



Week 1, December 7, 2023: Light & the Cosmic Church

Index

Introductory Resources

Welcome & Opening Thoughts by Pastor, Fr. Mark O’Hern Page 2

Backgrounders on the prayer forms that have shaped this event:
Taize & *visio divina* Page 3

How do I engage in-person at this prayer service? Page 4

Artwork, part of the Honest Advent collection by Scott Erickson

Used with permission by the artist.

“Annunciation” Page 5

“Anticipation” Page 6

“Beginning” Page 7

“Present” Page 8

“End” Page 9

Each piece is also printed in this booklet for you to pray with at home. The piece includes an adaptation of the reflection from the artist written in a conversational tone from his book “Honest Advent” as well as suggested questions for personal prayerful reflection. The same reflections are available digitally by scanning the QR code, printed in the bottom, left-hand corner of the displayed images.

Music

You may choose to listen to the music tonight or to sing along. Taize music is designed to be singable just from hearing it, but if it is helpful to see the words and music, you may pick up a supplemental music sheet, and then return it for reuse next week.

Introductory Resources

Welcome to Sacred Heart Church! We hope you feel at home here.

Parish Mission Statement: Sacred Heart is a welcoming Catholic community, caring for the needs of the parish and others in the spirit of Jesus.

Opening thoughts

When I was young I thought I wanted to be an artist - that was until I realized that I'm too controlling, too obsessive, too anal retentive to fully get into the chaotic, creative and uninhibited energy of the artists whose artwork I was in awe of. So instead of participating by creating art myself, I've learned to participate vicariously by celebrating the energy working in others, knowing full well that I would resist, distort or squelch those same energies within myself.

I offer this personal confession as advice for this Advent Art experience: practice letting go of judgment or criticism of the images, get lost in a perspective other than your own, and be present to what is happening within you - it might just be the Holy Spirit introducing you to a part of yourself that you've unconsciously avoided or buried. I am proud of Sacred Heart for hosting this event, and thankful to all who join us in this special means of praying and connecting with our cosmic Christ.

Happy Advent!

~Fr. Mark O'Hern
Pastor, Sacred Heart Church



Fr. Mark, assembling the easels with integrated lighting that he built for Advent Art by Dark

What prayer traditions have shaped “Advent Art By Dark”?

Taize Prayer:

Taizé Prayer is evening prayer for all Christian faiths. It is a simple, meditative form of worship, calling us to dwell deeply on Christ's presence around and within us. Mantra songs (like "Jesus, Remember Me"), prayerful silence, and short readings guide the focus of the prayer in a candle-lit environment. Taizé Prayer is named for the ecumenical Christian community formed in Taizé, France, during World War II. Today the Taizé community includes brothers from all Christian denominations, including Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox traditions and is known globally as an intergenerational community.

(Adapted from Creighton.edu)

Visio Divina:

“*Visio divina* invites the viewer into "divine seeing." *Visio divina* shares roots with the ancient practice of *lectio divina*. (*Lectio divina* calls for a slow, careful interaction with scripture through meditation and prayer, allowing a word or phrase to rise in one's consciousness, a holy word to be savored and examined.) Similarly, *visio divina* invites one to encounter the divine through images. A prayerful consideration of and interaction with a photograph in the magazine, icon, piece of art, or other visual representation allows the viewer to experience the divine in a unique & powerful way.”

(From upperroom.org)

How do I pray using *visio divina*?

Let your eyes stay with the very first thing you see in your chosen image. Perhaps you'll notice a small detail...or maybe one vibrant color....I find that slowing my breathing, and continually bringing my attention back when it strays, is helpful. Consider what thoughts come into your mind and what emotions you're feeling. Ask God to speak to you through what you've noticed and then take time to listen. I usually take around five minutes to do this, but there are no hard and fast rules. Then I'll let myself begin to take in the picture as a whole, considering other things that catch my attention. I'll ask myself how the entire image makes me feel, whether it provokes any questions, or if it stirs up memories. Sometimes a verse of Scripture will come to mind...Silence is an important aspect of practicing *Visio Divina*. Again, taking time to be still helps me to be more aware of any message from God and often helps me to think carefully about how I should respond to what God has revealed to me. Try taking notes. Then, pray about what you experienced during your time in front of the art.

(Adapted from Elizabeth Manneh on bustedhalo.org)

How should I engage at this prayer service?

