

Come, Lord Jesus, Come

Visual Devotions for Advent



IMAGE SELECTION AND COMMENTARY BY

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“Come, Lord Jesus, Come”

Coming as Word
Coming as Mary’s “Yes” to Gabriel
Coming as forced journey to Bethlehem
Coming as peace on earth
proclaimed by hymning angels singing
“Glory to God in the highest”

Come, Lord Jesus, come

Coming as nothing
Coming as sperm joins egg
Coming as growth
Coming as fetus
Coming as waters break
Coming down the birth canal
head covered with blood
Coming into light and air
Coming into vulnerability
Coming into poverty
A cold coming

Come, Lord Jesus, come

Coming as flesh
Coming in humility
Coming as servant
Coming in love
Coming through birth
Coming into death
Coming as child

Come, Lord Jesus, come

INTRODUCTION

Advent takes us back and brings us forward. In preparing us to celebrate Christ's first coming, it places us alongside the ancient prophets, who awaited with aching intensity the fulfilled promise of a messiah, and Joseph and Mary, whose pregnancy made the expectation all the more palpable; it also strengthens our longing for Christ's second coming, when he will return to fully and finally establish his kingdom on earth.

Threaded throughout this devotional booklet is an advent text written by Jonathan Evens, an Anglican priest who encourages the commissioning and placing of contemporary Christian art in churches through his organization *commission4mission*. Each line focuses on one aspect of Christ's coming. To promote deeper reflection on all these aspects, I have selected twenty-four art images to lead the way in stoking our imaginations and to provide entry points into prayer. I have taken special care to present art from around the world and, where possible, by modern or contemporary artists so that we will be stretched beyond the familiar imagery of the season. Before you read the commentary that follows, be sure to first spend time looking at the image—I recommend at least one minute—letting it take your heart or mind where it will.

You are invited to consider what it meant for Jesus to be born *of woman*—coming as seed and fetus and birthed son; the poverty Jesus shared with children around the world; culturally specific bodies of Christ, like a dancing body and a yogic body; how we are called to bear God into the world today; and more. I encourage you to do this in community, discussing these images and “Coming as” statements with fellow believers, including any insights or resistance that surface as you work with them.

May God bless you this Advent season as you ponder the amazing truth of the Incarnation.

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Come, Lord Jesus, come



Eduardo Kingman (Ecuadorian, 1913–1997): *Prayer*, 1956; *Untitled*, 1965; *Procession*, 1968. Oil on canvas.

One of Ecuador’s most famous artists, Eduardo Kingman was committed to exposing the poverty and toil of indigenous populations in his native country and abroad. He abandoned picturesque painting in favor of social realism, portraying working men and women in postures of exhaustion, waiting, grief, or petition. Like his colleague Oswaldo Guayasamín, he often used hands as the locus of emotional expression, emphasizing them through anatomical deformation. They’re always rough and gnarled.

The three images here show hands clasped in prayer, cradling an alms bowl, clenching a candlestick—and so offer fitting illustrations to the refrain “Come, Lord Jesus, come.” In our desire to see the glory of Christ manifest, we call out, we beg, we keep vigil.

A traditional Advent scripture reading is the parable of the ten virgins from Matthew 25:1–13, which Jesus used to teach his disciples to be ready for his second coming:

“Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a cry, ‘Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ But the wise answered, saying, ‘Since there will not be enough for us and for you, go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves.’ And while they were going to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast, and the door was shut. Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to

us.’ But he answered, ‘Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.’ Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”

The blue-cloaked woman of Kingman’s *Procession* could be read as one of the wise virgins of this parable, who stands in midnight darkness with a large supply of candles in stock, waiting for the groom to return. When he does, she will process to his house for the commencement of a magnificent wedding feast.

The other two Kingman figures also reinforce our Advent work: With open mouths we cry “O” and beseech God’s presence. With empty bowls we beg for the fullness only he can bring. In one the woman’s eyes are upcast, searching out the skies; in the other, downcast, expressing humility, or maybe a tiredness wrought by repeated asking.

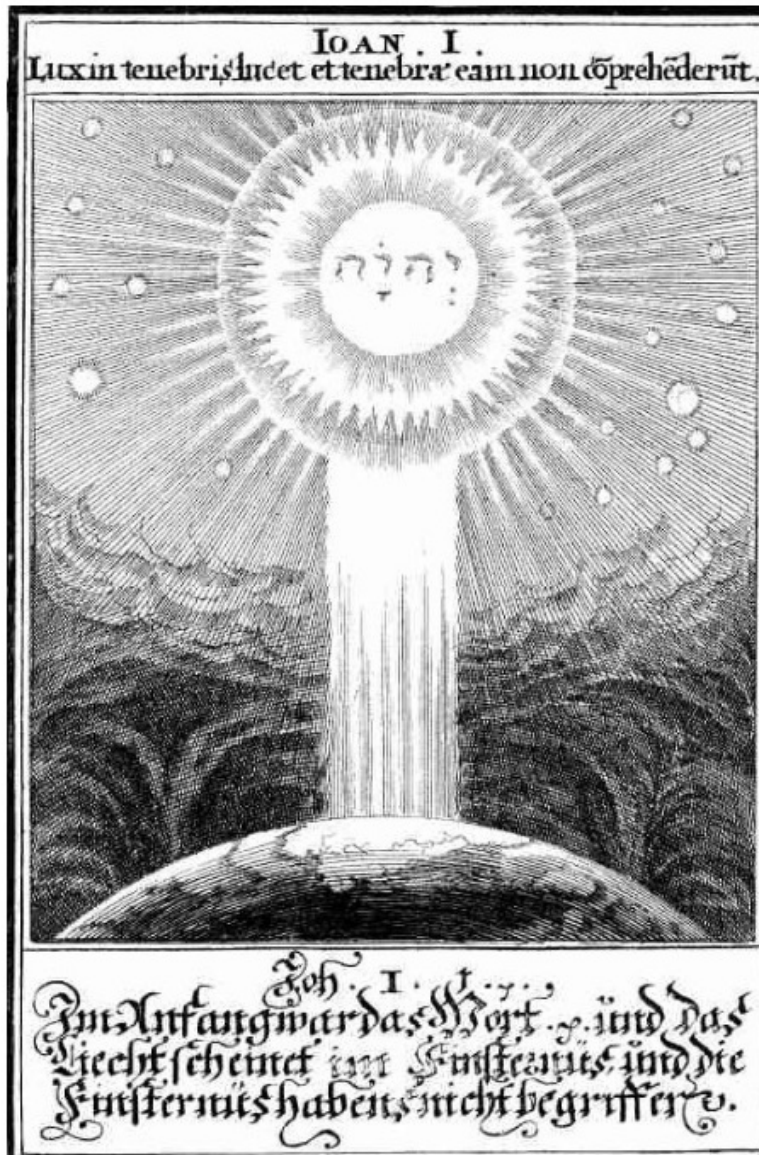
In his poem “Christ’s Nativity,” Henry Vaughan highlights our spiritual neediness and summons Christ, in his own words, into hearts and lives:

I would I had in my best part
Fit rooms for thee! or that my heart
Were so clean as
Thy manger was!
But I am all filth, and obscene;
Yet, if thou wilt, thou canst make clean.

Sweet Jesu! will then. Let no more
This leper haunt and soil thy door!
Cure him, ease him,
O release him!
And let once more, by mystic birth,
The Lord of life be born in earth.

