

A

Personal

Advent

Retreat

# A Personal Advent Retreat

What follows is a series of pauses that you are invited to take in the course of each day during the holy season of Advent, which begins on November 28, and ends on Christmas Eve.

These short vignettes of word and image are meant to draw you for a little while away from the preoccupations of what is incorrectly called in our culture “The Christmas Season,” into the mystery of Advent, the mystery of the Incarnation. So take an opportunity each day to stop the noise and go away and rest for a little while in the presence of waiting, waiting for the birth of the Messiah. The retreat begins with “The Invitation.” Give yourself the luxury of accepting the invitation, for - after all - Advent is about the acceptance of an invitation, and the consummation of that acceptance.

Each day’s meditation may ask question, make a point, or just wonder. Please give yourself some time after you have read the material and/or gazed at the art, to simply “BE” in the presence of whatever you receive from the experience. Let yourself be moved into prayer, into deeper relationship with the Ground of your being.

There are four weeks in Advent. We suggest that you might pace your experience of these short meditations and contemplations as follows:

November 28 - December 4:	Days 1 through 7.
December 5 - December 11:	Days 8 through 14.
December 12 - December 19:	Days 15 through 21.
December 19 - December 24:	Days 21 through 27.

If there is interest in having a weekly zoom to share individual experiences of the retreat with others making the retreat, we will host 30 minutes of sharing “popcorn” style at 11:30 each Saturday morning during the retreat.

May the grace of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you as you make this journey of faith. Amen



Hail, space



**for the uncontained God.**

*Uncontained by Áine O'Connor, RSM This work is  
based on Denise Levertov's  
Annunciation and the Akathistos Hymn dating to 626*

Day 1

### The Invitation...

Is made out in your name  
But who are you?  
Who is this person who feels drawn to explore  
the spiritual treasures that lie within you?  
Yes, within you...  
Not in some closet in the sky or the bishop's office.  
Not in some divine database, to which only the  
elect hold the password.  
But in you.  
Jesus said it himself:  
"The Kingdom is very close to you. It is in your heart."  
Six centuries before Jesus a Greek philosopher  
who rejoiced in the name Empedocles said  
something else that might interest you.  
"God," he said, "is a circle whose center is  
everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere."  
Now, there's a thought to ponder.  
Because that "center" is in every human  
heart-recognized or not.  
That "center" is in you. It is the very essence

and heart of who you are.  
It is WHO YOU ARE.

And the circumference is “nowhere” because  
God has no edges, no boundaries, no limits.

If only it were so easy! If only that “WHO•  
center” were obvious and accessible, and if only  
we could steer our course by it, knowing truly  
that God is in all things and all choices,  
seeking to draw the more life-giving outcome  
from all we do.

But that innermost circle is wrapped up in other  
layers that are not always so clearly of God. A  
bit like the parcels we sometimes make up for  
each other, with a small but precious gift  
wrapped up in layers and layers of wrapping  
paper and string.

The outermost layer of wrapping is what we  
might call the “WHERE” of ourselves and our  
living—those things we can’t change, or not  
very easily: our family and culture, our state of  
health and level of education, our strengths and  
our weaknesses, our history. It’s in this layer  
that we spend most of our time—out here on  
the edge of ourselves. And unlike God, we do  
have an edge—sometimes a rather sharp one—  
and we do have limits.

But if we can move inwards a bit, we get to a  
rather deeper layer, that we might call the  
“HOW” of our living. Here we have choices.

We may not be able to change our  
circumstances but we have a choice about how  
we respond to them. We may have no choice  
about who we get as family or work colleagues,  
but we can choose how we will relate to them.

And, as we shall see when we set out to

navigate by the inner compass of our WHO,  
where God abides, every choice makes a difference.

And so we arrive deep in the WHO center. Not everyone has the courage to go there. There is glory, sure, but there is also shame in that center.

To be truly there, before God, we will be invited to take off our protective masks and allow ourselves to be known—and loved—just as we truly are. That encounter with the living God may challenge us way beyond our comfort zone. But it will be the most important adventure of all, because it is what we are all about.

Your WHO-center is the place where God is growing God's unique Dream in you.

The invitation is to discover that Dream, and to live it.

Now take a look at the deeper level of desiring: Is there something you've always wanted to do but never managed? What are your unfinished dreams? If you had your life to live over again, what would you change? If you only had a few months to live, how would you use your time? If a significant sum of money came your way, how would you spend it? If you were granted three wishes, what would they be? Is there anyone, or anything, for whom you would literally give your life?

Take time to ponder one or more of these questions. The responses you make to yourself—provided they are honest answers, are not just the answers you feel you *ought* to give—will be pointers to where your deepest desires are rooted.



Day 2

For within her is a spirit intelligent, holy,  
unique, manifold, subtle,  
mobile, incisive, unsullied,  
lucid, invulnerable, benevolent, shrewd,  
irresistible, beneficent, friendly to human beings,  
steadfast, dependable, unperturbed,  
almighty, all-surveying,  
penetrating all intelligent, pure  
and most subtle spirits:

For Wisdom is quicker to move than any motion;  
she is so pure, she pervades and permeates all things.

She is a breath of the power of God,  
pure emanation of the glory for the Almighty  
so nothing impure can find its way into her.

For she is a reflection of the eternal light,  
untarnished mirror of God's active power,  
and image of his goodness.

— *Wisdom 7:22-26*

We know the scene: the room, variously furnished,  
almost always a lectern, a book; always  
the tall lily.

Arrived on solemn grandeur of great wings,  
the angelic ambassador, standing or hovering,  
whom she acknowledges, a guest.

But we are told of meek obedience. No one mentions  
courage.

The engendering Spirit  
did not enter her without consent.

God waited.

She was free  
to accept or to refuse, choice  
integral to humanness.

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Aren't there annunciations  
of one sort or another  
in most lives?

Some unwillingly  
undertake great destinies,  
enact them in sullen pride,  
uncomprehending.

More often  
those moments  
when roads of light and storm  
open from darkness in a man or woman,  
are turned away from  
in dread, in a wave of weakness, in despair  
and with relief.

Ordinary lives continue.

God does not smite them.  
But the gates close, the pathway vanishes.

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She had been a child who played, ate, slept  
like any other child—but unlike others,  
wept only for pity, laughed  
in joy not triumph.  
Compassion and intelligence  
fused in her, indivisible.

Called to a destiny more momentous  
than any in all of Time,  
she did not quail,  
                    only asked  
a simple, ‘How can this be?’  
and gravely, courteously,  
took to heart the angel’s reply,  
perceiving instantly  
the astounding ministry she 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.

                    Then bring to birth,  
push out into air, a Man-child  
needing, like any other,  
milk and love—

but who was God.

Day 3

*In the sixth month the angel  
Gabriel ...  
(Luke 1:26)*

Giotto has it wrong.  
I was not kneeling  
on my satin cushion  
in a ray of light,  
head slightly bent.

Painters always  
skew the scene,  
as though my life  
were wrapped in silks,  
in temple smells.

I had just come back  
from the well, placing  
the pitcher on the table  
I bumped against the edge,  
spilling water.

