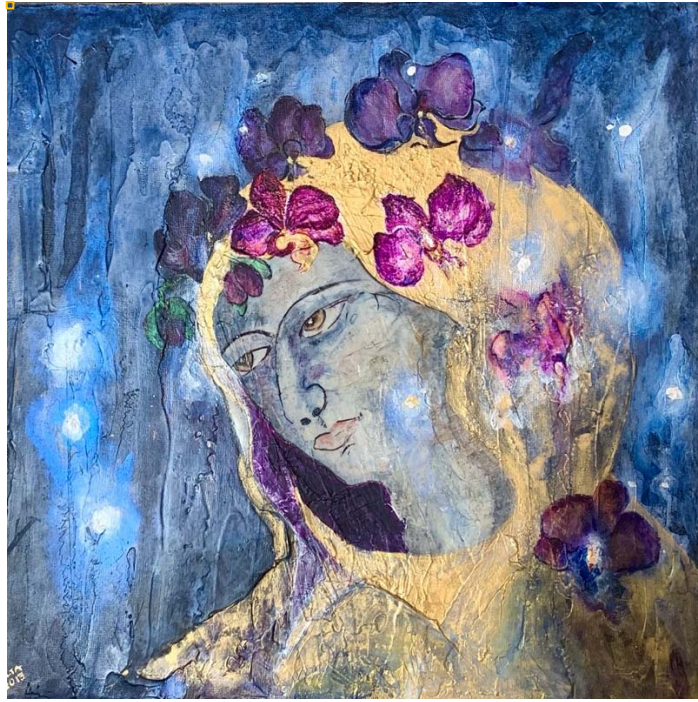


Advent Stations



The Song of Mary (Luke 1:46-55)

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,
my spirit rejoices in God my Savior;
for he has looked with favor on his lowly servant.
From this day all generations will call me blessed:
the Almighty has done great things for me,
and holy is his Name.

He has mercy on those who fear him
in every generation.

He has shown the strength of his arm,
he has scattered the proud in their conceit.
He has cast down the mighty from their thrones,
and has lifted up the lowly.

He has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent away empty.

He has come to the help of his servant Israel,
for he has remembered his promise of mercy,
The promise he made to our fathers,
to Abraham and his children for ever.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit:
as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be for ever. Amen.



I

The Annunciation

Luke 1:26-38

Luke 1:35 – 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.

Why of all the young maidens in the town of Nazareth or in all the world at the time was Mary the one? Why was she chosen by God to be the bearer of God’s son? Was it chance, or was it divine will? And Mary had free will. We never talk about how she could have said no. She had free will. She said yes.

The COVID-19 virus seems very random in terms of who it lands on. And perhaps the struggle is not so much to ask, why me? Why is this upending my life? But rather to ask, who am I? How am I going to respond to this virus? What will my life be like afterwards? And is there any way I can predict that?

Perhaps Mary struggled with similar queries. And if we are to enter into the story, what does it mean for us to say, “Let it be done according to your word?”

Let us pray: Gracious God, in the midst of COVID-19 help us to remember to let it be done to us according to Thy word. Help us to be kind. Help us to be compassionate. Help us to be loving. May we enter into the heart of Mary, be willing, be patient, and wait. Amen.



II

The Visitation

Luke 1:39-56

Luke 1:41-42 – When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped 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.”

The child in Elizabeth’s womb leapt with joy as Mary approached the slopes of Ein Karem to visit her cousin. The child in Elizabeth’s womb understands joy even before the day of his birth. Joy. The child in her womb leaps with joy and mirrors his mother’s joy at seeing a loved one. Joy.

Is joy childlike? Is it something we learn before we even come out of the womb? And if so, where do we find joy in the midst of this pandemic? Is every single second of our waking lives devoted to misery, or are we called to take a smidgen of our time and dedicate it to joy? For each of us, what are our glimmers of hope and glimpses of joy and love in the midst of this pandemic?