Despite the grimness of things, we must persist in our “O come, Lord Jesus, come.” We must burn bright our lamps of hopefulness, hold out our empty bowls, and pray that Christ indwells us and this whole earth.

Coming as Word



Christoph Weigel (German, 1654–1725), *Word*, 1695. Engraving from *Biblia ectypa: Bildnussen auss Heiliger Schrift Alt und Neuen Testaments*. Image courtesy of the Digital Image Archive, Pitts Theology Library, Candler School of Theology, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia, USA. Public Domain.

One of the most famous prologues in literary history and the foundation for the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation, John 1:1–18 describes the eternal Word of God taking on flesh and entering human history. The word *Word*, with a capital *W*, is the most common English translation of the loaded Greek term *Logos*, used in most schools of Greek philosophy to designate the underlying principle of the universe, one that is rational, intelligent, and vivifying; other translations include “Mind,” “Power,” “Cause,” “Act,” “Ground,” “Reason,” “Structure,” or “Universal Bond.” Philosophers had been reinterpreting the concept for centuries, but John the Evangelist was the first to link it to the person of Christ, and this new meaning has lived on in the church ever since.

The Incarnation, as poeticized by John, is notoriously difficult to illustrate. Most artists who choose to reference it draw from Luke’s Gospel instead—his story of Gabriel’s announcement to Mary that she will conceive a son, or of said son’s birth in a manger. But Christoph Weigel, in one of the 839 copperplate engravings he made for a seventeenth-century pictorial Bible, took on John’s more philosophical, less narrative presentation of the doctrine. In Weigel’s interpretation, the name YHWH (read from right to left in the image, as in Hebrew: *yod, heh, vav, heh*) is orbed by a blast of light and showers down to earth, an eruption of hope and joy. Heretofore invisible and unapproachable, Israel’s covenant God, through the Incarnation, reveals himself as man and Son, the second person of the Trinity. Still YHWH but now brought low, to be seen and touched and engaged face-to-face. God’s Word enfleshed. This is the big bang of the new creation.

“In the beginning was the Word,” reads the German inscription at the top, taken from John 1:1. Below, “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not comprehended it” (John 1:5).

In his poem “Margaret Clitheroe,” Gerard Manley Hopkins draws on John’s prologue in his classification of the Trinity as “Utterer, Utterèd, Uttering”: the Father spoke, begetting Jesus—his definitive word and will, embodied—and when Jesus was taken back up to heaven, the Holy Spirit was given in his place to continue speaking God’s word to us. Weigel imagines Hopkins’s “Utterèd” as a glory-stream that cuts through dark space and illuminates a dark earth.

Such expressions as “My word is my bond” and “You have my word” also convey something of the meaning of *Logos*. One’s word is a promise, an assurance. Likewise, God’s Word—Jesus Christ—is God’s promise that the good news will one day be finally accomplished, when Jesus comes again in unveiled glory. Advent is a season of waiting for this Word to be spoken.

Coming as Mary's "Yes" to Gabriel



Fr. Marko Ivan Rupnik (Slovenian, 1954–), *The Annunciation*, 2009. Mosaic, Church of St. Padre Pio of Pietrelcina, San Giovanni Rotondo, Apulia, Italy.

When Gabriel came to Mary to tell her she would bear a son, she was at first troubled, afraid, guarded. How was it possible that she, being a virgin, could become pregnant? But with the angel's words of reassurance and promise, she yielded to the divine plan, responding with "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." This is known as Mary's *fiat* (Latin for "let it be")—her consent to become the mother of God—and it's celebrated by the church as the moment at which God became flesh, setting salvation in motion.

Theologians have debated the nature of Mary's fiat—whether she really had a choice in the matter. After all, Gabriel comes speaking in terms of what *will* happen, without mentioning any conditions. However, most believe in the criticality of Mary's "yes," of her willing bodily and spiritual surrender. Between the angel's "Hail" and Mary's "Let it be" was a moment of supreme tension, one that Luci Shaw explores in her poem "The Annunciatory Angel":

. We worry that she might faint.
Weep. Turn away, perplexed and fearful
about opening herself. Refuse to let the wind
fill her, to buffet its nine-month seed into her earth.
She is so small and intact. Turmoil will wrench her.

She might say no.

That the Incarnation was predicated on the willingness of the teenage Mary to be used by God is something visual artists have picked up on too. They typically convey Mary's attitude of submission through posture and gesture, depicting her with her head bowed and her hands open or crossed in prayer.

In his visualization of the Annunciation from the Church of St. Padre Pio in Italy, mosaicist Marko Rupnik shows Mary holding a skein of scarlet thread. This traditional attribute is derived from the Protoevangelium of James, a second-century apocryphal Gospel that says Mary, a consecrated temple virgin from ages three to fourteen, was chosen to weave the scarlet portions of the temple veil. Here she fingers the loose end, perhaps pondering what it will mean for her to be from henceforth interlaced with God in such an intimate way, to be woven so prominently into his story.

Rupnik innovates on the subject by having Gabriel cover Mary with a mantle, a sign of God's favor and a summons to office (see, for example, 1 Kings 19:19). More than a prophetess, she is here declared *Theotokos*, "Mother of God"—a role she accepts, taking upon herself its heaviness but also its glory and grace.

Like Mary, we too are called, albeit in a less literal way, to bear Christ within us. God doesn't force us to accept this call, but he invites us to. He wants to "cast out our sin and enter in," as the carol has it, but he won't without our "yes."

The excerpt from "The Annunciatory Angel" by Luci Shaw is reprinted from *Accompanied by Angels: Poems of the Incarnation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2006) under the publisher's Fair Use policy.

Coming as forced journey to Bethlehem



Pranas Domšaitis (Lithuanian/South African, 1880–1965), *Untitled*. Oil on board. Lithuanian Museum of Art, Lemont, Illinois, USA. Photo: R. Vaitkus. Used by permission of the museum.

Peace? and to all the world? sure, One
And He the Prince of Peace hath none.
He travels to be born, and then
Is born to travel more again.
Poor Galilee! thou can'st not be
The place for his Nativity.
His restless mother's called away,
And not delivered till she pay.

—Henry Vaughan, from “The Nativity”

In Mary's third trimester she and Joseph were forced by an imperial decree to go to Bethlehem to register for the Roman census (Luke 2:1–5). A distance of about ninety miles, this journey probably would have taken a week, given Mary's condition—south along the flatlands of the Jordan River, then west over the hills surrounding Jerusalem, and on into the city of David. Walking or riding through cold desert, while pregnant, to fulfill a bureaucratic requirement is not anyone's idea of fun. It's inconvenient and uncomfortable, to say the least. But this is how Jesus came into the world.

The couple's mode of transportation is not mentioned in the Bible, but a donkey is likely, and indeed that's how artist Pranas Domšaitis has interpreted the event. Born in the Prussian village of Cropsiens in 1880 to a farming family, Domšaitis spent time in various European capitals, studying and exhibiting art and hobnobbing with other artists. In 1949 his wife's job brought them to Cape Town, South Africa, where he lived for the rest of his life.

Domšaitis's paintings are composed of large, richly colored planes and bold outlines, and they often evoke simple folk life. Art critic Graham Watson described them as fusing “something of [Marc] Chagall's enchanting visions, the guileless piety of [Georges] Rouault, the resonant colour of the expressionists, and the intuitive wisdom of the peasant.”