As I bent to wipe  
it up, there was light  
against the kitchen wall,  
as though someone had opened  
the door to the sun.

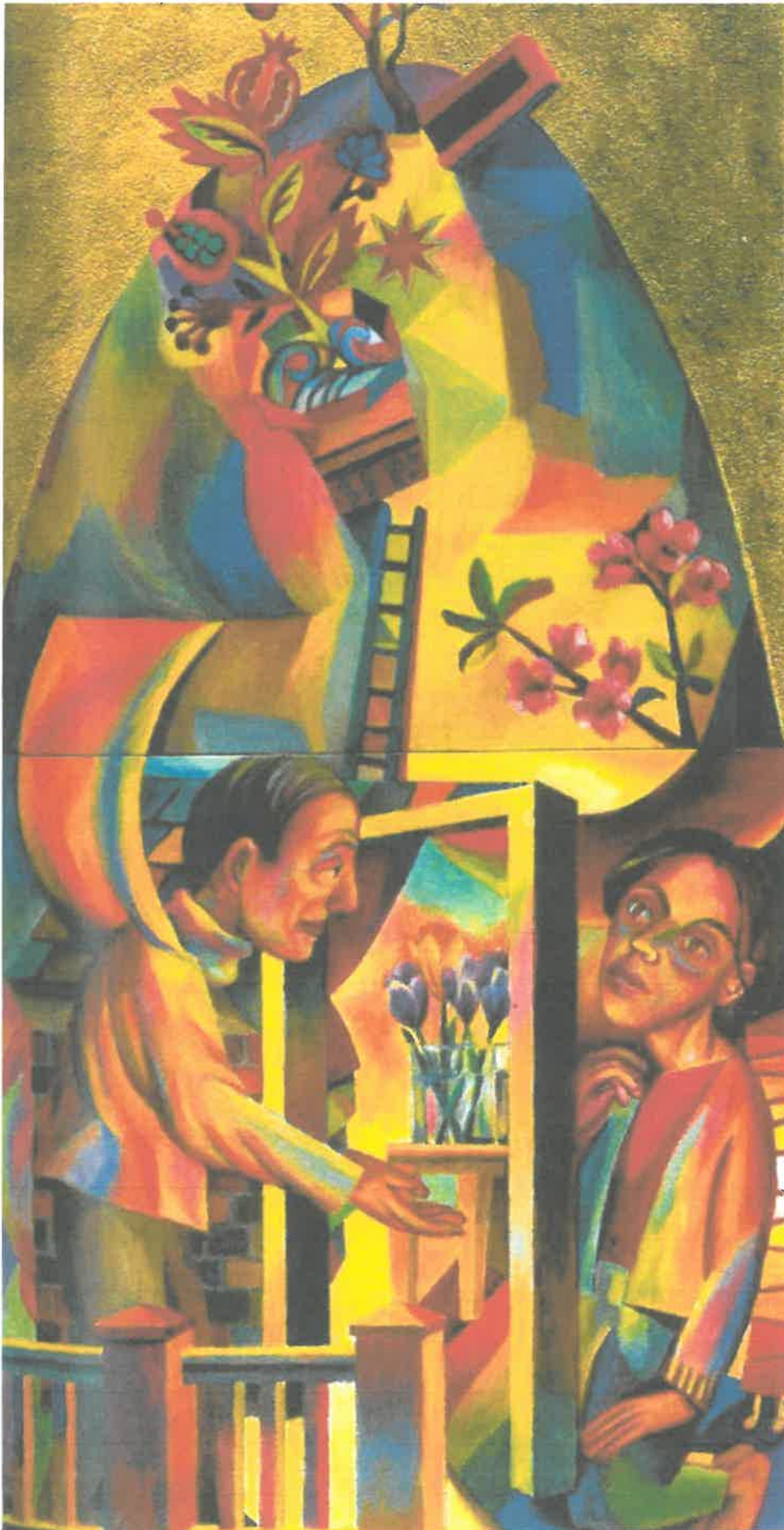
Rag in hand,  
hair across my face,  
I turned to see  
who was entering  
unannounced, unasked.

All I saw was light,  
white against the timbers.  
I heard a voice  
never heard before  
greeting me. I was elected.

the Lord was with me.  
I would bear a son  
who would reign forever.  
I pushed back my hair,  
stood afraid.

Someone closed the door  
And I dropped the rag.

-Killian McDonnell, O.S.B.,  
*In the Kitchen*, 2009





# Reflections on Hope

Either we have hope within us or we don't.

It is a dimension of the soul and it is not essentially dependent on some particular observation of the world.

It is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart.

It transcends the world that is immediately experienced and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizon.

Hope in this deep and powerful sense is not the same as joy that things are going well or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously headed for early success, but rather to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed.

Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism.

It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but certainty that something makes sense regardless of how it turns out.

It is hope above all which gives us the strength to live and try new things.

