



Week 3, December 21, 2023: Light & the Mother 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 3: “Light & the Mother Church”

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



“Motherhood”

What resonates most with you about this image?

In what ways do you relate to the motherhood of Eve? Of Mary? How does it feel to search for those similarities?

Advent is about Christ coming in the midst of human living. This image is based off a drawing by Sister Grace Remington. A few years ago I did a cover of it (with her permission) as a live painting I performed at a Christmas Eves service. There are so many wonderful theological ideas being displayed in this image. But what I love most about it is the look that Mary and Eve have for each other.

It's like they were at some cosmic party where they didn't know each other at first, but when they get introduced to each other they find out they are deeply connected on so many levels. They also have a billion mutual friends on Facebook.

Eve is experiencing hope and grace from brokenness that she never thought she'd see an end to. And yet her face could also be of a knowing mom bestowing wisdom and compassion on a new mom... as if saying “...parenting is one of the greatest and hardest adventures of a lifetime. You'll love them, and want to have them forever... but you may see one of them die before their time, and that's the absolute worst.”

In my opinion, the little that has been written about Eve has been used against her by male chauvinists. In the flannel board story of her life, she gets two paper cutouts - biting an apple and being cursed as the first mom to go through painful childbirth. That's it! We don't talk about how hard it must have been to do something for the first time. No guides. No mentors. No mommy blogs with strategies for maintaining sanity. It's easy to knock down the forerunners of human living who made mistakes; it's harder to see through the one-dimensional religious narratives that every mom has the unbelievable task of raising kids the best she can.

Mary takes the hand of Eve and places it on her belly to let her feel the manifestation of restoring Hope growing in her womb. And yet it's also of the move of sobering solidarity - accepting the entrance into the great cloud of witnesses of brokenhearted mothers who've lost their kids too early. I can never fully understand the deep connections and conversations in the worldwide society of mothers. But this art opens a small window into what that conversation might be like. That Immanuel means “God with us”... and that this divine Gift comes to us through one of us, into the womb of a blessed and humble teenage woman, and honors and dignifies the sacrificial and (w)hol(l)y involved life of being a mom.

“Grow”



What assumptions did you make about God, faith, or your life that you found to be (thankfully!) untrue?

What assumptions do you still make about God, faith, or your life? Are they comforting or troubling?

It's assumed that Mary rode on a donkey, but the Bible doesn't say she did. It's assumed there was an innkeeper, but it doesn't mention one anywhere. It's assumed there were three Magi, but it doesn't give a number of those who showed up. It's assumed there was a star overhead when Jesus was born, but it doesn't say that either. It's assumed that Jesus was born in a stable, but all it says is that He was laid in a manger - and that could've been any number of places.

Christmas comes with many assumptions—some helpful, some not so much.

Spirituality also comes with many assumptions, and the ones that fail us are the ones we make about what it's supposed to look like, who is worthy for it to happen to, and what kind of outcome it's supposed to have for us.

Assumptions like . . .

You should be more than you are now to be pleasing to God.

Your weaknesses are in the way of God's plan for your life.

Your lack of religious excitement disqualifies you from divine participation.

You're probably not doing it right.

Other spiritual people have something you don't have.

Our assumptions hinder our spiritual journey in all kinds of ways, and the antidote to assumption is surprise. The surprise of Christ's incarnation is that it happened in Mary's day as it is happening every day in your lack of resources, your overcrowded lodging, your unlit night sky, your humble surroundings.

It's a surprise that life can come through barren places.

It's a surprise that meek nobodies partake in divine plans.

It's a surprise that messengers are sent all along the hidden journey of life to let you know you are not alone.

It's a surprise that you will be given everything you need to accomplish what you've been asked to do.

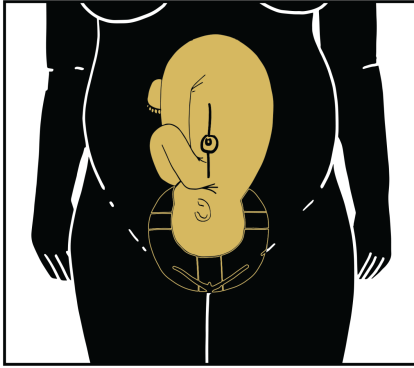
It's a surprise that nothing can separate you from the love of God.

Nothing can separate you from love. Your assumptions believe there must be something that can . . .

But surprise! Nothing can.

May you thank God with joyful surprise at how much you have assumed incorrectly.

“Vulnerability”



Have you ever thought of Almighty God as vulnerable?

How have you experienced the Divine in human vulnerability?

Any real connection involves vulnerability.

Whether in marriage or friendship - even in our work. To attempt to create anything in this world is to take a risk. All creating is an expression of vulnerability. Even in our biology.

The ancient psalmist alludes to an interior process of knitting - a delicate intertwining of individual strands over and over again until eventually an elaborate and beautiful tapestry comes to fruition. Presently we have been able to bear witness to this in-utero knitting through published photographs, but throughout the history of humanity, that knitting process remained an interior secret.