Domšaitis turned often to the Bible for inspiration. The Flight to Egypt was among his most commonly painted subjects, embodying his personal response to the twentieth-century experience of exile and uprootedness. Iconographically very similar to the Journey to Bethlehem, the Flight to Egypt differs only in that Jesus is out of the womb. The Lithuanian Art Museum does not have a title on file for the painting pictured here, and it could very well function as either an entry into or an exit from Bethlehem. The occurrence of these two episodes virtually one right after the other in Jesus's birth narrative reinforces a key theme of his life: he's always on the go, with no place to lay his head. As the seventeenth-century poet Henry Vaughan puts it, “He travels to be born, and then / Is born to travel more again.”

In Domšaitis's painting, a hill rises up behind Mary and Joseph as they enter town by night, weary from their travels; it foreshadows the challenges that lie ahead for their family. But there is also divine affirmation: a yellow moon, like a halo, hovers overhead, as if waiting to crown the infant head of the soon-to-be-born messiah.

Coming as peace on earth



Edward Hicks (American, 1780–1849), *Peaceable Kingdom of the Branch*, 1826–30. Oil on canvas, 61.9 × 80.3 cm (24.4 × 31.6 in.). Reynolda House Museum of American Art, Winston-Salem, North Carolina, USA. Public Domain.

Detail:



Quaker minister Edward Hicks initially took up easel painting as a means of supporting his family (Quaker ministers were not allowed salaries), but he eventually left the pulpit to pursue painting full-time. Despite the criticism of many of his fellow Friends, who viewed art as a frivolity, Hicks felt justified in his new vocation. He saw it as an alternative way of proclaiming the gospel.

His favorite subject was the Peaceable Kingdom (Isaiah 11:6–9; cf. Isaiah 65:25), which he painted sixty-two times in varying iterations between 1820 and his death in 1849. These paintings feature predators and prey lying down together in peace, and a little rosy-cheeked child—the Christ child—leading them. In the version in the Reynolda collection the child holds a grapevine, a dual reference to the fruit-bearing branch of the Tree of Jesse (Isaiah 11:1) and to the Eucharist. The blasted trunk behind him doubles, too, as an allusion to the “stump” out of which Christ sprung up and to the recent Hicksite schism in the Society of Friends, led by Hicks’s cousin Elias, which had Hicks discouraged but hopeful for reconciliation.

Under the elm tree on the riverbank, Pennsylvania founder William Penn and a Lenape chief are signing their famous treaty, promising perpetual friendship. For Hicks this episode from America’s colonial past encapsulated the Quaker values of peace and brotherly love.

The frame’s four edges were trimmed at some point, cutting off four lines of Hicks’s painted inscription, but the full text—a rhyming paraphrase of Isaiah’s Peaceable Kingdom prophecy, from a contemporaneous prayer book—is as follows:

The wolf shall with the lambkin dwell in peace,
His grim carniv’rous nature then shall cease;
The leopard with the harmless kid lay down,
And not one savage beast be seen to frown;
The lion and the calf shall forward move,
A little child shall lead them on in love;
When man is moved and led by sovereign grace,
To seek that state of everlasting peace.

Hicks’s Peaceable Kingdom paintings reveal a gradual shift in tone over time from idealism to cynicism regarding the actual possibility of peace on earth. While his early paintings show animals in joyful company with one another, in his middle period some of the animals are tense or exhausted. By the late period the carnivores bare their teeth in open hostility. Hicks wrote later in life that all the intrafaith “ranting” and division had “dissipated [his] hope” of ever seeing established in the here and now a kingdom like Isaiah envisioned. But that realization only caused him to cling to Christ all the more tightly.

The Peaceable Kingdom was inaugurated by Jesus’s first coming; he is the little boy who tames the beastly hearts of man. But his rule is not yet fully established. For that we wait, and in the waiting we act so that when he returns, we will be well practiced in the laws of the new kingdom—the laws of peace and love.

Proclaimed by hymning angels singing “Glory to God in the highest”



Yasuo Ueno (Japanese, 1926–2005), *A Multitude of Heavenly Hosts*. Traditional natural pigments on silk. Published in *Saisho no Kurisumasu* (The First Christmas) (Tokyo: Shiko-sha Co. Ltd., 1986).

Gloria in excelsis Deo—“glory to God in the highest.” An exultant Christmas proclamation, made familiar through that well-loved melismatic carol. In Luke’s account it follows the angels’ good news that a savior has been born.

This sudden, knock-your-socks-off revelation was vouchsafed to a group of blue-collar night-shift workers whose vocation was despised in the Jewish culture of the day. Marginalized by the social and religious elite, stereotyped as thieving and untrustworthy, shepherds were nonetheless chosen by God to receive the privilege of an angelic appearance—thousands strong—and the honor of attending the Messiah’s birth. “*Unto you* is born this day in the city of David a Savior,” the head angel said (Luke 2:11). Unto you, who have heretofore been ignored. Jesus would be *for* the shepherds in every way. In fact, he would one day call himself a Shepherd, redeeming the title from its negative associations and affirming the holiness of such a call.

Japanese artist Yasuo Ueno illustrated the angels’ Gloria, along with other episodes from Jesus’s birth narrative, in a Christmas storybook published in Tokyo in 1986. His illustration shows a winged and faceless choir hovering in a gold-washed sky, the annunciatory angel framed in the center.

In all his paintings Ueno used only traditional Japanese paints, which are sold as powders of minerals: blue powder of indigo copper ore, green of peacock stone, white of smashed shells. “I am fascinated by the beauty of Japanese paints,” he said, “which I believe to be the most beautiful in the world.” For background coloring he used gold leaf—“to express the glory of God and the space of infinity.” He applied these pigments to silk canvases using his fingers.

Ueno’s painting helps us to imagine the magnificence of that momentous night on which the dark sky was showered with heaven’s light and the gospel was preached to the poor.

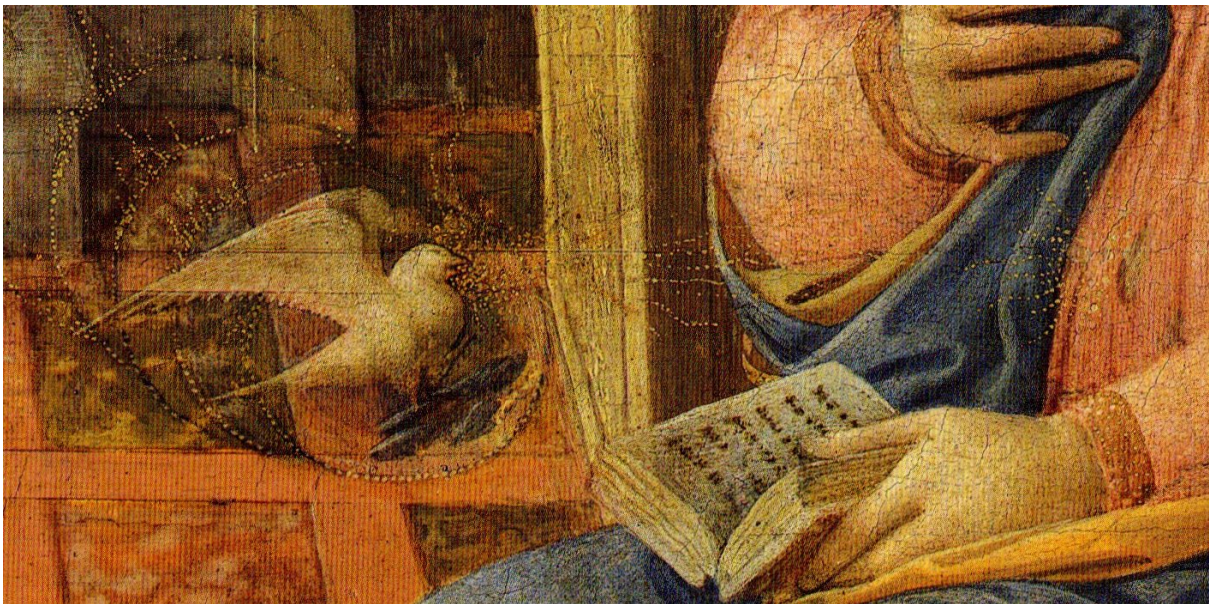
Coming as nothing

Coming as sperm joins egg



Fra Filippo Lippi (Italian, ca. 1406–1469), *The Annunciation*, ca. 1449–55. Egg tempera on wood, 68.6 × 152.7 cm (27 × 60.1 in.). National Gallery, London, England. Public Domain.