General ways to approach the evening include:

- Prepare yourself by asking God to make you open to offer and receive.
- Anticipate that the timing & pace of the 45-minutes will feel different than liturgy, with alternating periods of music & silence, up to 5-10 minutes each.
- You may choose to sit on a pew, sit on the floor, kneel, or walk around to observe each image fully.
- Allow yourself to settle into the prayer time by using whatever draws you closer to the intimate mystery of God: Listening to or joining in the singing, the silence, the darkness, the candlelight, the art, the reflections from this booklet, and/or the presence of the community alongside you. Don't force or expect yourself to do any or all of these things; engage with the ones you feel drawn to.

Specific options for your “self-guided retreat” this evening include:

1. Pray with the art:

Walk around and spend time looking at different pieces of art. You may sit or stand in front of any piece for as long as you'd like. You may choose to use the printed reflection and reflection questions during your time in contemplation with the image, or follow the instruction guide to *visio divina* on the previous page of this booklet. Each printed and displayed image also has a QR code in the bottom corner, so if you prefer to open the reflection on your phone, you can.

2. Pray with the music:

Allow yourself to sing or listen to each chant. It can be in the foreground of your experience, or the background if your focus is elsewhere.

3. Pray with the lights:

There are unlit tea light candles near each piece of artwork. If you are moved by a particular piece of art, use the provided lighters to light the tea light and leave it on the empty stand next to the artwork. Your light of inspiration will add to the light of others' prayer.

4. Pray with your words

The “Book of Intentions” for Sacred Heart parish is located at the base of the statue of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. You may come forward at any time to write any prayer intentions in this book. Our parish community will pray over the book and all of the intentions in it during each Sunday Mass this Advent season.

You may also choose to jot down notes for yourself from your time this evening directly in this booklet.

Artwork for Week 1: “Light & the Cosmic Church”

All artwork is by Scott Erickson, @scottthepainter and is used with permission.



“Annunciation”

*Have you ever had any kind of mystical experiences?
What happened? And what transformed about you?*

What kind of transformation are you longing for presently?

Revelation is a costly conversation.

I presume that most of us would invite a Divine annunciation. To have some other worldly non-human Being deliver a message from the Almighty sounds amazing! And a story that you would tell over and over again. It would be THE thing that people ask you to tell at gatherings. Would you get bored of it around the 183rd consecutive time telling it at a dinner party?

But the thing about the Revelation received in the annunciation by a heavenly messenger is that all that you had going, and all that you had planned, is over.

Everything will change... most of all you. And maybe that is a welcomed change. Maybe you are reading this and thinking "God I could use a change" ... and maybe you are ready for such a transformation. But the rub of Revelation is it's a transformation that you're not in charge of.

We all have areas that we would love [to be touched by] transformation. Me - a never ending daddy tummy, a proclivity to melancholy, an inability to enjoy the last Star Wars films... But it seems that Revelation doesn't transform the places you want to transform. It transforms all the things you dreamed and planned for - your best case scenario. How your life would be. Who you'd marry. What your wedding would be like. Your first kid's name. How people think about you and your family in the community you live in. How your kids' lives will turn out. Your best laid plans.

Revelation is a hard gift to receive. It's because you must give everything else up to receive it. Like finding a treasure in a field and selling everything you have so you can get that treasure.

But then again... one who is willing to receive the cost of Revelation finds themselves in the deepest of stories. Stories that are so mysterious, Divine, and human... that we still tell them today.



“Attention”

Have you ever had an experience where you felt the outside world was pointing to an inside calling?

What was that like? What happened because of it?

How do you pay attention to God’s presence in your life?

The running theory is that these Magi (more than three!) were a sort of upper-class, wealthy, star-watching celebrity priesthood most likely based in Persia. The Magi would have been familiar with the prophecies of a coming God-as-Man savior from the captivity of Israelite slaves several hundred years earlier in Babylon. So when they saw an unusual star in the west—maybe a supernova, a conjunction of planets, or just a good old-fashioned supernatural manifestation!— they made the long journey to find the king.

Their identity will most likely always be shrouded in mystery, but at least we get (1) a catchy song out of it and (2) a fantastic model of what it means to pay attention. They were paying attention.

To what was around them, yes - the world, the sky, the stars. But they were also paying attention to how those exterior patterns were pointing to the interior patterns inside their hearts and souls. It may not be necessary to figure out the origins of the Magi because the truth of their journey is what is truly transformational for us - that God places patterns inside us that will be revealed in the patterns of the exterior world.

Was the deep desire of the Magi to go on a road trip? I’m not saying the journey wasn’t enjoyable, but remember, they didn’t have AC and cruise control, just desert heat and camel humps.