Let us pray: God of joy, help us to remember that we are created to take delight in you. Keep us joyful in the midst of life’s challenges, and help us to remember always that joy is the pathway to peace. Amen.



III

John the Baptizer is Born

Luke 1:57-80

Luke 1:76-77 – [Zechariah said] “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.”

Zechariah must be so happy to finally have a son, especially in his old age. We know that because of his doubt, he was struck dumb by God for the duration of Elizabeth’s pregnancy. And at the birth of John, he regains his voice and is able to express his joy. He doubts no more.

There is, of course, a lot to be doubtful about during the COVID-19 pandemic. And many times, we may be speechless; not because God has struck us dumb, but because we are stuck in disbelief. But we continually hold out hope for better days that we know will come. What will our joyful Zechariah moments be when we have a vaccine, when we can hug one another, when we can worship in person, when we no longer have to social distance, when we can take off our masks? What will our Zechariah moments be? What kind of praise will flow out of our mouths and from our hearts? We don’t know, so for now, we wait patiently -- knowing that the day will come in God’s time.

Let us pray: God of praise and God of joyfulness: be with us as a light of hope as we await the day when we are free from this virus and the effects of the pandemic and know and feel your son to be in our midst and in our hearts. And as we await that day, give us patience and assurance so that we may wait calmly for that day when our voices will bring our joy and praise to you. Amen.



IV

Joseph Learns Mary Is with Child

Matthew 1:18-19

Matthew 1:19 – Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.

What was Joseph's initial reaction when he found out that Mary was with child? Was it shock? Was it betrayal? Was it anger? Was it some combination of all these emotions? What would you have felt? And what did Joseph do with those feelings? Did he lash out? Did he go off by himself to be alone and pray? Scripture doesn't really tell us what his initial reaction was, but what we do know is that ultimately, love prevailed.

Countless people in the world today have felt betrayed at the hands of COVID-19 and the reactions of those in power who have placed restrictions upon our lives, whether those restrictions are reasonable or unreasonable. And what are the reactions of those who receive diagnoses of COVID-19? Or what are the reactions of those who've heard that loved ones have been put on ventilators or even worse, succumbed? That kind of news shocks us to our core and strips away the façade, the bravado that we put up as walls of defense to protect ourselves. And no matter what, God is there with us, weeping with us, ministering to us, comforting us, giving us hope.

Let us pray: Gracious God, help us to be aware and know that you are with us no matter what, especially when we receive hard or difficult news. Come into our hearts and help our souls discern what you would have us do – for ourselves, for our loved ones, for our community, for the world, and for the building up of your kingdom. And help us feel the soothing balm of your presence in the midst of challenging, surprising, and difficult times. Amen.



V

Joseph Accepts Mary

Matthew 1:20-25

Matthew 1:20b, 24 - 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. When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife.

We know that Joseph is a kind man and that upon receiving word that Mary was with child, he planned to quietly dismiss her rather than have her face the horrible consequences that would otherwise have been in store for her. And then God comes to him in a dream and Joseph listens to and trusts that message. And what about you and me? Do we dream? Do we listen? Do we listen to what God tells us in our dreams?

They say that we are limited only by our inability to dream. What kind of church do we dream of during this pandemic? Do we listen to naysayers who say that the sky is falling and the church is going to crumble? Or do we tap into our imagination and divine inspiration to come up with new ways of worshiping and keeping our faith communities together? Joseph made a choice to listen to his dreams. Are we courageous enough to do the same?

Let us pray: God of dreams, we thank you for all the ways you speak to us and inspire us, especially our dreams. And we pray that we will have the faith and courage to trust those messages and live into what you have called us to be and do, especially to be kind and compassionate in a way that dashes secular norms, even though we risk marginalization. Give us the courage to do the right thing. Amen.



VI

The Census

Luke 2:1-3

Luke 2:1 – In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered.

In the midst of a census it bears asking, who counts? That can mean who keeps track of the numbers, and it can also mean who is worthy. And why did Mary and Joseph have to travel so far in order to count? In order to matter? Who counts? And who doesn't count or get counted?