Detail:



The conception of Christ in Mary's virginal womb is one of the central mysteries of the Christian faith. At what stage of prenatal development did Jesus enter? Did he start his human life as a sperm cell, which then fertilized one of Mary's eggs, or did he come through parthenogenesis? Could the male gamete have come from Joseph (deposited supernaturally, not through copulation)? What does Jesus's DNA look like?

Of course, our understanding of reproductive biology is more advanced than that of the ancients, who knew only that for conception to occur, a man must sow his seed into a woman. In 1:35 of his Gospel, Luke suggests that some kind of nonsexual divine seeding took place in Jesus's case; *pneuma* and *dynamis* served as the procreative agents. Luke didn't concern himself with all the details—not simply because his medical knowledge was basic but because nailing down the mechanism of conception is not the point of the narrative. (With gospel miracles the *who* and *why* are always key and the *how* is irrelevant.) The point is that God became human through a willing female vessel in order to liberate humanity from its curse.

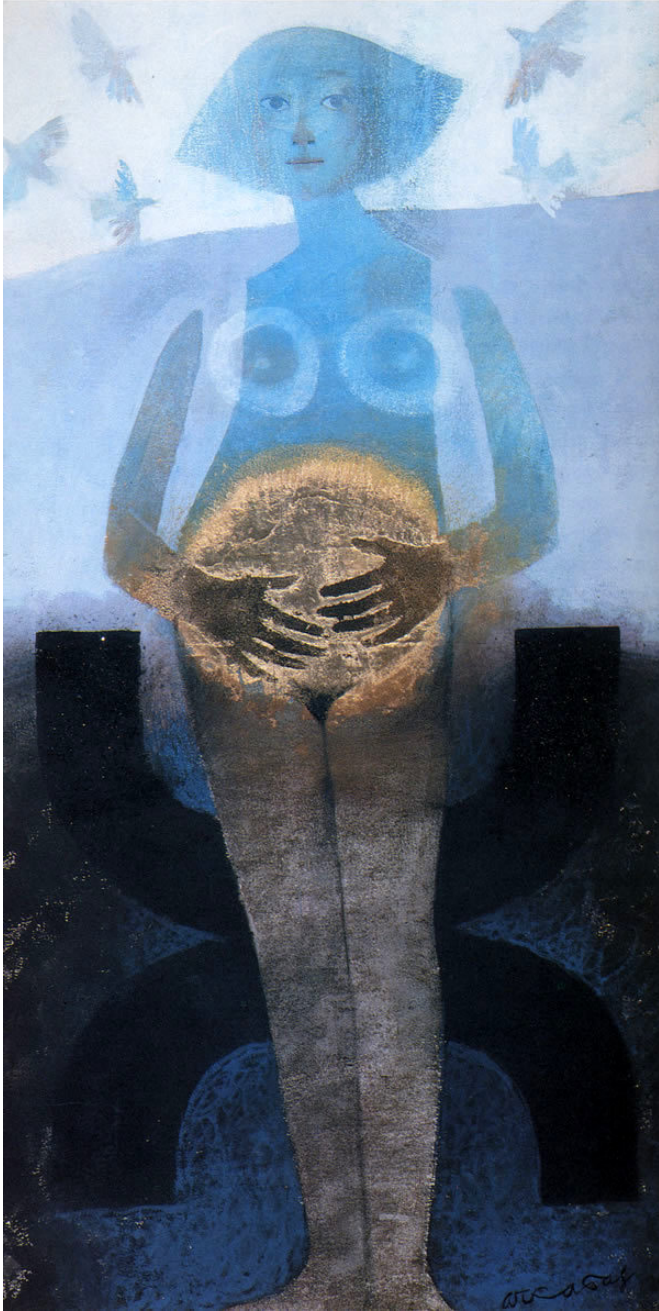
Artists through the ages have taken up the challenge of portraying this invisible mystery. Some, in deference to Augustine's assertion that "God spake by the angel and the Virgin was impregnated through the ear," show either Gabriel's golden speech-script or a ray of light from heaven shooting forth into Mary's aural orifice, or else the Holy Spirit as dove hovering beside it, performing some secret act of penetration (whispering? blowing?). Others show a naked baby with a cross diving headfirst from the hand of God into Mary's womb—though Antoninus of Florence (1389–1459) and other church leaders rejected this motif as heretical because to them it suggested that Christ's human substance was preformed rather than derived from Mary.

On an overdoor panel from the Medici Palace in Florence (now in the collection of London's National Gallery), the Carmelite friar Fra Filippo Lippi painted what is, in my mind, the most beautiful interpretation of the moment of insemination. In the top center the hand of God reaches out from a dark cloud into the earth realm, releasing his Spirit onto the porch where Mary is sitting, reading from Isaiah: "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel" (7:14). Descending in spiraling billows of gold dust, the Spirit as dove plants himself in midair, level with Mary's womb, then emits the divine seed from his beak; it burns a small hole in her tunic where it enters her body to become the enfleshed Word of God.

Behind Gabriel is a *hortus conclusus* (enclosed garden), an emblematic attribute of the Virgin Mary derived from the Latin translation of Song of Solomon 4:12: "A garden locked is my sister, my bride, a spring locked, a fountain sealed." It refers to her inviolate nether parts. Though she kept her virginity intact, she did open her uterus—which Lippi hints at by placing her on a porch that's only semienclosed.

Jesus came as "nothing" in that he came imperceptibly at first. He came as God's power acted upon the ovum in Mary's womb.

Coming as growth



Arcabas (French, 1926–), *Woman with the Sun in Her Belly*. Private collection.

In his fourth-century *Critique of Apollinarius and Apollinarianism*, Gregory of Nazianzus wrote that Jesus was incarnated “humanly, because in accordance with the laws of gestation.” John of Damascus, on the other hand, insisted that “from [Mary’s] holy and most pure blood He formed flesh . . . not developing the fashion of the body by gradual additions but perfecting it at once” (*Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, Book III, chapter 2). Theologians do not agree on this point—whether Jesus was immediately fully formed in Mary’s womb and just waited there for nine months, or instead followed all the typical stages of prenatal development. I see no reason why the latter should not be the case.

If the in utero Jesus did follow the standard timeline, in the first three weeks he would have grown from a fertilized egg into a ball of cells. At five weeks his heart started beating; at six weeks his facial features—eyes, nostrils—began to form; at eight weeks he had fingers; at ten weeks his vital organs started functioning; at fourteen weeks he could make facial expressions; at nineteen weeks he could hear sounds from outside Mary’s body; at twenty-four weeks his taste buds were developing and his hair growing; at twenty-seven weeks he was opening and closing his eyes and sucking his thumb; at thirty-two weeks he had nails on his fingers and toes.