*\* –Vaclav Havel*

*Playwright and former President of Czechoslovakia 1989-1992*



Day 4

## Mother Most Admirable

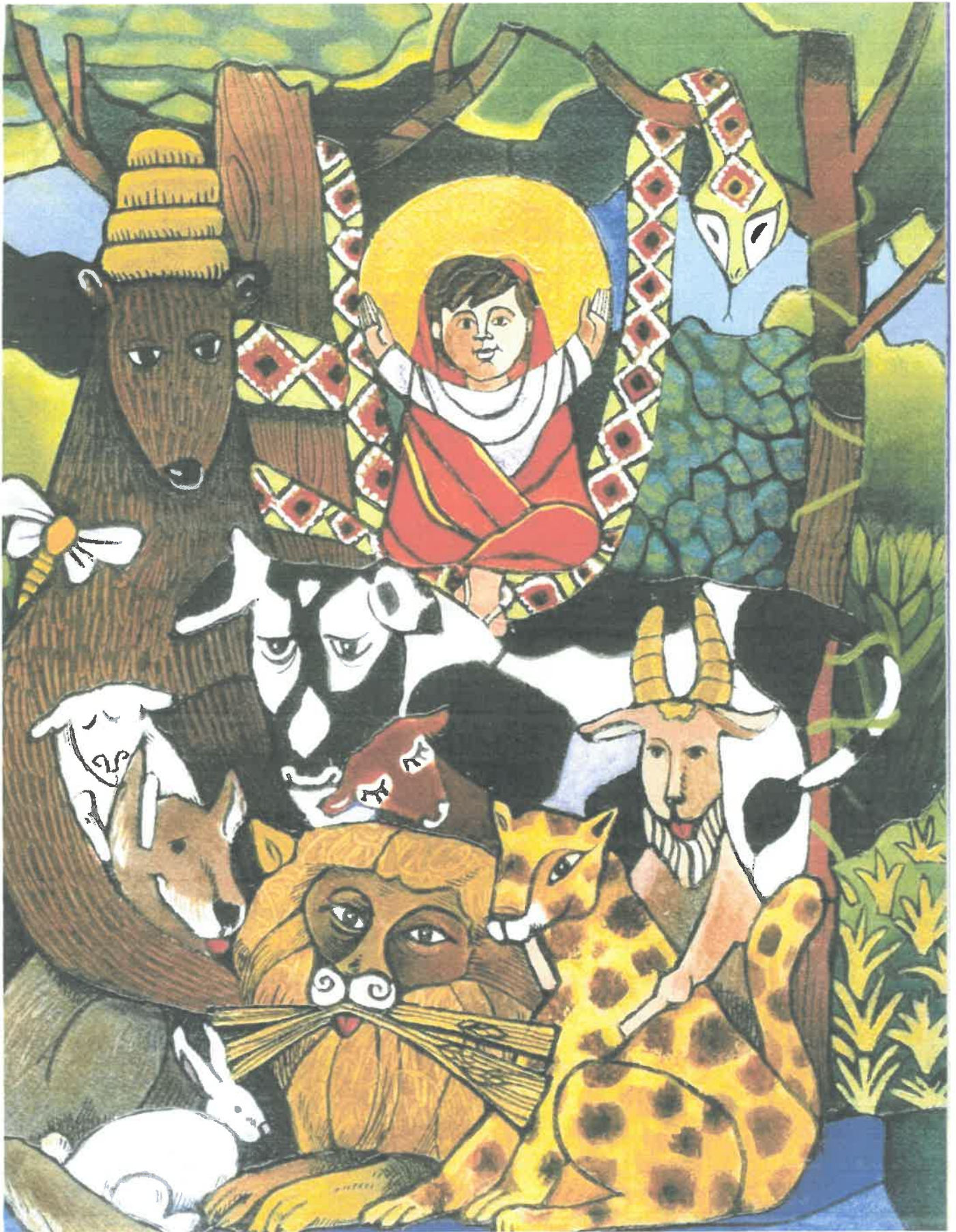


Mother most  
admirable, Treasure  
of calm serenity.

We love her for the light of her lowered  
eyes, for the peace radiating from her  
countenance,  
for her whole being which reveals her inner fullness of  
grace. She is the virgin of the invisible and of the  
essential.

We ask her to detach us from the  
visible, to lead us on and to fix our  
gaze  
on the invisible on which her eyes are  
fixed: the invisible Presence,  
the invisible  
Life, the  
invisible  
Action, the  
invisible Love.

In the midst of non-essentials which invite and often  
beguile us, may she give us a right understanding of the  
essential and a hunger for it.





Day 5

## Prince of Peace

Can we imagine a place like this,  
the wolf and the lamb together,  
the cow and the bear enjoying each other's company?  
The lion is a vegetarian, eating hay,  
and the cobra plays at being a swing for the child.  
Can we imagine it?  
Dare we dream it?  
O what peace, on that holy mountain!

Difficult to picture such a paradise  
in a world gone mad  
with violence, greed, untrammelled ego.

Why are we only half-awake, leading unconscious lives?  
We have blasted the Garden into a battlefield,  
squandered the precious cycles of seasons and hours,  
disdained the expanses of space and galaxies,  
scorned the sparkle of water and sky,  
manufactured the savor of food.

Perhaps we could take a lesson from the animals:  
no competitive egos,  
no power plays,  
no pretensions.

Perhaps we could learn from them  
to be as we were made—  
the image and likeness  
of you, O Prince of Peace.

Inspire us to dream, Holy Child.  
Help us to become what you imagine us to be.

Amen.

*They shall not hurt nor destroy on all my holy mountain:  
for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord.*

*—Isaiah 11:9*

One of my favorite images among the Advent scripture readings comes from the prophet Isaiah, the one where he speaks of the long-awaited Messiah creating a world of complete and total peace.

So transformed will this world be, so at one with heavenly harmony, that even the lion and the lamb will lie down side by side without so much as a whimper, let alone a roar and a chomp. The cow and the bear will be friendly neighbors, and the leopard and the kid-goat will cuddle. While all this is going on, the Child will befriend the poisonous snake or, as in this painting, use it as a swing.

“It’s a jungle out there.” Perhaps the little boy Isaiah grew up with parents who drilled that message into his head, putting his life on eternal orange alert. Ski-masked lions and tigers and bears, oh my! lurk around every corner and cargo hold, waiting to pounce and detonate. Globally warmed natural disasters loom, ever-patient disease and pestilence hover. And then there’s the little stuff, the traffic jams or plane delays when you’re in a hurry; the daily grind of juggling home and work and school; babies, teenagers, spouses. It can all get pretty exhausting. Exactly when, we may ask, does all this king-of-the-peaceful-jungle stuff kick in? When do the fangs and claws of life retract so we can all start getting along, holding hands and teaching each other to sing on a hillside, like those old Coke® commercials?

From the moment each morning when we make the semi-comatose decision to stop hitting the snooze button and really get up this time, we are presented with a plethora of choices to begin that day’s walk through the jungle. When we choose love, not fear, we choose life. We walk through the forest hand in hand with the Prince of Peace, uncovering our own grace, our *shalom*, step by step, tree by tree. We are heaven bound and home free.





Day 6

*O Adonai, ruler of the house of Israel, who appeared to Moses in the burning bush, come and redeem us.*

For the grace of attention to the ways the Lord reveals himself to you in these Advent days.

*O Root of Jesse, standard of the Nations and of kings, whom the whole world implores, come and deliver us.*

For the grace of courage to pray for the peace we all yearn for in this war-torn world.

*O Key of David and Sceptre of the house of Israel, what you open none can shut, come and lead us out of darkness.*

For the grace of awareness that comes as we enter the more contemplative months of our lives.

*O Radiant Dawn, splendor of eternal light and Sun of justice, shine on those lost in darkness, come to enlighten us.*

For the grace of gratitude for your caretakers whose faces are the face of Christ.

*O King of the nations, so long desired, cornerstone uniting humankind, come and save the work of your creation.*

For the grace of continuing to see God in all things and the appreciation that comes with that.

*O Emmanuel, God present in our midst, long awaited Savior and King, come and save us, O Lord our God.*

For the grace of receiving the Christ who is to come.

May the light of Christ shine on you and your loved ones during this Holy Season.

Day 7

## May the Light of Your Soul Guide You

May the light of your soul guide you.  
May the light of your soul bless the work  
You do with the secret love  
and warmth of your heart.  
May you see in what you do the beauty  
of your own soul.  
May the sacredness of your work bring healing,  
Light and renewal to those  
Who work with you and to those who see  
and receive your work.  
May your work never weary you.  
May it release within you wellsprings of  
refreshment, inspiration and excitement.  
May you be present in what you do.  
May you never become lost in the  
bland absences.  
May the day never burden you.  
May dawn find you awake and alert,  
approaching your new day with dreams,  
Possibilities and promises.  
May evening find you gracious and fulfilled.  
May you go into the night blessed,  
sheltered and protected.  
May your soul calm, console and renew you.

—John O'Donohue



## Your Nativity

Imagine the room in which you were born. Allow your imagination to fill in the details of the scene.

See ... hear ... touch ... smell.

Continue as your heart suggests.

Allow your mind's eye to see your mother holding you as a baby.

Move ahead as your heart suggests.

Allow your imagination to see your mom handing you into the arms of Jesus.

Move ahead as your heart suggests.

