John Collier

Gabriel's Annunciation by Jan Richardson

For a moment
I hesitated
on the threshold.
For the space
of a breath
I paused,
unwilling to disturb
her last ordinary moment,
knowing that the next step
would cleave her life:
that this day
would slice her story
in two,
dividing all the days before
from all the ones
to come.

The artists would later
depict the scene:
Mary dazzled
by the archangel,
her head bowed
in humble assent,
awed by the messenger

who condescended
to leave paradise
to bestow such an honor
upon a woman, and mortal.

Yet I tell you
it was I who was dazzled,
I who found myself agape
when I came upon her—
reading, at the loom, in the kitchen,
I cannot now recall;
only that the woman before me—
blessed and full of grace
long before I called her so—
shimmered with how completely
she inhabited herself,
inhabited the space around her,
inhabited the moment
that hung between us.

I wanted to save her
from what I had been sent
to say.

Yet when the time came,
when I had stammered
the invitation
(history would not record

the sweat on my brow,
the pounding of my heart;
would not note
that I said
Do not be afraid
to myself as much as
to her)
it was she
who saved me—
her first deliverance—
her Let it be
not just declaration
to the Divine
but a word of solace,
of soothing,
of benediction

for the angel
in the doorway
who would hesitate
one last time—
just for the space
of a breath
torn from his chest—
before wrenching himself away
from her radiant consent,
her beautiful and
awful yes

Station Five: Mary Visits Elizabeth



Image: Philip de Champaigne

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.' - Luke 1:39-45

... Sacred friendship. Here we have a sacred friendship between two women, relatives. Together they share a moment of pregnant holiness which results in joy!

Where have you experienced this joy in sacred friendship? How has God been part of that?

God, fill our lives with holy friendships and sacred connections so that we might be drawn deeper into life with You. Amen.

Station Six: Magnificat!



Image: Benjamin Wildflower

And Mary said, 'My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has looked with favour 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. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he 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 for ever.' - Luke 1:46 - 55

...Magnify. *What do you think of when you hear the word? How does Mary Magnify this upside down reign of God and where do you see that breaking in today? In your life? In the life of this world?*

Oh God, let our lives reflect you, let us have the courage to speak and hear and act with your love, your justice, your tenderness. May we bear your life into this beautiful and blessed world. Amen.

Station Seven: The Angel Visits Joseph



Image: Traditional Ikon

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.’ All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ‘Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel’, which means, ‘God is with us.’ When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus. - Matthew 1:18 - 25

O Sapientia by Madeleine L’Engle.

It was from Joseph first I learned
of love. Like me he was dismayed.
How easily he could have turned
me from his house; but, unafraid,
he put me not away from him
(O God-sent angel, pray for him).
Thus through his love was Love obeyed.
The Child’s first cry came like a bell:
God’s Word aloud, God’s Word in deed.

The angel spoke: so it befell,
and Joseph with me in my need.
O Child whose father came from heaven,
to you another gift was given,
your earthly father chosen well.
With Joseph I was always warmed
and cherished. Even in the stable
I knew that I would not be harmed.
And, though above the angels swarmed,
man’s love it was that made me able
to bear God’s love, wild, formidable,
to bear God’s will, through me performed.

Station Eight: The Birth of John the Baptist



Image: Russian Orthodox Ikon

‘Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a mighty saviour for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace...’ -Luke 1:68 - 80

Oh God, guide our feet in the way of peace. “Where there is hatred, let us show love? Where there is injury, pardon...” (attributed to St. Francis)

How and when have you been called to be a peacemaker? How might you be called to be a peacemaker? Lord, makes us instruments of your peace. Amen.

Station Nine: Travel to Bethlehem



Image: Scott Erickson

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. - Luke 2:1-5

‘Nazareth’ comes from Hebrew ‘Netzer’, which means “branch” or “shoot.” Bethlehem means ‘house of bread’. In the midst of oppression, a tender shoot springs forth - new life out of death that will be abundant food for all. *Where are the shoots of new life for you? Where do you hunger for the bread of life?*

Light of the world, guide our footsteps on the long and difficult pathways of our lives. Nourish us with your life and show us the tables of gracious hospitality you lay before us, even here and now. Come Lord - come down, come in, come among us and make us whole. Amen.

