



Week 2, December 14, 2023: Light & the Global Church

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Artwork, part of the Honest Advent collection by Scott Erickson

Used with permission by the artist.

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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 2: “Light & the Global Church”

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



“Light”

*Where have you seen God revealed in this physical world?
What happened? How did you know?*

When do you feel like you connect with your soul the most?

The wondrously odd phenomenon of being a parent is witnessing the particular incarnation of each child.

Even with the same parents every kid comes out differently. And the peculiar paradox of parenting is forming the parts you know and the parts you don't know. You intentionally form in the child manners, responsibilities, social ethics, and good taste in music so they don't

grow up to be complete [goofballs] in society.

But then there is this mysterious aspect of parenting, which is to pay attention to how they have uniquely come into the world and help foster their predisposition to its fullest fruition in greater society. This is the hidden part of the child you must pay attention to in parenting. And this is the same part in ourselves that we must bring to our Advent meditation.

Who we are is deeper than where we find ourselves in this moment. And Jesus illuminates that deeper identity.

John writes that the Word (the Christ!) gave life to everything and everyone. And then this Word's life (Jesus) brought light to everyone. Another way to say it is there is a Giver of this life. And then the Giver of this life joins that life, and His life brings light to all life. Don't get lost in all the metaphor! Put simply, the function of light is to help us see more clearly. Jesus' life helps us see our own lives more clearly.

First, His being human affirms our being human. It affirms that we are not supposed to be anywhere else but here. Second, He affirms that we, in some mysterious way, are an amalgamation of something seen and unseen. Our invitation to Advent starts here, now - and thank God, because being here now feels really complicated. And hard. And sad at times. With a lot of loss.

But what gives me hope in this Advent season is the reminder that everything can be taken away except that hidden part of me. Whether I lose my savings, my house, my title, or my very livelihood, what is untakeable is the part of me that Jesus illuminates. The deeper self that was woven into this world but is anchored in a much larger hidden world. In the gift of my life is a doorway to a much larger reality. And Jesus is the Light that shows me the way.



“Visible”

*Who in your life really sees the true you?
How does that make you feel?*

*How does it feel to think about God seeing your true self,
just as you are now?*

Incarnation is the process of becoming seen.

To be seen is to allow yourself to be known.

To be known is to risk being loved . . . or not.

I remember my friend Taylor saying to me one time, “I don’t want God to love me. I just want God to tell me what to do. Because if I let God love me, He will love me the way I am. And if I let God love me the way I am, I will have to see the way I am. And I don’t want to see the way I am. So I’d rather God just tell me what to do.”

Why is being seen so hard?

It’s hard because when you decide to live into your true self - your strengths and weaknesses, your light and shadow, your superpowers and your kryptonites - you are revealing yourself to the world, and you can now be touched. Loved, rejected, embraced, ignored . . . and all of the other complicated interactions that come with human relationships.

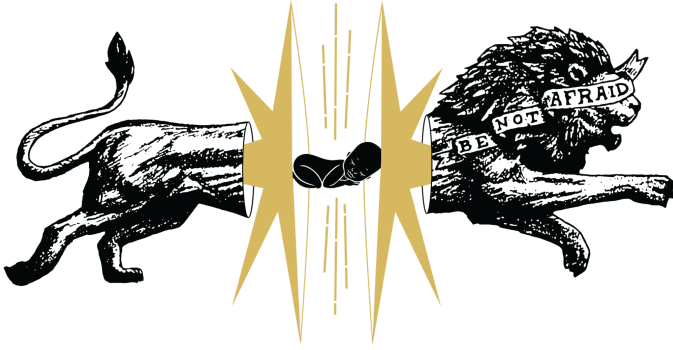
One of the invitations of Advent is the contemplation of God being seen, which is to say....incarnation.

You might think God in flesh would be the most all- encompassing, attractive Being there ever was with no risk of rejection, but the answer to that assumption is a big biblical nope!

What we see in the chronicles about Jesus’ life is that being seen was complicated for Him too. His incarnation was not void of hardship and heartbreak.

But what we see in Jesus is a spirituality that is grounded in the never-ending spring of LOVE that was the source of everything He did. It was the source that enabled Him to forgive the haters. It was the source that empowered Him to lay down His own life for those He loved . . . which is humanity.

“Joy”



What fears do you carry with you most days?

What if those fears were the very place where God wanted to enter your life?

What would it take for you to release your fears?

“Be Not Afraid” could be a legitimate substitution for “Merry Christmas.” A message from the Divine must start with “Be not afraid” because it is shattering the security you’ve found in limited conclusions, like:

“Existence is a curse to endure. Our bodies are just flawed meatsuits full of disappointment. Divine encounters only happen with worthy saints on mountaintops or in sacred places. The Almighty can’t wait to be wrathful toward all the sinful malarkey taking place on this earth. We deserve to be left out because of our glaring inability to be faithful.”