Watch while Jesus holds you as an infant.  
Move ahead as your heart suggests.

Watch as Jesus holds you and rocks you back and forth. Watch Jesus speak to you as an infant about the unfolding of your life.  
Move ahead as your heart suggests.

Watch as Jesus offers you as a child back to your mom.  
Move ahead as your heart suggests.

Look at your mom holding you.  
Move ahead as your heart suggests.

Allow your eyes to be closed and sit with your own interior self.

Day 8

## Nativity II

Resituate yourself within the scene of the nativity. Allow your imagination to remember the details of the scene.  
Continue as your heart suggests.

Allow your mind's eye to see Mary holding her baby.  
Move ahead as your heart suggests.

Allow your imagination to see Mary handing her baby into your arms.  
Move ahead as your heart suggests.

Spend time holding the infant.  
Move ahead as your heart suggests.

As you hold the child and rock him back and forth, speak to him about the unfolding of his life.  
Move ahead as your heart suggests.

Offer the child back to Mary,  
Move ahead as your heart suggests.

Look at Mary holding the child.  
Move ahead as your heart suggests.

Allow your eyes to be closed and sit with your own interior self.

Day 9

## Let Your God Love You

Be silent.  
Be still.  
Alone.  
Empty  
Before your God.  
Say nothing.  
Ask nothing.  
Be silent.  
Be still.  
Let your God look upon you.  
That is all.  
God knows.  
God understands.  
God loves you  
With an enormous love,  
And only wants  
To look upon you  
With that love.  
Quiet.  
Still.  
Be.  
Let your God—  
Love you.

— Edwina Gately

Day 10

## Announcement of the Birth of Jesus

In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David, and the virgin's name was Mary.

And coming to her, he said, 'Hail, favored one! The Lord is with you.' But she was greatly troubled at what was said and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

Then the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.

Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus.

He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father, and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.'

But Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?'

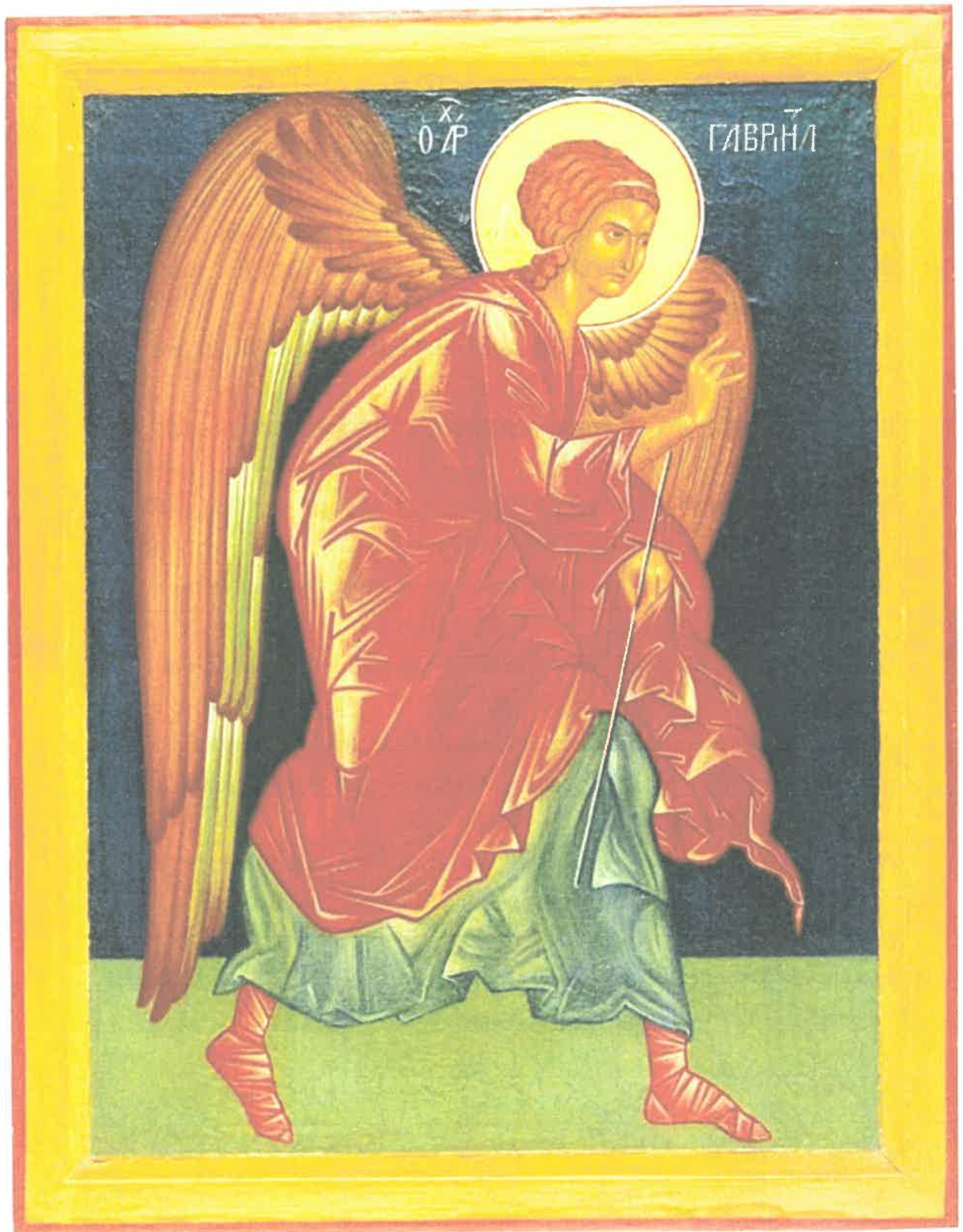
And the angel said to her in reply, 'The holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God.

And behold, Elizabeth, your relative, has also conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her who was called barren, for nothing will be impossible for God.'

Mary said, 'Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her.