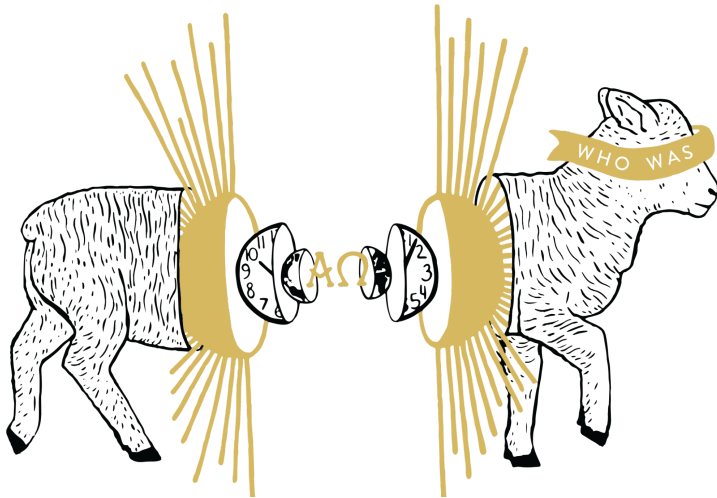
The deep desire of the Magi was to connect with the Creator of the world, and they trusted the Creator to reveal the interior journey of the soul in the exterior world around them.

They wanted to know God, and they were willing to move from observation to participation in the pursuit of knowing. There was no promise that in traveling hundreds of miles in unknown territory they were going to find their way to this prophesied incarnation, but because of their deep desire to know God, they were willing to trust the signs in the sky to go and see.

Is it too fantastical to think that the Giver of your spirit, who is also the Giver of this material world, will use both of those given realities to lead you to a deeper knowing?

May you keep paying attention to what the outside illuminates inside.

“Beginning”



In what ways have you witnessed God’s detailed intention in your life? Have you ever been surprised by it?

What places do you struggle in seeing God’s involvement in the world? Your life? Where are you hoping to find the God “Who Was” in your world now?

I don’t know how God’s sovereignty works. I don’t know what’s free will and what’s predetermined, and how that all plays out. I just know that the Divine is really really really really really really really detailed in Its working with us—and anytime I’m awakened to this intentionality, I’m filled with wonder.

There’s a section in the Scriptures where John the Baptist sees his cousin Jesus walking down the street and says, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”

Kind of an odd comment to make about your relative, and I don’t think it’s alluding to Jesus being rather sheepish at family gatherings. The lamb had been a symbol of sacrificial atonement from the earliest days in the Jewish identity. Abraham, Passover, Isaiah all include references to this. And then John declares that Jesus is this ultimate offering for God’s restoration plan for the world.

For John, God’s plan had moved from lamb to man, from abstract to physical, from cosmic to personal. And that is the invitation for us this Advent too.

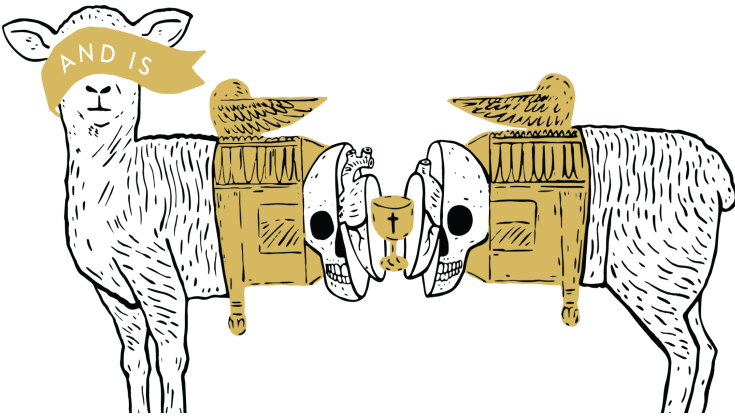
In the book of Revelation, there’s a line that reads, “I am the Alpha and the Omega . . . who is, and who was, and who is to come,” which seems to cover pretty much all the things.

It’s the “who was” part that catches my attention because it means that Who has been around for everything up until now. Who has been paying attention. Who comes into this universe (rays), this time (clock), and this world (earth) as the Lamb who takes away the sins of the world. But Who also comes to us personally, today, as the answer to our deepest question: “Who cares?”

If we’re honest, isn’t that our real question during this Advent season? Not “What was the overarching theological plan of Christmas?” but “Who cares?” Has the Divine been paying attention to what’s going on with us, with us here, with us up until now? I don’t think our deepest question is “Is God real?” I think our real question is “Is God real in all of this?” This life. The one we woke up in.

I think wonder this season can be found when we move from abstract religious ideas to the minutiae of our lives... the lives we woke up in... because it’s in our everyday lives we will discover The Who who cares.

“Present”



Notice your heartbeat. What comes to mind for you when you realize that you're not in charge of your own heart beating?