Station Ten: Shepherds And Angels



Images: He Qi; Scott Erickson

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people - Luke 2:8-10

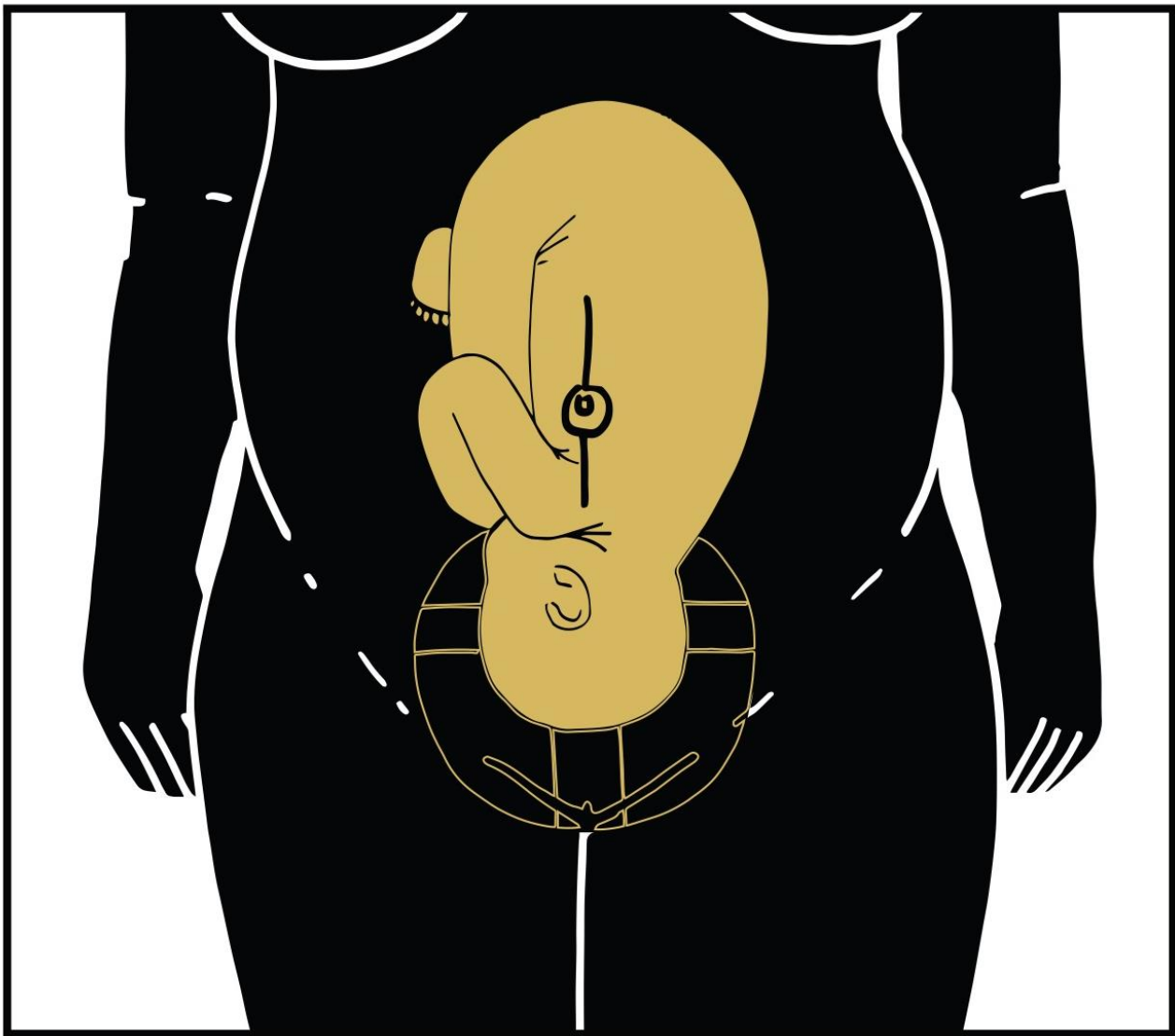
The angels come once more to announce “good news of great joy for all people.” And this news was not heard on the cable TV networks or shared through social media campaigns, but whispered to lowly shepherds, keeping watch outside of town.