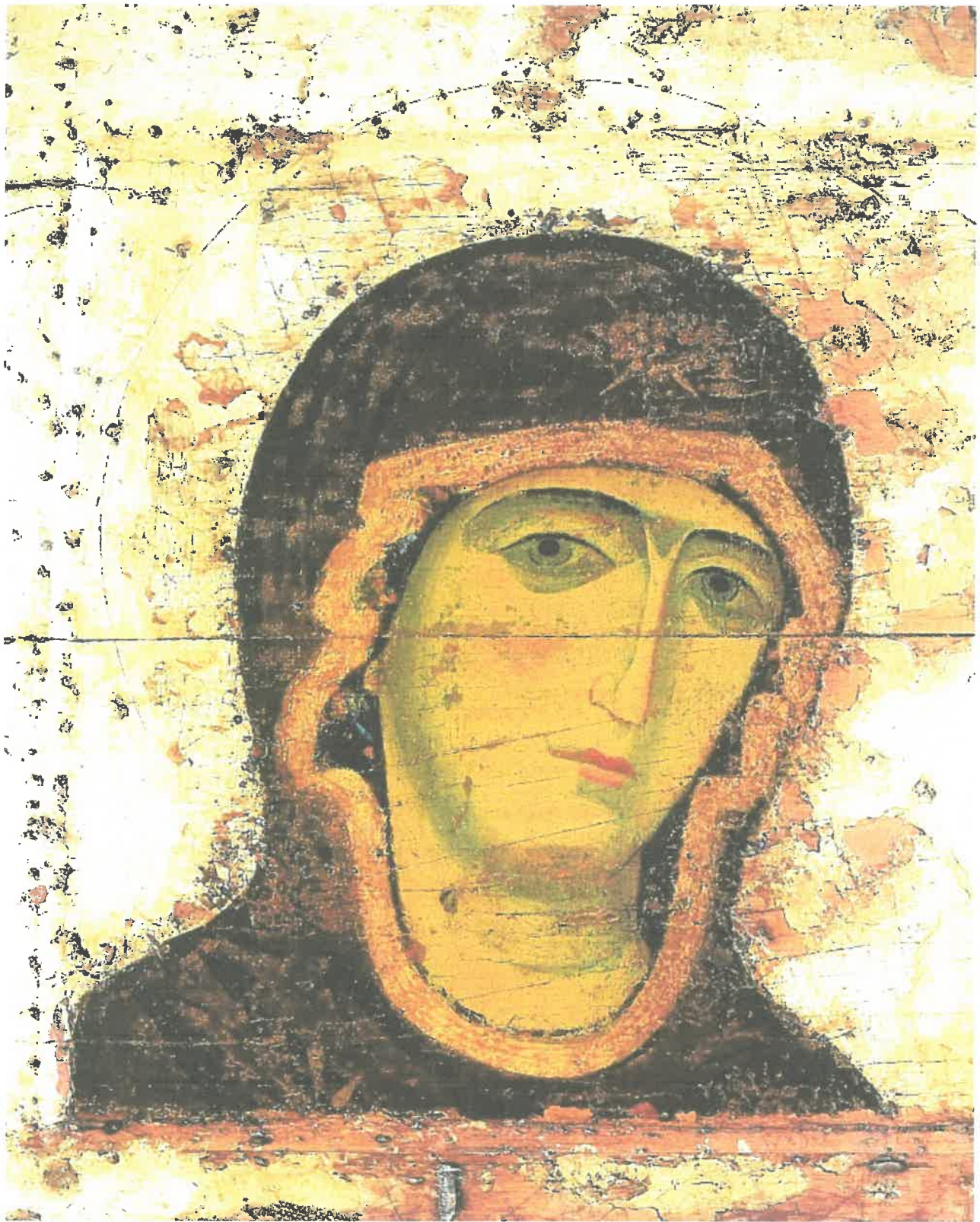
— *Luke 1:26–38*





*The Archangel Gabriel, Solrunn Nes*





*The Mother of God, early 13 c., Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow*



Day 11

## Psalm 23

*(From a Japanese Translation)*

The Lord is my Pace setter, I shall not rush  
He makes me stop and rest for quiet intervals.  
He provides me with images of stillness,  
which deepen my serenity.

He leads me in ways of efficiency  
through calmness of mind,  
and His guidance is peace.  
Even though I have a great many things  
to accomplish each day,  
I will not fret, for His presence is here.

His timelessness, His all importance  
will keep me in balance.  
He prepares refreshment and renewal  
in the midst of my activity.

By anointing my mind with His oils of tranquility.  
My cup of joyous energy overflows.  
Surely harmony and effectiveness  
shall be the fruits of my hours.  
For I shall walk in the pace of my Lord,  
and dwell in His house forever.

— Taki Myashina

Day 12

## Annunciation

*In the days of the creation of the world, when God was uttering his living and mighty “Let there be,” the word of the Creator brought creatures into the world. But on that day, unprecedented in the history of the world, when Mary uttered her brief and obedient, “So be it,” I hardly dare say what happened then—the word of the creature brought the Creator into the world.*

— Metropolitan Philaret of Moscow  
*A Sermon on The Feast of Annunciation, 1874*

From the moment of Mary’s assent, Jesus Christ, though hidden in his mother’s body, is physically present in the world.

In all versions of the Annunciation icon, Mary is on the right, the Archangel Gabriel on the left, while at the top of the icon is a partially revealed dark sphere, symbol of heaven and an indication of the presence of God the Father. In many versions of the icon, a ray of divine power radiates from the sphere toward Mary.

Though normally invisible to our eyes, angels can, when needed, reveal themselves. Rays of light are often used in highlighting angelic robes to suggest their immaterial existence. “Angels [are] bearers of Divine Silence,” wrote Saint Dionysius the Areopagite, “lights of revelation sent by the inaccessible to reveal him on the very threshold of his sanctuary.”

— Jim Forest  
*Praying with Icons*



*The Annunciation, 12 c., Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow*





*The Annunciation*



Day 13



*Our Lady of Vladimir and Church Feasts*

## Master of the Three Virtues

I am, God says, Master of the Three Virtues.

Faith is a loyal wife.

Charity is a fervent mother.

But hope is a very little girl.

I am, God says, the Master of the Virtues.

It is Faith who holds fast through century upon century.

It is Charity who gives herself through centuries of centuries,

But it is my little hope

Who gets up every morning.

says good-day to us...

I am, God says, the Lord of the Virtues.

It is my little hope

who goes to sleep every evening

In her child's bed,

after having said a good prayer,

and who wakes every morning and gets up

and says her prayers with new attention...



## The Mother of God of Tenderness

Mary's was a sublime beauty, making both worlds beautiful.

— Saint Gregory Palamas

One of the most frequently painted of all icons reminds us of the love that binds Mary and Jesus to each other, and also of the connection between Mary and ourselves, for we too are her children. There are numerous variations, but all of them show Christ in his mother's arms with their faces pressed together. One of her hands holds him while the other draws our attention to him, a motion reinforced by the gentle tilt of her head. There is often a subdued sense of apprehension in Mary's face, as if she can already see her son bearing the cross, while Christ seems to be silently reassuring his mother of the resurrection.

This icon is probably the archetype of all icons in which the face of mother and child are touching though other details of the composition vary.

In some versions of the icon—the Vladimir prototype is one—Mary appears to be looking toward the person praying before the icon; in others her gaze is slightly off to the side. In either case, her eyes have an inward, contemplative quality. “The Virgin's eyes,” Henri Nouwen comments, “are not curious, investigating or even understanding, but eyes which reveal to us our true selves.”

Invariably Christ's attention is directed to his mother. Always there is the detail of Christ's bare feet, a vivid symbol of his physical reality: he walked among us, leaving his footprints on the earth.

In some versions of the icon there is an additional detail of love, the arm of Christ around his mother's neck. This too is in the Vladimir prototype.

In contrast to Renaissance religious paintings with a similar subject, in the icon Christ is shown as an infant in size, but his body's proportions are those of a man. A baby's head would be much larger. This is intentional. The timeless and noble face we see pressed against Mary's cheek is Christ Immanuel, the Lord of Creation, and the Glory of God. He wears adult clothing, a tunic and coat woven from gold, the color iconography uses for the imperishable and all that is associated with the kingdom of God. In these details the icon reveals the real identity of the son of Mary.