Breathe in. Breathe out. Paying attention to our breathing is at the heart of any kind of centering prayer and mindfulness practice. Our minds love to live in the future or the past... and to focus on your breathing is a way of anchoring yourself in this very real present. The Hebrew language has a word for breath - **ruach**.

It's the same word for wind and Spirit. It's a multifaceted word alluding to the hidden animating Spirit from whom all life emanates. To participate in this world, with the seen and unseen, is to breathe in and out the air that gives life to our bodies, and with that breathing to become aware of the Spirit who gives life to that deep part of us as well.

Throughout the Scriptures, the place to meet the Divine has taken many forms. From a wrestling match, to a bush, to a mountain, to a trunk, to a temple - but probably the most unexpected form would be in the very lungs of a baby.

One of the most amazing experiences is holding a sleeping baby on your chest. Feeling their little lungs move in and out. . . partaking in the same **ruach** rhythm as you do. You are not in charge of your heartbeat. You are not in charge of your breathing. So much of being alive is not up to your will power.

Imagine being Mary or Joseph . . . holding your newborn baby. Listening to His little breaths. Aware of your own breaths. Three sets of inhales and exhales braided quietly together. The sound of a new family. In. Out. In.Out.

What does it say about a God who is willing to be this present with us? A God who is everywhere at once, yet who has been present with humanity in a box (ark of the covenant), in a body (skull and heart), in a blessing (cup and cross), and in our very breath.

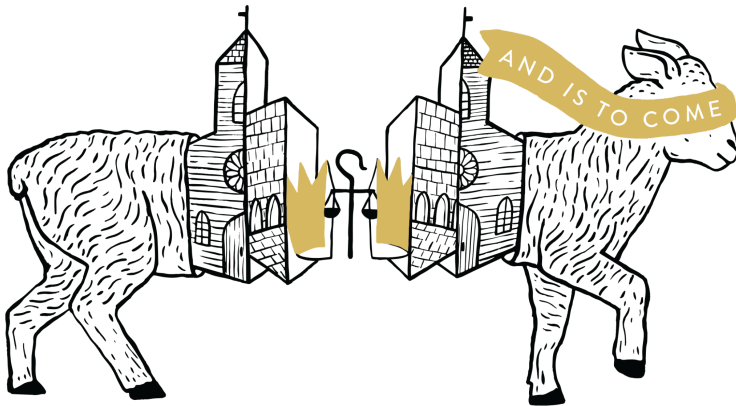
“Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”

Maybe the place we can experience the wonder of this season is in the moments we stop and listen to our very own breathing. To pay attention to the rhythm of **ruach** already inside us . . . and to realize that the Divine with us is not in a building we must journey to, but is in the animating breath of what makes us alive.

“End”

Have you ever thought of the Jesus “who is to come”? What comes to mind when you think about that Jesus?

In what ways have you brushed close to death? What are your thoughts on your mortality and your eventual death? How do you talk about it with God and others?



How are we to understand the Lamb “who is still to come”?

We can obsess over controlling future narratives because it’s a cathartic practice in the face of all the things we have no control over. Look, we have the responsibility & agency to make choices that affect our life now and in the future. Floss, put on sunscreen, and start saving for retirement are the trinity of yesses you should be making.

But none of us are in control of this weekend’s weather forecast, the callback from that great first date, our teenage kids’ choices, that bald spot or forehead crease that’s forming, our job security, and so forth. And none of us are in charge of the inevitable future event that is coming for us all...Yes, I’m talking about the 100% death rate for humans. The vulnerability of dying is deeply frightening. Not just what’s on the other side, but knowing if the powers greater than me that will carry me to the other side are charitable, merciful, full of grace and love?

“Look,” John the Baptist proclaims, “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”

“Who is” . . . fully loving us now.

“Who always was” . . . loving us throughout.

“Who is still to come” . . . restoring us to Love.

Christ’s entrance by way of the human birth canal is the annunciation of this forever restoration. But the reality of our lives is we can be present with *the Lamb who is*, and we can study about the *Lamb who always was*, but our human lives most likely will end before we witness the *Lamb who is still to come*. This is the part of Christ that remains unknown to us. This is the part of Christ we must start a conversation with. How do we start this conversation? By apprenticing our eventual disappearance from this life.

Advent is a season associated with birth . . . but every birth ends with a death. Death is our ultimate loss of control, and we must bring this loss of control to Christ, like a Magi gift. By bringing the gift of your life to Christ now, you can grow in conversation with Him about the gift of your life and your eventual death. Then Christ, the “One who is still to come,” won’t feel like a complete stranger when you become the “you who is still to come” through your eventual disappearance.