This interior secret is a vulnerable relationship between two individuals. The forming child trusts the mother to provide all it needs so it can be knit together to completion. The mother offers herself to the forming child, trusting it will take what it needs to mature into completion while refraining from harming her. Both parties grow together connected at their vulnerabilities. Both parties take the risk of creating something new together.

If you don't know anyone who has had a miscarriage, just wait. You will. And if you don't know of at least one person who has lost their life trying to bring another life into this world, just wait. You will. The risks are all too painfully real.

What does it say about a God who's willing to be this vulnerable with us?

Who's willing to come into this world through the statistical risk of childbearing?

Who's willing to be attached by a placenta for nourishment and life to Its own creation?

Who's willing to wait and grow in the human womb?

Who's willing to be fearfully and wonderfully made, just like we are?

Any real connection involves vulnerability because it takes the act of making oneself open to truly be known. God came to us floating in embryonic fluid. Embedded in the uterine wall of a Middle Eastern teenage woman It trusted to care for Its fragile knitting process.

What it says about a God who's willing to be this vulnerable is that God is willing to open Itself up to deeply connect with us. The real question is, are we willing to do the same?

“With”



Would you say your relationship with God has been more rooted in ideology (ideas) or incarnation (the things right in front of you)? What's the next horizon for that relationship?

Have you ever witnessed a birth? Recall what that moment meant to you, and how it impacted you.

Incarnation is the pathway from our head to our heart.

I remember when my daughter Elsa came out of her mama. I was standing next to my mama-wife when it happened. She pushed her out, and then we looked at each other, and instantly burst into tears. I remember the action being involuntary... as if I had witnessed something that could only be expressed in the breaking of my socially conformed demeanor. It was one of the most

wonderful experiences I've had in my life.

To finally see what you have hoped for so long is a breaking experience. It's a healing breaking. Like cracking your back. Or like hearing a song lyric that makes us tear up. Or we witness a sappy commercial that somehow tickles our heart. We get emotional because we are witnessing something TRUE.

Not TRUE as an ideological list that we used to draw lines and make teams. But something TRUE that unites us. A moment of solidarity. A connective happening that awakens us to see that we are not alone. Like when a group of strangers watches the sunset together. Or somebody shares a tasty dish with someone else and says "you must try this! It's so good!" Or when a newborn baby enters the room and everybody turns and looks because they know they are witnessing that split second magic when the Unknown incarnated into the Known.

I wonder if what broke in the room with Mary and Joseph was the wall between ideology and incarnation? That the idea of God with Us moved just from a belief into a very actual little breathing human that spoke more Truth than any sacred text could.

Isn't that what we're hoping for this Advent? The breaking of the wall between ideology and incarnation? From words to real? Maybe it's our presence that needs to be broken open this Advent.

Instead of adding more of our words to the centuries of expectations of what this is all supposed to do and be, maybe we need to reach out and hold what needs to be restored in our hands? Like people, or broken hearts, or systems, or perspectives, or beliefs, or policies, or our dashed hopes for a brighter tomorrow...

This is the move from words to presence that awakens us to God's presence that's already here.

“Participate”



Where have you experienced needing a connection with other people?

*Do you believe that Jesus needs you?
What would it mean for your life if He does?*

It's easy to think of Jesus as not needing anyone, just out on a mission to save everyone. You know, clear the temples, turn kingdoms upside down, take on the religiously corrupt. Saviors don't need relationships! Aren't saviors solo acts?

But Jesus called His disciples friends. He stayed at friends' houses. He had a mom....He was fully human.

Have you, being fully human, ever lived a life separate from relationships?

Did you not need someone to change your diapers as a baby? Did you not take a steady hand when learning how to walk? Did you not say, “Mama, look,” when finishing your fourteenth Crayola masterpiece of the day? Did you not confide a secret to your trusted bestie? Did you not giggle until it hurt with someone at an inappropriate time? Did you not let them buy you dinner when you were low on funds? Did you not feel healed by a hug from someone who loved you?

Just like every human ever, at some moment Jesus sought a friend or a mom or a little sister for humor, compassion, nourishment, relatability, enjoyment. For belly laughs, hugs, inside jokes, maybe even high fives. That's the way being fully human works.

Did He not receive nourishment as a baby? Did He not live in a house that His parents provided? Did He not wear clothes that others had meticulously woven? Did He not learn to read from attentive teachers? Did He not learn a trade so He could make a living? Did He not join His voice to the chorus of singing? Did He not know the joy of having friends?

Jesus' incarnation is participating in the same dynamics we all participate in . . .

Which is no one who is fully human is an island... and WE NEED EACH OTHER TO BE FULLY HUMAN.

It's easy to think of us as needing Jesus, but it's pretty scandalous to think that Jesus would need us...

Why is that again?