Over her dress, Mary wears a dark shawl which circles her head, has a golden border and is ornamented with three stars (one is hidden by Christ's body) symbolizing her virginity before, during and after her son's birth. At the same time they suggest that

heaven has found a place in her.



*Our Lady of Vladimir, 12<sup>th</sup> c., Hall Museum Church of St Nicholas, Moscow.*



The icon's triangular composition gives the two figures an immovable solidity. It is also a subtle reminder of the presence of the Holy Trinity in all things.

The center of the composition is at the level of Mary's heart. A much used Orthodox prayer declares, "Beneath your tenderness of heart do we take refuge, O Mother of God." As anyone discovers in coming to know the Mother of God, her heart is as spacious as heaven.

In any version of the icon of the Mother of God of Tenderness, we see Mary's perfect devotion, a dedication so absolute that God finds in her the person who can both give birth to himself and who will ever after serve as the primary model of Christ-centered wholeness—the woman whom all generations will regard as blessed. In her assent to the angelic invitation, Mary said not only on behalf of herself and all her righteous ancestors, but for all generations, "Yes, Lord, come!" Through her all humanity gives birth to Jesus Christ, and through Christ she becomes our mother. She through whom Christ took human flesh also shared in his divinity. As Saint Athanasius of Alexandria wrote, "The Son of God became man, that we might become God." Mary was the first to do so.

— Jim Forest  
*Praying with Icons*

Day 15

## Magnificat

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,  
my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
for he has looked with favor on his humble servant.  
From this day all generations will call me blessed,  
the Almighty has done great things for me,  
and holy is his Name.

He has mercy on those who fear Him  
in every generation.  
He has shown the strength of his arm,  
he has scattered the proud in their conceit.

He has cast down the mighty from their thrones,  
and has lifted up the lowly.  
He has filled the hungry with good things,  
and the rich he has sent away empty.

He has come to the help of his servant Israel  
for he has remembered his promise of mercy,  
the promise he made to our fathers,  
to Abraham and his children forever.  
Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit,  
as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever.  
Amen. Alleluia

*Luke 1:46–55*

Day 16

## The Mother of God of the Sign

*And far beneath the movement of this silent cataclysm Mary slept in the infinite tranquility of God, and God was a child curled up who slept in her and her veins were flooded with His wisdom which is night, which is starlight, which is silence. And her whole being was embraced in Him whom she embraced and they became tremendous silence.*

— Thomas Merton

The Mother of God of the Sign has its roots in a still earlier image found in the Roman Catacombs: Mary in a classical posture of prayer, standing upright with upraised hands. Beginning in the fourth century, iconographers revised the image, adding a rondel within which we see the child she was bearing: Christ Immanuel, “God With Us.” We see him as a young man rather than as an infant, as even in her womb he was the ruler of the cosmos. He is vested in a golden robe and looking outward. In some versions his right hand offers a blessing, while in others his hands, like his mother’s, are extended in a gesture of priestly prayer.

When placed in an iconostasis that includes a tier of icons of the prophets, this icon is placed in the center, for through Mary the prophecies of redemption were at last realized. Mary, daughter of Israel, is the virgin Isaiah saw in the distance of time:

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, a virgin will conceive and bear a son and shall call him Immanuel.

The “sign” Isaiah anticipated is Mary and her son. Hence the name of the icon.

It is an icon full of circles, symbol of wholeness, completeness and perfection. There are the circles around Christ. The two halos are circular. Mary’s hands are angled, as if she were holding up a still larger but invisible circle.

— Jim Forest  
*Praying with Icons*



*Mother of God of the Sign*, 13th c., Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow

The grace she held in fullness is as grace we hold, a silent gift unknown...And peace that made its quietness in her was peace God gave...she had made a place for it...

*“Behold the handmaid of the Lord. Let it done to me according to thy word.”*

This is conclusion: the fires that scorched the prophets’ lips and old consuming fires that burned in Israel’s blood might now be cooled....

This is fulfillment, and the up-reaching hands may now be folded and the long desires that beat, half heard in need, through all the veins may now be eased.

New Testament is made, new visitation, and a full new world that holds much more of mystery, and more of consequence than that which first answered from the nothingness.

And yet, the quiet here retains no trace of great archangel wings. And now that all the words are said that waited to be said, the voices leave no trail of echo after them.... Dust is floating undisturbed, and from a distance comes the muffled noises of moving wheels and sound of daily things.

A moment came, and that is all. A moment came and passed, and in its passing left a young girl here who was now not alone....And the crowded days that stretch beyond will still be bound for her in sun and in the dark. Her steps will still fall upon the dust and leave an imprint there, and tasks will weary her.

This is God’s chosen way: to take men’s way. And so the streets she walks and all the roads; the shepherds and the shepherds’ sheep; the winds, the firelight, Israel’s hill will find just this—no more: a woman, plain upon the earth—a woman wrapped in silence—and in her arms, a Child.

— John W. Lynch  
*Woman Wrapped in Silence*





*The Mother of God of Tenderness-Eleousa, mid 13th c., Russian Museum, St. Petersburg*

Day 17

O God, whose will is justice for the poor  
and peace for the afflicted,  
let your herald's urgent voice  
pierce our hardened hearts  
and announce the dawn of your kingdom.  
Before the Advent of the one who baptizes  
with the fire of the Holy Spirit,  
let our complacency give way to conversion,  
oppression to justice,  
and conflict to acceptance of one another in Christ.  
We ask this through him whose coming is certain,  
whose day draws near:  
your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ,  
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,  
one God, forever and ever. Amen.

Christmas





*The Mother of God Enthroned, late 13th c., Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow*



Day 18

## The Memorare

REMEMBER, O most  
gracious Virgin Mary,  
that never was it  
known that anyone  
who fled to thy  
protection, implored  
thy help, or sought  
thy intercession  
was left unaided.

Inspired with  
this confidence, I  
fly to thee,  
O Virgin of virgins,  
my Mother;  
to thee do I come;  
before thee  
I stand, sinful and  
sorrowful.

O Mother of the Word  
Incarnate, despise  
not my  
petitions, but in  
thy mercy  
hear and answer me.

Amen.





*St. Luke painting an icon of the Mother of God, Michael Damaskenos*



Day 19

## She Who Shows the Way

*Behold the handmaid of the Lord.*

*I am the way, the truth and the life.*

Another icon of Mary and Christ is called, in Greek, *Hodigitria*—She Who Shows the Way, or simply The Guide.

Like the Vladimir Mother of God icon, the original of the Hodigitria icon is regarded as having been painted by the physician and Gospel author, Luke. According to tradition, it was given by Luke to the same Theophilus who received the first copy of the gospel he had written. Could it be? All we can say is that the tradition may be well founded. It is, in any event, Luke's Gospel which gives us the most information about Mary. At the very least, he gives us a portrait of Christ's mother in words. His text is sometimes described as the Gospel According to Mary—an account of the events in her son's life as she witnessed them, from conception to resurrection. While she was not Luke's only source, some of what he recorded could have been known only to her. Having described Mary in words, it is not surprising that he might also have left a visual record.