Who counts in the midst of this pandemic? Is it only those with financial resources who can get medical attention and who have enough saved to get themselves through these difficult times? And what about the poor? The friendless? The needy? Do they matter? Do they count? While governments and political institutions may say that they don't matter and that they don't count, our gospel says something different, doesn't it? "Whatever you did to the least of these, you did it unto me." That's what Jesus said says. So, who matters? Who counts?

Let us pray: God of the marginalized, help us to see that everyone in your kingdom matters, everyone in your kingdom counts. Help us to seek and serve you in all persons and give us the strength, courage, and desire to reach out to those in the margins and bring them into your loving fold. Amen.



VII

Journey to Bethlehem

Luke 2:4-5

Luke 2:5 – He [Joseph] went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.

Joseph and Mary go on a journey with a beast of burden while Mary is burdened with pregnancy and Joseph is burdened with enforced travel. In retrospect, we realize that they are on a journey and sometimes the journeys we have to take are our crosses to bear. Their journey to Bethlehem was a cross that Mary and Joseph had to bear because their government made demands upon them that they had no choice but to follow. Yet we bear in mind that they made the journey together and they had help not only from their beast of burden, but also from God.

2020 has been a year where we have journeyed through the burdens of COVID-19 and at the same time had the burden of complying with the demands of those in power, hopefully for our own good. And like Joseph and Mary had each other, we have each other and through this journey countless people have reached out to us and we have reached out to others, lending helping hands with kindness, compassion, genuine concern, and love.

Let us pray: God of Mary, be with us as we traverse the trials and tribulations of our lives. And give us grateful hearts for those who help us along the way so that we can continue to reach out to others with kindness, compassion, genuine concern, and love. Amen.



VIII

Search for Sanctuary

Luke 2:6-7

Luke 2:7b – There was no place for them in the inn.

We usually find light at the end of the tunnel at the end of our journeys, but not Mary and Joseph. They arrive in Bethlehem and can't find a place to stay, worried because Mary is about to give birth. It seems as if there is no hope, but they do not give up and they do whatever it takes to find the sanctuary they need, even if it means being with the animals in a cave and using a manger, a food trough, for a cradle.

To what ends will we go to survive this pandemic? And like Mary and Joseph, do we continue to do what we must do with the belief in promise and hope? Maybe it's not so much the task of seeing light at the end of the tunnel, but doing what we can to make light, to create light at the end of the tunnel. And that means that we do things that we would never have thought we would've done before, including doing church on a computer screen rather than in person. If we are committed to creating light, we can't go wrong.

Let us pray: God of sanctuary, help us to find your light in all circumstances in our lives and to stay totally focused on you through our challenges. Help us to understand that we always have sanctuary when you abide in our hearts and help us to live into the call to provide sanctuary for others. Amen.



IX

Birth in a Manger

Luke 2:6-7

Luke 2:7a – And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger.

Today the site of Jesus's birth in Bethlehem is a very busy place. You've got to shove and push past people to get into the grotto and under the altar to kneel down and kiss the spot where he was born. And then you've got to compete with all the people who want to take pictures and flash their cameras and that notion of serenity and peace is completely gone. If you really want to *find* peace and serenity in that place, you can walk about three meters back and you can be all alone and in solitude in the site of the manger. Nobody goes there and it seems a wonderful place to place your burdens right in the cradle so that God can do with your burdens what God will do.

In the midst of COVID-19, there are a lot of things that we have to do. We have to wear masks. We have to social distance. We have to forgo worship in churches. The list goes on and on. But perhaps the birth of Jesus gives us the opportunity to practice surrender, the way his mother surrendered to the forces of nature so that the birth could happen and that the light of the world could be placed in the manger for us. Perhaps COVID-19 and our acts of surrender can be thought of as a gift to God for the betterment of God's world, God's kingdom, and God's people. He gave us the Christ child and now it's our turn to give something back in return, so we surrender.