From outside the womb this growth meant danger for the unwed Mary, whose increasingly swollen belly testified against her story that she had *not* known a man. Her journey to Elizabeth’s house might have been prompted in part by a desire to avoid the shaming glares and threat of stoning that followed her in Nazareth.

It also meant all the requisite discomforts of pregnancy: nausea, hot flashes, leg cramps, backaches, food cravings, shortness of breath, swollen ankles, tender breasts, sleeplessness. As her baby put on weight inside her, her skin stretched to accommodate him, leaving marks, and she had to learn to walk with a new center of gravity. She also had to cope with dramatically higher hormone levels. Through it all Joseph was no doubt there to support her and alleviate her distress as best he could.

Images of Mary with a conspicuous baby bump are rare in art. Some sprang up in the Middle Ages in Germany, Italy, Spain, and Portugal, with names like *Maria Gravida* (Gravid Mary), the *Madonna del Parto* (Our Lady of Parturition), *Nossa Senhora do Ó* (Our Lady of the O), or *Our Lady of Expectation*, and in some cities devotion to these images continues to this day. Other than these, the pregnant Mary is implied by representations of the Woman of the Apocalypse described in Revelation 12, who gives birth to a male child who is attacked by a dragon; this is the figure Arcabas interprets in his painting *Woman with the Sun in Her Belly*. Here Mary cradles her tummy in the familiar way pregnant women do. The source of her “mother’s glow” is the Light inside her, so bright it emanates around her bump like a halo. She stares ahead, excited but a little fearful. She’s going to be a mother—the mother of *God!*

Advent is a time for us to share in the expectation of Mary and Joseph as they prepare to welcome their son into the world.

Coming as fetus



Roberta Karstetter (American, 1953–), *The Annunciation: The Adventus*, 2008. Altered torso assemblage, 76.2 × 38.1 × 25.4 cm (30 × 15 × 10 in.). Used by permission of the artist.

Roberta Karstetter's primary medium is assemblage—the arrangement of everyday objects into three-dimensional compositions. She says she likes how assemblage enables her to bring new life and meaning to old, sometimes broken, things. In *The Annunciation: The Adventus* she ripped and crumpled up brown paper bags and decoupage'd them onto a full-size torso. For the bust she attached an angel-faced wall hanging, a playful reference to the angelic visits that are part of Jesus's birth narrative. The womb is an iron-pan inset covered with domed glass and outlined with brass tacks. Inside, Jesus is curled up in the fetal position, wearing a brass crown and wrapped in rhinestones. This inner image is a digitally edited reproduction of a circa 1510 drawing from one of Leonardo da Vinci's private notebooks; it shows a uterus splayed open like a seed pod to reveal a human fetus who is waiting to unfold and blossom. This is the flower of Jesse's tree that Israel had waited for for so long.

The church has long marveled at how infinite God, who cannot be contained, was somehow—paradoxically—contained for nine months within the tight space of Mary's womb. (And then for the next thirty-three years in a human body.) In John Donne's poem "Annunciation," the speaker addresses Mary, full of wonder:

..... yea thou art now
Thy Maker's maker, and thy Father's mother;
Thou hast light in dark, and shutst in little room,
Immensity cloistered in thy dear womb.

More recently, in a poem of the same name, Denise Levertov describes

the astounding ministry she [Mary] was offered: to bear in her womb
Infinite weight and lightness; to carry
in hidden, finite inwardness,
nine months of Eternity; to contain
in slender vase of being,
the sum of power—
in narrow flesh,
the sum of light.

The border that circumscribes the preborn Christ child in Karstetter's *Annunciation* reinforces the precious truth of the Incarnation: that God submitted to being bound in so many ways, so that we could be set free.

The excerpt from "Annunciation" by Denise Levertov is reprinted from *The Stream and the Sapphire: Selected Poems on Religious Themes* (New York: New Directions Books, 1997).

Coming as waters break



Janet McKenzie (American), *Mary with the Midwives*, 2003. Oil on canvas, 137.2 × 106.7 cm (54 × 42 in.). Collection of Catholic Theological Union, Chicago, Illinois, USA. Used by permission of the artist.

One of the heralds of Jesus's birth was the rupture of Mary's amniotic sac and subsequent gush of fluid between her legs. Signaling the beginning of labor, this water breaking would have heightened the anticipation of the now imminent birth. Pain and joy were on their way.

In ancient Jewish culture, midwives were usually present to assist with labor and delivery. They provided holistic care—mental, emotional, and spiritual as well as physical—supporting the mother with herbs, massages, hot compresses, hand squeezes, prayers, scripture recitations, and coaching.

Known for her paintings of strong, racially diverse female figures, Janet McKenzie has imagined a quiet moment of inner preparation that Mary might have shared with her two midwives on the night of Jesus's coming. In *Mary with the Midwives*, Mary touches her belly and prays to God for calmness and strength—qualities she draws from the Spirit above and her helpers beside. She exhales, steadying herself for the adventure of motherhood. A shared womanhood, a shared faith, and a shared desire to welcome new life unite these three women in this most spectacular assignment: bringing God into the world.

Coming down the birth canal head covered with blood



Sara Star (American, 1980–), *The Crowning*, 2004. Acrylic and gold leaf on canvas, 152.4 × 149.9 cm (60 × 59 in.). Collection of the artist. Used by permission.

Here's a picture of Jesus I bet you've never seen before: halfway born, his head peeping out of Mary's vaginal opening. Other than Paula Rego's less graphic *Nativity*, Sara Star's *The Crowning* is the only artistic representation of Mary in labor that I'm aware of. The subject is considered indecorous, I suppose.

In her rendering Star defers to the Catholic and Orthodox tradition, dating at least as far back as Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 388), that Mary gave birth without any pain. (Both branches believe Mary was conceived without original sin and is therefore exempt from its curse of pangs in childbirth.) The Catholic and Orthodox Churches also teach that Mary remained a virgin not only at Jesus's conception but also during his birth—that is, her hymen never tore.

I gently reject these teachings, being persuaded that while Mary's conception of Jesus was certainly miraculous, her pregnancy and childbirth were ordinary. I believe there were contractions, screaming, pushing, blood, sweat, and tears. Still, I appreciate Star's interpretation, which emphasizes the holiness of the event. I also like the amusing title, a dual reference to the emergence of Jesus's head from the birth canal and his inheritance of David's throne.

Another tradition—from the apocryphal Protoevangelium of James (ca. 145)—says Mary gave birth alone while Joseph was out looking for a midwife. He returned with two, but only after the delivery was complete; these women can be seen in the bottom right corner of Orthodox nativity icons, washing baby Jesus in a tub. Star's painting suggests a secluded birth, as Mary reaches her hands down to deliver her son.

As Star painted this image she referenced photos from a natural birthing manual. Her choice to have Mary unclothed reminds us of the bodiliness of Christ's coming. The dilated cervix; the large, darkened areolas; the purple umbilical cord—these are some of the physical aspects of childbirth.

God could have come into the world any way he wanted, but he came through a woman's birth canal, coated in water and blood.

Coming into light and air



Kim Young Gil (Korean, 1940–2008), *Mother and Child*. Traditional Asian paints on paper.