Where do you hear God speaking good news of great joy? In what unexpected place, outside the city limits, might God be at work in your life even now?

Shepherd us, O God, beyond all wants, beyond all fears, from death into life. Come with your good news of great joy and whisper words of peace that only you can speak. Amen.



Station Eleven: The Birth of Christ



vulnerability

“My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place,
when I was woven together in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed body.”
Psalm 139:15-16

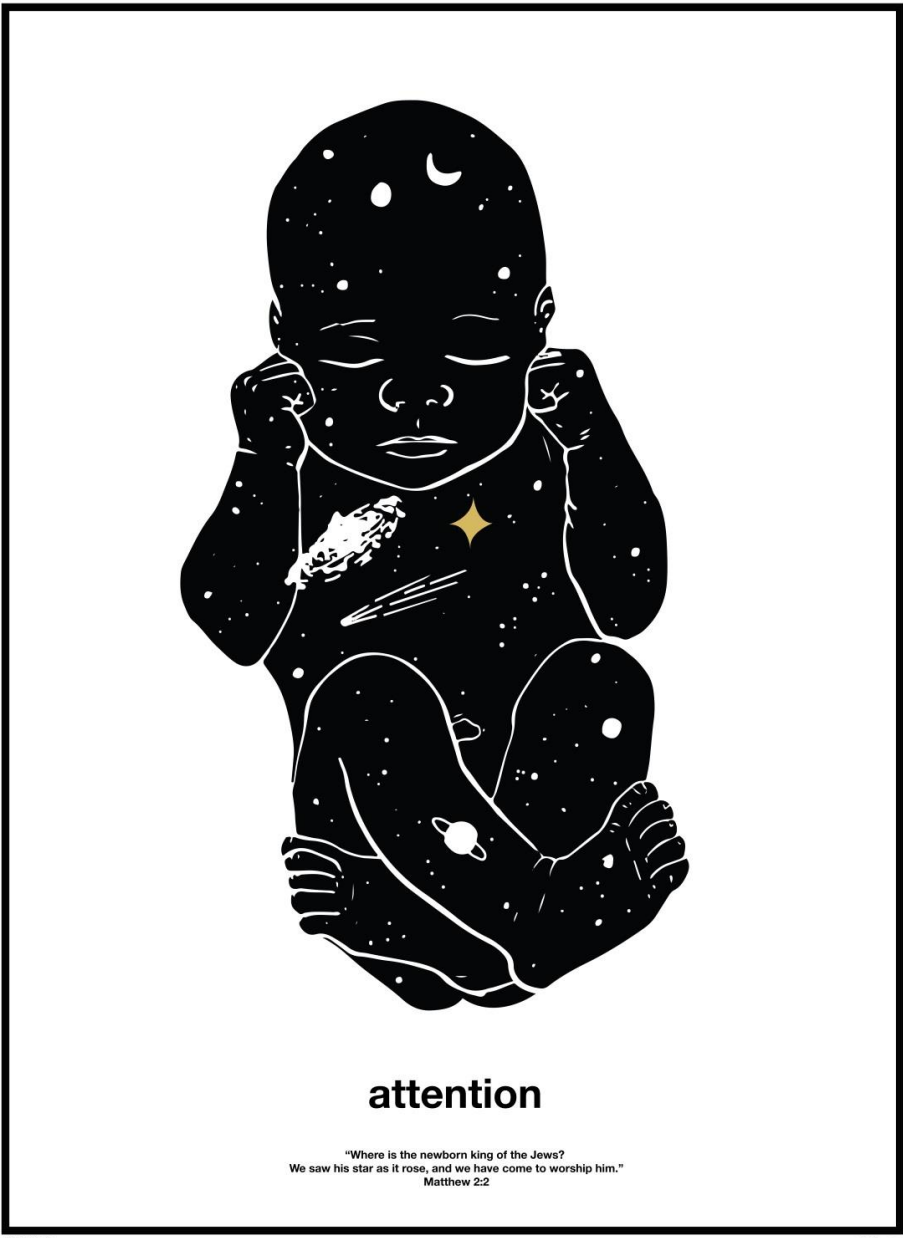
Images: Scott Erickson

While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn - Luke 2:6-7

“Christmas is about the vulnerability of God. The One who is timeless and omnipotent becomes truly vulnerable and subject to all the created natural forces breathed into existence. The One who cannot be contained in the vast expanse of the universe is contained in the womb of a teenager, herself vulnerable - an unmarried teenager open to the censure of her society who might put her to death, risking her life as she travels to Bethlehem in the late stages of her pregnancy and even more risking her life and that of her young child as she flees with Joseph into Egypt.” - Christine Aroney-Sine

There is an ancient tradition which calls Mary the “God-Bearer” (Theotokos, in Greek). *How is it that each of us are also called to be God-bearers?*

God, teach us to bear you so that your Divine and human nature may be birthed throughout all of creation again and again. Amen.



attention

“Where is the newborn king of the Jews?
We saw his star as it rose, and we have come to worship him.”
Matthew 2:2

Station Twelve: Wise Folk



Image: Fritz Eichenberg/The Catholic Worker Movement

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: ‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.’” Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary, his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

- Matthew 2: 1-12

What would you leave everything to follow? What guides your path? In what ways has an encounter with the Divine sent you home by another road?

God of hope, make us attentive to signs of your presence. May we hear and see you in unexpected people and places and may that encounter transform our lives. Let us fall to our knees in joy, offering all that is most precious to your reign of vulnerable love. Amen

Station Thirteen: The Flight to Egypt



Image: La Sagrada Familia – Kelly Latimore Icons

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: ‘A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation. Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more.’