Let us pray: God of surrender, help us to see that in surrendering, we become full of your presence. Help us through these times of trial to trust in you and place everything into your loving care, knowing that you can do more for us than we could ever do for ourselves. Amen.



X

Shepherds in the Field

Luke 2:8-14

Luke 2:8, 10 – In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.... The angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.”

Working with sheep is not fun. It’s gross, filthy, dirty work. Manure gets stuck to their fur and when you feed them they run toward you and brush that manure on your clothing. They also smell like urine, especially when it soaks into to their fur. On top of that, they are not the brightest animals. You have to work hard to keep track of them and have them do what you want them to do. The shepherds who tend the sheep are marginalized and looked down upon. And in spite of that, who do the angels go to? The king? The wealthy merchants? The priests? No. They go to the lowliest of the low, to people who are covered in the urine and manure of sheep.

From their celestial dwellings, upon whom do the angels descend in the time of COVID-19? The celebrities? The bankers? The politicians? Or do they descend on the poor living in our streets, or the healthcare workers who risk their lives to take care of others? Upon whom do these angels descend from their celestial dwellings? Advent would be an excellent time to meditate on that so that we understand ourselves to whom we are called to deliver and be the good news.

Let us pray: God of the shepherds, give us kind and compassionate hearts so that the Christ light within us feels compelled to be shared with all God’s people, especially those who live in the margins and long desperately for your light in the midst of their lives. Amen.



XI

Shepherds Worship

Luke 2:15-20

Luke 2:16-17 – So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in a manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child.

The shepherds' hearts must have been completely open, and they succumbed not only to relief, but also to joy and if that's available for them who live in the margins, then the line from the song "Joy to the World" comes to life. And what is their response? Do they take what's given them and run? No. They go to the source and give the Christ child *worship*, because his coming into the world gives them worth, teaching them something inconceivable – that they are worthy in the sight of God, even though the world condemns them. And for them in that moment, nothing else matters but to pay homage and give thanks for their worth being shown.

There seems to be a lot of discussion in the world today about who is worthy and who is not. Who is worthy of medical treatment? Who is worthy of government assistance? Who will be worthy of a vaccine? Who will get it first? And will the benchmark for worthiness come down to money and finances and economic realities, or will the benchmark be that each and every human being is a child of God and worthy of dignity and respect? Time will tell.

Let us pray: God of worthiness, we give you thanks for showing us that we are worthy in your sight. And may we take our worthiness and use our worthiness to show others that they are worthy too, no matter who they are: worthy of compassion, kindness, generosity, and of love. Amen.



XII

Herod

Matthew 2:1-12

Matthew 2:3 – When King Herod heard this, he was frightened and all Jerusalem with him.

Herod was a jealous man, and he was a vindictive, cruel man. And jealousy made him do evil things and act from his lower self. And part of the lower self was picking on the vulnerable and victimizing the innocent, because of his need to hold onto power. But then we realize that Herod was acting out of fear and that made him weak. What would it have been like if he had embraced the Christ child rather than trying to destroy him? We shall never know.

Think of the communities that are hardest hit by the medical metaphorical Herod that we call COVID-19 today? It seems to hit very hard upon the poor and those in the margins. And how does the Christ who dwells within our human hearts call us to respond? Does that child call us to forsake the desperate and the poor? Who will be the first to receive the vaccine if and when it comes? The richest? The most powerful? The most famous? What is the world offering to the Christ child in our response to this pandemic?

Let us pray: Loving God, help us to remember the teachings of your Son during his earthly ministry. Help us to remember that he said that the poor were blessed, along with the meek and the merciful. May the world be merciful to the poor in response to this pandemic and may the world see your countenance on their faces and your light in their hearts. Amen.



XIII

The Magi

Matthew 2:1-12

Matthew 2:2 – “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.”