When Jesus left the dark, cushioned environment of Mary's womb, he entered a sensory world of sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell, ripe for exploring. He learned that milk tastes good, Mom feels soft, falling hurts, the sun is bright, the breeze is cold. Like all babies, he had to get acquainted with his new body and its capabilities. In his first year he learned how to smile, track objects with his eyes, reach and grip, babble, sit up, and move.

For the first time now, God had lungs. A heartbeat. A digestive system. He was *embodied*, and living under a set of physical laws that he had previously existed outside of.

In Kim Young Gil's painting *Mother and Child*, Jesus sits on Mary's knee and reaches for a bird that's flying overhead. He throws his arms up and out, trying to embrace this wonderful new thing, and she nuzzles him adoringly. Birds would become a teaching tool for him later on—a lesson on trust—but for now they're just color and movement and song, a stimulus for his young developing self.

Coming into vulnerability



Joel Sheesley (American, 1950–), *O Magnum Mysterium*, 2013. Oil on canvas, 182.9 × 111.8 cm (72 × 44 in.). Collection of Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois, USA. Used by permission of the artist.

Titled after a responsorial chant that's part of Christmas Matins, Joel Sheesley's *O Magnum Mysterium* reflects visually on the "great mystery" of the incarnation. He cites as one of his influences the famous Portinari Altarpiece by the fifteenth-century Flemish painter Hugo van der Goes, which likewise shows the newborn infant lying on the cold, hard ground. This placement of Jesus in nativity paintings was common in the Renaissance and Baroque eras—Piero della Francesca and Caravaggio are among the many others who put him there—the purpose being to show the earthliness of the birth.

In his coming, Jesus subjected himself to all the discomforts and limitations and potential hurts of being human. To soiled cloths and hunger pangs and sore muscles and skin that tears and burns, and to love. By putting himself out there for the world to receive, he risked misunderstanding, rejection, and worse, hostility. This latter reaction chased him out of Bethlehem while he was still a newborn, as Herod sought to kill him, and would come to a head again in his adulthood.

In *O Magnum Mysterium*, Jesus is swaddled but exposed—a little bundle who's completely vulnerable. This feeling is emphasized by the tallness of the painting, half of which is just open, cracked pavement. Behind Jesus a sheep and a donkey sip from puddles, casting reflections; they remind us, perhaps, of stories and events from his ministry, like his parable of the lost sheep (or John the Baptist's "Behold the Lamb of God!" exclamation), and his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Mary and Joseph have wrapped their little one snugly in this blanket and will do all they can throughout his life to continue to keep him warm and secure, even though they know what's in store. Jesus's Passion would be his greatest exposure, his greatest wounding. Here his swaddling blanket foreshadows his burial shroud.

Coming into poverty



Vicente Manansala (Filipino, 1910–1981), *Madonna of the Slums*, 1950. Oil on Masonite, 86.5 × 61 cm (34 × 24 in.).

Infant holy, infant lowly—a common theme of the Advent and Christmas seasons. Jesus came poor not just in the sense that he laid aside the riches of his divine glory to become human, but socioeconomically. He was born into a peasant family who couldn't even afford the lamb offering prescribed in Leviticus 12 for Mary's postpartum purification ritual, so they gave a turtledove instead.

Jesus grew up in a small, dirty corner of the Roman Empire—Nazareth—that other Jews in the Galilee region looked down on (see John 1:45–46). He spent most of his life as a manual laborer, living (we can assume) with his parents, and his last few years as an itinerant preacher, finding shelter wherever it was offered. Dependent on the generosity of others, he borrowed much during his time on earth: a birthing room, a boat, a donkey, a dining room, a tomb. Satan tempted him with wealth and power, but he stayed the course of poverty so that when he blessed the poor, he did so from a place of empathy.

In his painting *Madonna of the Slums*, Filipino artist Vicente Manansala has imagined Mary and baby Jesus as urban shanty residents in Manila. Barong-barongs (homes built from scraps) rise

up in the background, and crudely erected clotheslines dry wet rags. This Madonna looks away from her naked babe in arms, trying not to let him see her tiredness and fear. He senses it anyway and, in response, touches her face, as if to reassure her that everything will be all right.

Manansala painted this in 1950 following the devastation of World War II, but all these years later, slums are still a reality for many Filipinos, with an estimated four million dwelling there today in Manila alone. Here children scavenge dumpsites for food to eat and recyclables to sell while their parents try to eke out a living fishing the polluted waters or making charcoal from driftwood.

Like Manansala, the Anglo-Irish poet Cecil Day-Lewis connects the lowly birth of Jesus with modern-day poverty. In “A Carol” he adapts the lullaby-like meter and words of “Away in a Manger” to present, contra the sentimentality of the original, a bleak look at what it is to be poor.

Oh hush thee, my baby,
Thy cradle's in pawn:
No blankets to cover thee
Cold and forlorn.
The stars in the bright sky
Look down and are dumb
At the heir of the ages
Asleep in a slum.

The hooters are blowing,
No heed let him take;
When baby is hungry
'Tis best not to wake.
Thy mother is crying,
Thy dad's on the dole:
Two shillings a week is
The price of a soul.

In this satirical poem Mom tries to sing her baby to sleep over the honking of car horns. For survival the destitute family relies on a weekly welfare check—a meager one-tenth of a pound—and pawning their few possessions, like baby's bed. It drains Dad of dignity and frustrates Mom to tears. When baby is hungry they are forced to ignore his cries for lack of food.

Meditating on Jesus's coming into poverty can help attune us to the privation around us and inspire compassion in action.

“A Carol” by Cecil Day-Lewis is reprinted from *The Complete Poems by C. Day Lewis* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1992). Copyright © the Estate of C. Day Lewis.

A cold coming



Nicholas Mynheer (British, 1958–), *Lullaby of Winter*, 2012. Oil on canvas, 30 × 30 cm (11.8 × 11.8 in.). For sale via www.mynheer-art.co.uk. Used by permission of the artist.

It may or may not have been cold when Jesus was born. There may or may not have been snow on the ground. Truth is, we have no idea of the date or even the season of his birth. Around 200 CE, Clement of Alexandria listed three possibilities—one each in March, April, and May; some scholars say these months make more sense, given that sheep were grazing. However, a date of December 25 was decided on in the fourth century by Pope Julius I—the same date as the Roman feast of the birth of Sol Invictus (the Unconquered Sun). Saturnalia was also celebrated around that time, as were various other festivals in northern and western Europe.

While some Christians are embarrassed to admit that pagans had anything to do with the dating of Christmas, I think it makes plenty of sense to choose a day that the dominant culture already vested with religious significance and to assert instead an alternative religious truth and cause for celebration while also drawing on familiar traditions. (Maybe—probably?—attracting converts also aided the decision. Who'd want to give up all the winter solstice merrymaking to follow Christ?) But besides this more practical consideration, an anonymous Christian treatise from North Africa written around that time, titled *On Solstices and Equinoxes*, dated Christ's conception to March 25; counting forward nine months would place Jesus's due date on December 25. Whether A came before B is unknown.

So while Jesus may not have actually been born “in the bleak midwinter,” the liturgical calendar places him there, and artists have embraced the poetic implications. Jesus was born when the earth was dead. He came as light into darkness, warmth into coldness, a rose in winter. Barren landscapes full of snow reflect the condition of men's hearts: icy toward God, and fruitless. But Jesus enters the dread chill we have created, the one true and all-conquering Sun, and brings life.