The original Hodigitria icon was brought from Jerusalem to Constantinople in the fourth or fifth century. Later, during the time of icon destruction, it was hidden behind a wall in the Hodegon Monastery. In times when Constantinople was under siege, the icon was placed on the city walls, regarded as the city's defender.

In contrast to icons of tenderness, the Hodigitria icon is a more formal image in which we see Mary serving as Christ's living throne. Her left hand supports him while her right hand directs our attention to her son. The "way" is Christ himself. The scroll Christ holds in his left hand is the Gospel. His right hand is extended in a gesture of blessing.

In some versions of the icon both mother and son gaze outward toward those standing before the icon. In other variations, they seem to look slightly away, perhaps so as not to cause discomfort to the person at prayer.

In her son's work, Mary is more than a passive bystander. It was at her appeal that Christ performed his first public miracle, changing water into wine at the marriage feast at Cana. It was at Cana that we hear her simple appeal to each person who would follow her son: "Do whatever he tells you." These few words would serve well as another name for this icon.

— Jim Forest  
*Praying with Icons*



*Hodigitria: She Who Shows the Way, 1482 by Dionisius, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow*



Day 20

## Your Nativity

Imagine the room in which you were born. Allow your imagination to fill in the details of the scene.

See ... hear ... touch ...  
smell. Continue as your  
heart suggests.

Allow your mind's eye to see your mother holding you as  
a baby. Move ahead as your heart suggests.

Allow your imagination to see your mom handling you into the arms  
of Jesus. Move ahead as your heart suggests.

Watch while Jesus holds you as an infant.  
Move ahead as your heart suggests.

Watch as Jesus holds you and rocks you back and forth. Watch Jesus speak to you as an  
infant about the unfolding of your life.  
Move ahead as your heart suggests.

Watch as Jesus offers you as a child back to your mom.  
Move ahead as your heart suggests.

Look at your mom holding you.  
Move ahead as your heart  
suggests.

Allow your eyes to be closed and sit with your own interior self.



*Madonna of San Sisto, 7<sup>th</sup> c.*

Day 21

## Nativity II

Resituate yourself within the scene of the nativity. Allow your imagination to remember the details of the scene.

Continue as your heart suggests.

Allow your mind's eye to see Mary holding her baby.

Move ahead as your heart suggests.

Allow your imagination to see Mary handing her baby into your arms.

Move ahead as your heart suggests.

Spend time holding the infant.

Move ahead as your heart suggests.

As you hold the child and rock him back and forth, speak to him about the unfolding of his life. Move ahead as your heart suggests.

Offer the child back to Mary,

Move ahead as your heart suggests.

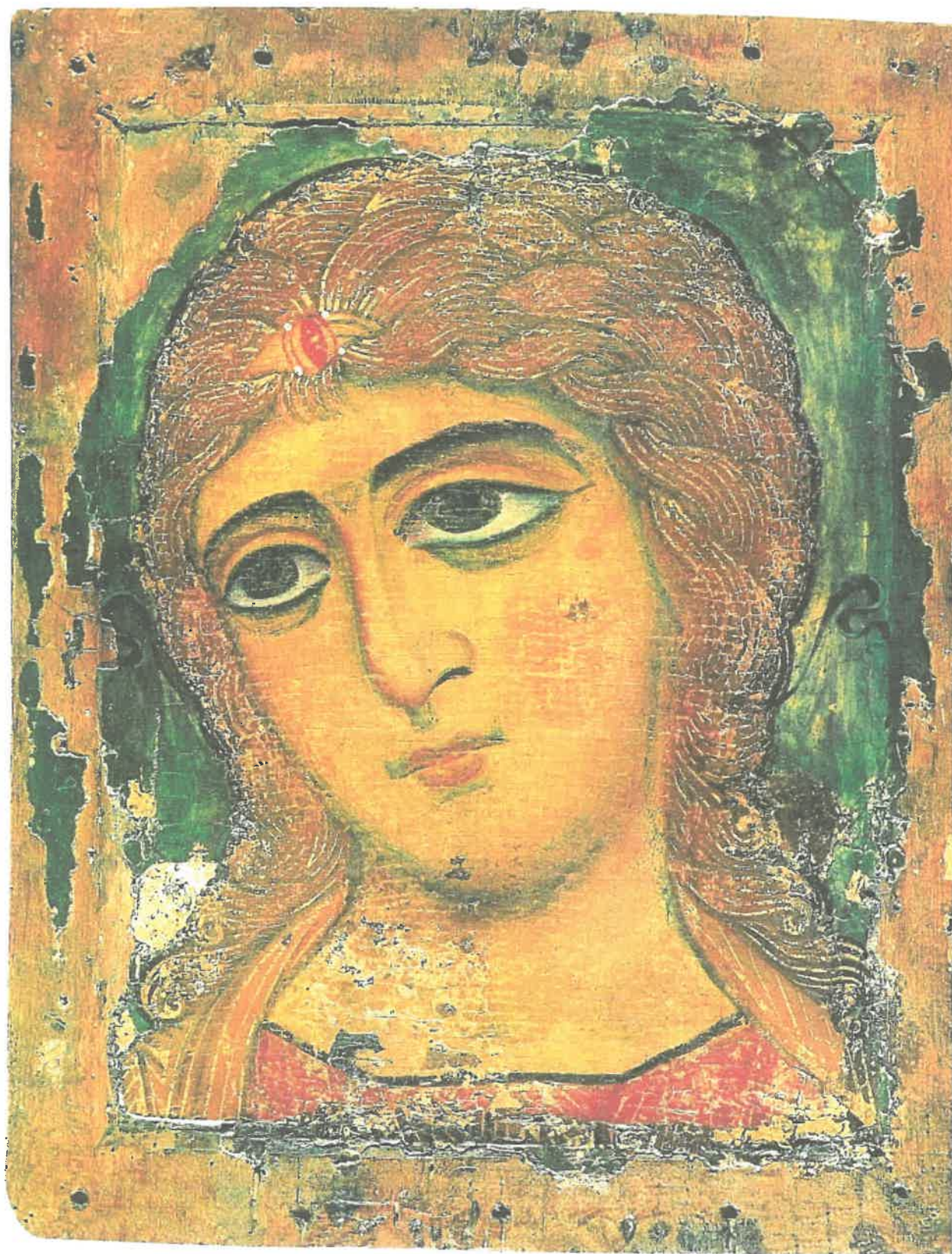
Look at Mary holding the child.

Move ahead as your heart suggests.

Allow your eyes to be closed and sit with your own interior self.

— James Sears





*The Angel with Golden Hair*, late 12<sup>th</sup> c., Russian Museum, St. Petersburg



Day 22



*Joseph*

## Time is Eternity

Time is too slow for those who wait,  
Time is too fast for those who fear,  
Time is too long for those who mourn,  
Time is too short for those who rejoice,  
But for those who love, time is eternity.

— *St. Augustine*



Day 23



*Christ multiplying the loaves & the fishes, Giancarlo Pellegrini*

## The Canticle Singer

It was one of those rare really really cold evenings on the Loaves & Fishes Van. The Van volunteers has prepared 250 sandwiches and 6 gallons of homemade soup. The Van followed its usual route through the city, looking for homeless persons in alleys where the cardboard villages are built each sundown, where overhangs provide a break against some of the rain and weather and wind, where the steam grates provide humid and sometimes dangerous heat against the night's extreme.