The astrologers took a leap of faith in following a star without knowing what they would find there. There’s a lesson in that for us. And then they presented their gifts to the Christ child – frankincense, gold, and myrrh; gifts that were extravagant, symbolizing the complete and total giving up oneself to God’s son. And on top of that, they risk their own lives to protect that child by defying Herod and not disclosing the whereabouts of the Christ child (that Herod wanted to kill.) Thank God for their example of extravagance and dedication.

We believe the Christ dwells in every human heart, including and especially those who have fallen and succumbed to the COVID-19 virus and those who are affected by the pandemic. And there is a star in our midst calling us to seek and serve the Christ that we see in our brothers and sisters who suffer from the effects of this virus. But we also have to bear in mind that the star that we follow also symbolizes hope for the world and that you and I are called to embody that hope through our thoughts, through our words, and through our deeds. Perhaps Advent is a good time to reflect on how we are doing and to offer it all up to God as our gifts of frankincense, gold, and myrrh.

Let us pray: God of stars, help us to show those in our midst the possibility in the hope not only in the birth of your son but also in the resurrection after his death on the cross. Help us to die the deaths we are called to die, to have the births we are called to birth, and to have the audacity to hope and dream of possibilities in the midst of a hurt, wounded, and suffering world. Amen.



XIV

The Flight to Egypt

Matthew 2:13-18

Matthew 2:13 – Now after they [the wise men] 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 the search for the child, to destroy him.”

Once again, Joseph is warned in a dream, and he follows the message that comes to him by taking his wife and the newborn Christ child to a foreign land, the land of Egypt, where they become refugees and immigrants, living along the river Nile and possibly taking in the pyramids of Giza. And as they leave the Holy Land and cross over into Egypt, perhaps many of those who placed their hope on this child thought he was gone forever and that the salvation that came with him was gone forever as well. What did they give up? Or did they have faith that he would return?

We have watched old ways of life cross over into a new land beyond our sight and then beyond our reach. Do we think they'll ever come back? Or do we believe that they are gone forever? What does the Christ child who dwells in our hearts tell us through our prayers and our meditation? And what do we do with those insights? Will we keep them to ourselves? Or do we share them with others?

Let us pray: God of Advent, scripture teaches us of the first Advent as we wait for the second Advent, the return of Christ for our suffering. But help us to remember the third Advent, the daily arrival of the Christ child in our hearts, holding us forward as people of faith, dreams, and hope. May we be the lights for the world the way your Son is the light of the world. Amen.

The Song of Zechariah (Luke 1:68-79)

Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel;
he has come to his people and set them free.
He has raised up for us a mighty savior,
born of the house of his servant David.
Through his holy prophets he promised of old,
that he would save us from our enemies,
from the hands of all who hate us.
He promised to show mercy to our fathers
and to remember his holy covenant.
This was the oath he swore to our father Abraham,
to set us free from the hands of our enemies,
Free to worship him without fear, holy and righteous in his sight
all the days of our life.
You, my child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High,
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way,
to give his people knowledge of salvation
by the forgiveness of their sins.
In the tender compassion of our God
the dawn from on high shall break upon us,
To shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death,
and to guide our feet into the way of peace.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit:
as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be for ever. Amen.

Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending

Lo! he comes with clouds descending,
once for our salvation slain;
thousand, thousand saints attending
swell the triumph of his train:
Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!
Christ the Lord returns to reign.

Every eye shall now behold him,
robed in dreadful majesty;
those who set at nought and sold him,
pierced, and nailed him to the tree,
deeply wailing, deeply wailing,
deeply wailing,
shall the true Messiah see.

Those dear tokens of his passion
still his dazzling body bears,
cause of endless exultation
to his ransomed worshipers;
with what rapture, with what rapture,
with what rapture,
gaze we on those glorious scars!

Yea, amen! let all adore thee,
high on thine eternal throne;
Savior, take the power and glory;
claim the kingdom for thine own:
Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!
Thou shalt reign, and thou alone.

Text: John Cennick (1718–1755) and Charles
Wesley (1707–1788)