And yet the messengers who “stand in the presence of God” are astonished by our limited conclusions, for their message is a proclamation of good news, such as:

- *That existence, in all its seeming absurdity, is not a curse to endure but the very gift that the Giver of existence wants you to receive and participate in.*
- *That it’s good to be in your body, for all kinds of miracles happen through it.*
- *That divine encounters happen in the humblest of places, like at your job, in your kitchen, in the headspace of making hard decisions.*
- *That the Almighty didn’t enter the world as a judgmental titan set on condemning it but as a loving participant whose ultimate work of healing came through His ultimate loving participation.*
- *That Love is intentionally inclusive in Its restoration invitation of all things and isn’t worried about not accomplishing what It has set out to do.*

Maybe the place we experience God-with-Us today is in the very fears we have about our own lives, our own world, our own future. The fears that keep us from believing that anything can be different. The fears that make the silence of the Divine feel like centuries have passed. The fears that we are here all on our own. The fears we will be holding at our upcoming angelic visit.

Today, let our fears be the starting place of divine connection, because if a messenger from heaven were to show up with an announcement of good tidings of great joy, a message that will change everything, historically that proclamation would begin with the greeting “Be Not Afraid” - or, the way we say it today,

“Merry Christmas.”



“Virgin”

In what ways have you experienced a transformation that wasn't up to you?

What paradoxes have you come across in life? How have you navigated those?

What impossibilities are you wanting the Divine to turn into possibilities?

Virgin birth. Honestly . . . it feels a bit beyond my pay grade to write about it.

I mean, I attended biology class and I am the father of three children, so I can explain the steps two humans take to make a baby. But how that happened between the finite and the Infinite, I don't know.

Throughout our lives, we will encounter paradox - two seemingly contradictory truths existing in the same space and time. And at the heart of the Christ story is a paradox: Jesus - fully God and fully human - where the finite and Infinite wove together salvation in the belly of a young woman.

This part of the Christmas tradition will remain a mystery and may never be fully explained. And that's okay . . . because the function of a paradox is not to solve the opposing truths, but to be transformed by living in the middle mystery of them. So here's the mystery for us today: Transformation is a Virgin Birth

A paradox. You have a choice in transformation, and yet there are other parts of your transformation that you're not in charge of. It's less about your mustering up the strength to accomplish something and more about your being open to the transformation that God wants to do in you. The Divine inception begins quietly and deeply within you.

Surely you have experienced this unanticipated change. Like a nagging knowing that it's time to move on from your comfortable situation. Or a deep desire to try that thing that scares you the most. Or that unexpected longing for prayer. Or the revelatory conclusion that the best way forward is to be kinder to your weaknesses. Or a persistent invitation to forgive someone you feel hurt by.

This is the place where the Divine begins new life. And newness of life is what we all desire.

“For nothing will be impossible with God” was the answer Mary received from the messenger and I believe we get the same answer for our own situations. Most of us will not have an angel announce those words to us. But I do think all of us can whisper the statement that catalyzes deep transformation and restoration:

“Let it be to me according to your word.” May all your impossibilities be the very starting point for divine possibility.

“Given”



Do you believe that God loves you for who you are, just as you are, now? What would it take to believe this?

Is it harder to believe in the Grace that God offers you, or the Truth that God offers you? Can you challenge yourself to hold both together?

John said that he and his friends saw the Glory of the unseen YHWH and it was full of Grace and Truth.

TRUTH- Defined as “the actual state of the matter; seeing things for the way they are.” It’s interesting that those who spent time with Jesus consistently described Him as being “full of truth.” Having a clear perspective.

Truth is seeing the real.

GRACE - What I’ve come to understand is that grace is the antidote to the ailment of shame. Shame believes one lacks what it takes to be loved and must strive to earn Love. It’s just an endless jog on the janky treadmill of striving. To see Jesus as full of grace means there wasn’t any perfection checklist that was met to deserve His presence. His arrival stands against the idea that if you do it right, you get access to His presence. His presence was freely given and never withheld.

Grace is presence not withheld.

My friend Tom told me he stopped being a Christian because it stopped making sense. The idea of being created by a God who is wrathful toward you the moment you emerge from the womb - and always will be, unless you say a magic sentence of belief to that God - started to sound like crazy talk to him. He knew he had his faults, but if the starting place to a relationship with his Creator was not being loved because he wasn’t created perfect enough by that Creator, he couldn’t do it. Everything was already stacked against him.

Religion stops working for a lot of people because of their belief that who they really are... the real... is rejected by the Giver. Why would the Giver reject what the Giver gave?

Incarnation proclaims that the unseen Giver comes to us full of grace and truth - comes seeing us in all our real, right now, just as we are. Grace and truth releases us from the janky treadmill of religious meritocracy and invites us to a long walk on the beach as ones who love each other. (subtle Footprints poster reference)

This is why the kingdom of heaven is built on the foundation of forgiveness. For Given-Ness - presence not withheld in the midst of seeing the real. “FOR unto us a child is born . . . 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.