

## Greetings to the Saints of Mission Presbytery!

This has been a heck of a year, hasn't it? But if we look carefully, we can see that God has given us blessings even in such a time as this.

One of those blessings for me, while I was taking a few vacation days, was getting to go to an Adult Ed class at First Presbyterian in Dallas from the comfort of my own office. My friend Susan Cuellar is quite the art aficionado. She's also quite a lay theologian, and regularly leads classes on the intersection of theology and art. Even though I've been around the block in both of those areas myself, I learned something new from Susan (as I almost always do).

Religious iconography across the centuries, just like stained glass windows, have been used as tools for teaching the faith as well as objects of devotion. They tell a story. And just like the more ancient biblical texts, we may find the ancient images unfamiliar in our day. The further away they are from us in time, the more interpretation they need.

Look at this beauty from the second century. As it says, this is a depiction of "Nativity of Our Lord," but there are some elements that we don't recognize from our familiar Christmas pageants and from the way we read the gospel of Luke. Instead of an inn, you see a mountain with a cave. While there are lots of people, there's not an innkeeper around. You can easily see the angels. The shepherds are to the right - the sheep are the giveaway! Interesting that, to the left, the Magi are making an appearance, even as early as the second century. In the bottom right corner, those are midwives who are bathing the new baby (a newborn who can, interestingly, sit up straight!). You can even recognize an early depiction of light over the birthplace: not so much a star, as some kind of heavenly mandala that draws our attention to the newborn baby.



But look at that bottom left corner. That's Joseph, not looking exactly thrilled at the baby's birth. Look at Mary: is she resting, or is she watching Joseph and trying to connect with him? (note that she is not focused on the baby) And who do you think that is, having a conversation with Joseph? Apparently, the earliest traditions held that Joseph was deeply conflicted about the parentage of Jesus, and that he felt more like a guardian than a father. If you look closely, Joseph looks a bit pouty. And the person speaking with him - it's a depiction of Satan. Also in the earliest traditions, Satan was seen as having a role in Joseph's doubt; here, it looks like he's encouraging Joseph in his uncertainty. No wonder Mary is trying to connect with him.

There's so much in this one icon. But wait, there's more!

I've heard so much talk in recent years about whether the official liturgical color for Advent should be purple or blue. So many people are almost offended by the fact that we would use the same color for the joyous birth of Jesus that we use for his passion and death. Let me tell you: I'm in the purple camp, and the study of this icon has only made me moreso. Look again carefully at the baby Jesus above. The iconographer doesn't show the baby in a manger. That little box is a sarcophagus: a tomb. And the white cloth around him is not "swaddling cloth:" that was the traditional way that dead bodies were dressed for burial. The iconographer got it, in my opinion, in a deeper way 1800 years ago than we do now. That sweet infant had quite a future awaiting him. This icon, created for prayer and meditation, makes painfully clear the connection between Jesus' birth and death.

I'm so grateful for my friend Susan sharing her insights and wisdom with us over that less-than-intimate medium we call Zoom. I remain grateful for the color purple (which I commend to you for your Advent decorating!). And I am grateful for the Mystery that welcomes us, compels us, convicts us, and sustains us in the darkest seasons.

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### **Presbyter "Sightings" (as it were)**

**December 10** - Zoom with Corpus Christi region

**December 14** - Zoom with Hill Country region

**December 15** - Staff meeting

**December 16** - Fiscal Oversight meeting, Zoom with Synod EP Forum

**December 17** - Zoom calls with Committee on the Office of General Assembly and the Stewardship Committee

**December 23 - January 3** - Presbytery office closed for Christmas and New Years