In *Lullaby of Winter*, Nicholas Mynheer shows the Holy Family huddled together outside under a desolate tree, with three shepherds leaning in to pay reverence, tightly hugging their cloaks for warmth. Thick purple clouds billow above, and blue-white snow blankets the ground. An angel rides in on a blustery wind to spiritually embrace the young family and steel them for difficult times ahead.

Coming as flesh



Nyoman Darsane (Indonesian, 1939–), *He Came Down*, 1978. Oil on canvas.

Balinese artist Nyoman Darsane—painter, musician, dancer, and *wayang kulit* (shadow puppetry) performer—was born in 1939 and raised Hindu. At age seventeen he became a Christian and as a result was ostracized by his family and village community, who thought he was abandoning his culture. But because he so effectively showed, through his art, that Christianity was not at odds with their island heritage, they eventually accepted him back in. “Bali is my body; Christ is my life,” Darsane said.

Jesus was a historical person, born in a particular time and of a particular ethnicity. We don’t know what he looked like, but we can educatedly guess at some features, like dark hair and olive-toned skin. Since the earliest days of Christianity, however, artists have imagined him as one of their own: to the early Roman Christians, he was Roman (i.e., beardless, sometimes even a Hermes or a Helios); to many of the Renaissance greats, he was Tuscan; the Victorians made him meek and mild, the embodiment of their cultural values, and Warner Sallman gave him a studio portrait glow à la the trend in American photography; the Ethiopians darkened his skin and gave him kinky hair; the Maori gave him tattoos; in Korea, he wears a hanbok and gat, while in Thailand, it’s a saron and pakamar.

Some Christians are uncomfortable with the translation of Jesus into different cultural and ethnic contexts, fearing it undermines his historicity. (I would challenge those Christians to take a look at the illustrated Bible stories they read their kids and the Christmas cards they send and consider whether those don’t also engage in some form of contextualization.) The reason I embrace culturally and ethnically diverse representations of Jesus is because together they give me a fuller understanding of the gospel—who it’s for and what it means. Jesus came for *us*. When a culture accepts and owns that truth, naturally they will integrate it into culturally appropriate forms of expression. A Jesus who looks like you is no stranger, unlike the white Jesuses brought by colonists. Christianity is not exclusively Western; it didn’t originate in the West, and its center is no longer even there. Images that show Jesus as anything other than a first-century Palestinian Jew are concerned not with documentary illustration but with celebrating his global mission to seek and to save.

Dance is integral to Balinese life, so in many of his paintings Darsane portrays Jesus as a dancer—dancing the world into being, dancing his Sermon on the Mount, dancing his way to the cross. In *He Came Down*, Jesus dances right into the womb of Mary, who assumes a traditional Balinese prayer posture: knees bent, and a frangipani held up to her forehead, wedged between her fingertips. Bare-chested and full of energy, Jesus dispels the powers of darkness with his fire and light. He wears traditional ornaments, including *gelang kana* (wrist and arm bands) and a gilded *badong kulit* (leather necklace), and white cotton pants with velvet cuffs.

The painting can also be read as Christ’s descent into the heart of the believer, a visual echo of the invocation in “O Little Town of Bethlehem”:

O holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray.
Cast out our sin and enter in; be born in us today.

Christ came down first in a Jewish body, but now he is enfleshed by all those who confess his name.

Coming in humility



Jyoti Sahi (Indian, 1944–), *The First Station of the Cross: Jesus Is Judged*, 1988. Mixed media on handmade paper, 42 × 29.7 cm (16.5 × 11.7 in.). Private collection. Used by permission of the artist.

Jesus's first coming was characterized by a radical, self-emptying humility. This truth is celebrated in the Kenosis Hymn—one of the oldest hymns in Christian history—which Paul quotes in Philippians 2:6–11 as a model of Christian behavior:

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, *did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped*, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:3–8, emphasis added)

In a 2013 conference lecture on this hymn, Dr. Stephen Backhouse homed in on the words ἴσα θεῷ (*isa theo*) and ἄρπαγμὸν (*harpagmon*)—rendered as “equality with God” and “something to be grasped,” or “something to be used to [his own] advantage.” The Roman emperors assumed the former as a title for themselves and relied on it to back up their system of oppression, which concentrated wealth and power in the hands of 0.5 to 5 percent of the population. They used their wealth for public displays of their own greatness, sponsoring public games, building temples, and so on. For them, equality with God *was* something to be grasped—tightly! Even though *isa theo* wasn't theirs to claim, they seized it and leveraged it to advance their own power and interests.

Into this political climate came Jesus, who was the true equal of God but chose to empty himself of the attendant glory. He avoided the pomp and circumstance of the empire, with all its “we're worthy and you're not” propaganda, preferring instead to honor those whom the system did not honor by living life with them and affirming them through word and deed.

The image on the opposite page is another example of Asian contextualization, part of a sequence by Jyoti Sahi that represents the Stations of the Cross as yoga poses. In station 1, “Jesus Is Judged,” Jesus is in Uttanasana (Standing Forward Bend Pose), touching the earth as a sign of humility. The Sanskrit pose name translates to something like “intense stretch or extension”—an appropriate description of the Incarnation, whereby God bent down far to establish intimate contact with his world.

Sahi runs an art ashram outside Bangalore, India, where he maintains a spiritual art practice and hosts seminars and retreats. His large body of work gives Christianity an Indian face, drawing on the sacred symbols of indigenous faith traditions like Hinduism and Buddhism and advancing a Dalit theology. A doctor of divinity, Sahi imbues his art with theological robustness, and Christ is always at the center. His paintings and woodcuts can be found in churches and seminaries throughout the country.

Coming as servant



Alexander Smirnov (Russian, 1947–), *Healing on the Sabbath*. Oil on canvas.

Behold my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my Spirit upon him;
he will bring forth justice to the nations.
He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice,
or make it heard in the street;
a bruised reed he will not break,
and a faintly burning wick he will not quench;
he will faithfully bring forth justice.
He will not grow faint or be discouraged
till he has established justice in the earth;
and the coastlands wait for his law.

—Isaiah 42:1–4 (cf. Matthew 12:18–21)

The Jewish prophets foretold the coming of a servant-messiah who would implement healing justice worldwide. This messiah, God told Isaiah, would not trample on the poor and feeble—those ready to snap or expire—but rather would build them up, tending to their needs and restoring to them their human rights. Matthew quotes this passage after just having recounted mass healings performed by Jesus, clearly seeing him as the fulfillment of the messianic prophecy.

Servanthood is a laborious vocation. A servant is one who gives rather than gets, whose attention is always on others. Jesus was constantly anticipating needs, be they physical, social, spiritual, or all of the above, and extending himself to meet them. He was often called away to do this or that—refill the wine, interpret law, help someone’s relative. And he did it always without grumbling, because his heart was for the people, for justice in the earth. “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve,” Jesus told his disciples (Matthew 20:28; Mark 10:45), hoping they’d adopt the same posture.

During Jesus’s ministry, the religious elite were often critical of who and how he served. For example, on several occasions they accused him of breaking Jewish law by healing people on the Sabbath. Russian painter Alexander Smirnov visualizes one such episode: the healing of the lame man at the pool of Bethesda (John 5:1–17). Jesus stoops down to bestow his restorative touch and help the now cured man to his feet, instructing him to “pick up your mat and walk.” But it was Saturday, and, believing that transporting objects constituted work, some of the witnesses cried Sabbath violation. The disciples had to exercise crowd control. “My Father is working until now, and I am working,” Jesus replied. In other words, we should never allow the Sabbath to restrict us from loving service.