- Matthew: 2:16-18

Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, ‘Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.’ ¹⁴Then Joseph* got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, ¹⁵and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, ‘Out of Egypt I have called my son.

Here this sacred story of God becoming human encounters the brutal world of power politics. Herod (who claimed the same title given to Jesus, ‘King of the Jews’) is infuriated that the wise folk aren’t delivering this child into his hands. And so he launches a campaign to murder every child under two years of age in Bethlehem and the surrounding area. The Church takes so seriously this tragedy that it marks the first feast following Christmas as the ‘Feast of Holy Innocents’ and the Catholic Church regards these infants as the first martyrs.

Where might we see God mysteriously present to those fleeing persecution, those in danger or fleeing politically motivated violence?

Among those who do not look like us or talk like us, O God, you are there. In those who are harmed by our governments and systems of oppression, O God, you are there. Enlarge our hearts to discern your presence everywhere. Amen.

Station Fourteen: God Is With Us!



One of the key themes of this ancient Advent story is of self-giving love. Christians believe that the Divine, that Almighty God, gave of God’s-self by becoming human.

One ancient writer used the word ‘kenosis’ (literally ‘self-emptying’) - which was a deliberate act of such power becoming vulnerable.

With the world, such as it is, it is all too easy for our hearts to grow hard and numb, which makes it so much more difficult to live into this kind of self-emptying; this becoming vulnerable.

We hope that elements of this ancient wisdom story, the story of the Christ, as embodied in this walk, may have helped to chisel at hard places in your heart.

Indeed, may this story be a reminder that God chose to come in dung and straw and in a barn to a peasant family living under Roman occupation - and, indeed, not in palaces or even in ornate houses of worship.

May it be a call for us all into what the spiritual writer Henri Nouwen called “downward mobility”, so that there will be peace and *enough for all*.

Though our buildings are closed for worship, may our hearts be open to this wonder of God-in-community; and you are invited deeper and deeper into this Holy Story.

We hope that this Advent path has been one of hope, peace, joy and love and that this year there is such profound and holy wonder in your celebrations.