Like Jesus, may we never grow faint or be discouraged until justice reigns both near and far.

Coming in love



Mariama McCarthy (Tuareg), *Beautiful Jesus*, 2011. Oil on canvas, 127 × 83.8 cm (50 × 33 in.). For sale via the Outsider Folk Art Gallery, Reading, Pennsylvania, USA (www.outsiderfolkart.com). Used by permission of the artist.

Love is at the core of who Jesus is. Love drove him to the manger and to the cross. Love impelled him to perform miracles and characterized his teachings. In the Garden of Gethsemane the night before his death, Jesus prayed that the love of the Father that was in him would also be in his disciples. “Abide in my love” (John 15:9), he said, inviting us into his Sacred Heart.

A Tuareg artist from Niger (now a citizen of the United States), Mariama McCarthy has visualized this invitation to love in her painting *Beautiful Jesus*. Jesus’s veins and arteries are vines of flowers, a network of life extending throughout his body and the world. (The white ones resemble Christmas lights!) His crown of thorns, too, has blossomed, a sign of his victory over death. With his right hand, stitched up where the nail puncture used to be, he clasps his heart, aflame with divine compassion. His other hand he extends in a gesture of giving, releasing a tide of red-tinged blooms.

All around Jesus people travel along paths and through doors—some on their way to him, some in the opposite direction. Those who come to his garden of love go out with flowers, spreading his beauty wherever they go.

This Advent we are called to remember the love of Christ that dwells in us richly, filling us “with all the fullness of God” (Ephesians 3:19). Beautiful.

Coming through birth



Greg Weatherby (Australian Aboriginal, 1942–), *Dreamtime Birth*, 2005. Acrylic on paper.

Hills, stars,
White stars that stand above the eastern stable.

Look down and offer Him.
The dim adoring light of your belief.
Whose small Heart bleeds with infinite fire.

Shall not this Child
(When we shall hear the bells of His amazing voice)
Conquer the winter of our hateful century?

—Thomas Merton, from “A Christmas Card” (1947)

Greg Weatherby is an Australian artist of Walbanga descent from the southern coast of New South Wales. The image shown here is one of three nativity paintings he’s done, titled *Dreamtime Birth*. “Dreamtime” is the word outsiders use to describe the way Aborigines look at the world. In the book *Aboriginal Art and Spirituality*, comparative religion scholar Max Charlesworth writes,

The Dreaming is the quintessence of reality for Australian Aborigines. It refers to the primordial shaping of the earth by the Ancestor Spirits and their giving to each Aboriginal people its moral and social Law. It also refers to the persistence of the spiritual power of the Ancestor Spirits in the land. . . . The Dreaming is not merely something in the past (though it is that) but something that is also contemporaneously active. In Christian theology God did not just create the world in the past: by his power he continually sustains it in being, from moment to moment. The Dreaming is like that: it is a living and present reality continually sustaining and energising plants, animals and human beings.

Dreamtime Birth incorporates Jesus’s coming into Aboriginal mythology, suggesting that it is a vital and vitalizing event that is both past, present, and future; it is “everywhen.” The hands of God, the Great Ancestor, reach down from the starlit sky to cast favor on the Christ child. Instead of sheep, oxen, and donkeys in attendance, there are kangaroos, emus, and monitor lizards. The wise men approach as Mimi spirits, the tall, thin beings that live in rocky escarpments. All this takes place near Uluru (Ayers Rock), the iconic sandstone formation in central Australia.

Jesus was born in Palestine around the turn of the Common Era, he’s born today in hearts and cultures all over the world, and someday soon he will blast back onto the scene. These are the three comings that Advent rejoices in.

Coming into death



Paulo Medina (Mexican, 1964–), *Cristo yacente* (Recumbent Christ), 2010. Mixed media on canvas, 140 × 110 cm (55.1 × 43.3 in.). For sale via www.absolutearts.com/mixed_media/paulo_medina-cristo_yacente-1327344018.html. Used by permission of the artist.

The shadow of death is present in the story of Jesus's birth—in the wise men's gift of myrrh, in the messianic prophecies of Isaiah, and in Simeon's words to Mary at the temple. Death itself is present in the Massacre of the Innocents, Herod's attempt to snuff out the rival king Jesus. To show how closely the Incarnation is tied to the Passion, some artists allude to the latter in their nativity images through a cruciform arrangement of wooden stable beams, the presence of a thorn-eating goldfinch, or a pale, stiff Jesus in swaddling clothes that mimic embalming sheets.

Lyricist William C. Dix connects Jesus's birth and death in the second verse of the carol "What Child Is This":

Nails, spear shall pierce him through,
The cross be borne for me, for you;
Hail, hail the word made flesh,
The babe, the son of Mary!

Though I disagree with the common assertion that Jesus was "born to die" (he was born for far more than that!), it's undeniable that death was a major part of his mission and a necessary precursor to our salvation.

Inspired by the color field movement of abstract art that emerged in the 1940s, Mexican artist Paulo Medina has painted the dead Christ in his tomb. His body is just a wispy strip of black paint with red highlights, with slight protrusions for head, hip bones, and knees. He lies against a large, flat swath of blue, a middle ground between the red below and white above. In the black color field in the top register—a window? a recess?—a golden glimmer hints forward to the Resurrection.

Don't be afraid to let a little Lent into your Advent. Jesus's coming was into birth *and* death. He was born in a cave and buried in one—for me and for you. And from the mouth of that cave he arose after death. Hail, hail!

Coming as child



Sir Jacob Epstein (British, 1880–1959), *Madonna and Child*, 1953. Lead sculpture, 4 m (13 ft.) tall. Cavendish Square, London, England. Photo: Ben Garrett, via Flickr/CC BY-NC 2.0.

Born in New York to Polish Jewish refugees, Jacob Epstein was a pioneer of modern sculpture. In 1902 he moved to Europe to study art and became a British citizen in 1911; he was knighted in 1954. In search of a universal aesthetic, he studied and drew inspiration from the art traditions of India, China, West Africa, and the Pacific Islands. He doesn't have a single style or medium: he is known as much for his realistic clay portraits cast in bronze as for his non-naturalistic, rough-hewn stone carvings.

During World War II the Convent of the Holy Child Jesus in London's Cavendish Square suffered bomb damage, and architect Louis Osman was called in to rebuild. His plan included adding a covered footbridge to link building Nos. 12 and 13 and commissioning a religious sculpture for the bridge's facade. Osman hired Epstein and gave him two conditions: (1) the sculpture must appear to levitate above the arch, and (2) it must be cast in the lead from the destroyed roof of the convent.



Levitating lead—now *that* would be a challenge! Epstein settled on a Madonna and Child as the subject and achieved the desired levitating effect in part by flattening the figures, reducing their weight to three tons. He rendered them in a hieratic style—restrained, formal, severe. Clothed in a diaphanous garment, kid Jesus extends his arms outward in a gesture of embrace that echoes his execution stance. He looks straight ahead out of deeply drilled pupils, prepared to fulfill his mission.

Mary presents her child to us with lowered, open hands. Although it pains her, she gives him to the world; he was never only hers. She wears a quiet, watchful expression as she supports him from behind, just as she would throughout the remainder of his life.

The sculpture is no longer the property of the convent, as its buildings were acquired by Heythrop College and then, in 1995, by current owner The King's Fund, a charitable foundation. But still it's suspended there against the brick wall, overlooking the public square, reminding passersby of Christ's coming as child, in love and peace and sacrifice.

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