At the corner of Saratoga and Cathedral, there was a man sitting on top of the grate, leaning against the building's wall. The Van stopped and unloaded in its usual fashion, some ladling soup, others bagging fruit and a few sandwiches. The Van helpers approached the man, slowly and respectfully, so as not to startle him. He was a bit out of it; alcohol was his companion that night. His toes, in wet socks, were exposed through slits, cut through the tennis shoes that were too short for his feet.

Gentle hands on the man's shoulder helped to rouse him a bit, enough to explain that there was hot soup and sandwiches, and a new pair of boots if he needed them. Kneeling down, offers were made to help his frozen hands to remove his shoes. He, like so many, protested – not wanting to offend anyone's senses with the stench of his unwashed feet. The volunteers persuaded him to allow their assistance. Old, wet socks, exposing dirt and sores, were removed and replaced with fresh new, thick socks. The man accepted the gentle massage to his feet, allowing some warmth and flow to gradually return to his numb feet. With some tugging and pulling, the boots were maneuvered on his feet, and then laced up.

At that point, the man stood up and started to dance with joy. He could have been writing for the Lukan evangelist that night for he glowed with what could only be called a radiant joy, and what he said was fit for a canticle: "Blessed am I among all men on the street tonight, God has given me all I need".

It was a moment that all who were present knew was not of their own doing. There was a sense of abundant life. There was an awareness that the man on the grate and the Van servers had all entered a small corner of the Kingdom, present here, but not yet, each of them doing, perhaps, that for which each was created. The van pulled off. The dancer continued his smile and waving goodbye. On that cold December evening, like some sort of street Santa Claus, the man cried out, "God bless you." That evening, that prayer... was surely answered. God had blessed all who were present. Blessed in ways... that even now, this writer can hardly express. Like so many of the Lord's teachable moments, the lesson is not always easy to describe. You had to be there.

— Sue Cesare  
*Loaves & Fishes*, Baltimore, MD

Day 24

## The Peace of Wild Things

When despair for the world grows in me  
and I wake in the night at the least sound  
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,  
I go and lie down where the wood drake  
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.  
I come into the peace of wild things  
who do not tax their lives with forethought  
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.  
And I feel above me the day-blind stars  
waiting with their light. For a time  
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

— Wendell Berry



Day 25



*Mother of God of the Sign, 12 c, Leonis Ouspensky*

**I**t was as if the human race were a little dark house, without light or air, locked and latched. The wind of the Spirit had beaten on the door, rattled the windows, tapped on the dark glass with the tiny hands of flowers, flung golden seed against it, even, in hours of storm, lashed it with the boughs of a great tree — the prophesy of the Cross — and yet the Spirit was outside. But one day a girl opened the door, and the little house was swept pure and sweet by the wind. Seas of light swept through it, and the light remained in it; and in that little house a child was born and the Child was God.

— Caryl Houselander  
*The Reed of God*

## Devotion to Christ's Mother

*Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you.*  
— Luke 1:28

One of the earliest non-biblical texts about Mary is found in the letters of Saint Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, written about 90 AD, while he was en route to his martyrdom in Rome:

And the virginity of Mary was hidden from the ruler of this world, as were her giving birth and likewise the death of the Lord—three secrets to be cried out aloud which were accompanied by the silence of God.

Elsewhere Ignatius writes of the Lord being born “out of Mary and out of God.” Late in the second century we find Saint Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyon, describing Mary as the new Eve:

Just as Eve, wife of Adam, yet still a virgin...became by her disobedience the cause of death for herself and the whole human race, so Mary, too, espoused yet a virgin, became by her obedience the cause of salvation for herself and the whole human race...And so it was that the knot of Eve's disobedience was loosed by Mary's obedience.

For the fourth-century poet and hymn writer, Saint Ephraim the Syrian, Mary is “your mother, your sister, your spouse, your servant.”

In modern times, the theologian Alexander Schmemmann has written:

And so we ask ourselves, what is the strength of [icons of Mary]? What help do they give us?...What the Mother of God's image gives us first of all is the image of a woman. Christ's first gift to us, the first and most profound revelation of his teaching and call, is given to us in the image of a woman. Why is this so important, so comforting and so redeeming? Precisely because our world has become so completely and hopelessly male, governed by pride and aggression, where all has been reduced to power and weapons of power, to production and



weapons of production, to violence, to the refusal to willingly back down or make peace in anything or to keep one's mouth shut and plunge into the silent depth of life. The image of the Virgin Mary, the Virgin Mother, stands against all this and indicts it by her presence alone: the image of infinite humility and purity, yet filled with beauty and strength; the image of love and the victory of love.

The Virgin Mary, the All-Pure Mother, demands nothing and receives everything. She pursues nothing, and possesses all. In the image of the Virgin Mary we find what has almost completely been lost in our proud, aggressive, male world: compassion, tender-heartedness, care, trust, humility. We call her our Lady and the Queen of heaven and earth, and yet she calls herself "the handmaid of the Lord."

No saint is represented in iconography in so many ways as Mary.

In the most ancient images of her, she is shown alone in prayer, her hands lifted toward heaven. The earliest surviving examples of this image are found in various catacombs. In such images she is referred to as the Mother of God Orans—the one who prays. We see her both as humanity's intercessor before Christ and as the personification of wisdom. Appropriately, one of the best examples of the Orans-Holy Wisdom icon is a mosaic that towers over the altar in the Holy Wisdom Cathedral in Kiev.

In a later development of this icon, a rondel or mandorla with an image of Christ is placed over her robes, thus making visible her unborn child. This is the icon known as "The Mother of God of the Sign." The icon makes visible the divine son who was present in her womb, shown wearing the garments of a ruler.

In most icons of Mary, she is holding Christ in her arms. Though these icons have hundreds of variations, always one hand gestures toward her son, the action that sums up her entire life to the present day. She wants us to meet her son and invites us to allow him to become the center point of our lives.

— Jim Forest  
*Praying with Icons*



*The Virgin and Child, late 12 c., Kremlin Cathedral of the Dormition, Moscow*

Day 26

## The Welcome

No music He heard, and no angels He saw  
As He lay in His wrappings of linen and straw;  
And the ox and the ass could not kneel and adore  
For the poor creatures never were angels before.

The palace He found was an old cattle stall  
With a broken-down roof and a windowless wall,  
And it looked so ashamed of its spider-worn wood;  
But it tried to be Heaven, as well as it could.

A dull stable-lantern that hung dark and dim  
Was the small bit of moonlight that flickered on Him.  
Now it longed to be beautiful, starry and bright,  
And it sputt red and wept for the dearth of its light.

But a Lady of Beauty stood over His head  
While she gathered the strewnings about for His bed.  
And her soul was as sweet as a fresh-budding rose  
And as white as the fusion of myriad snows

And her hands did not soil this immaculate prize,  
And her breath did not sully the bloom in His eyes.  
On her breast sweet and safe He could slumber and nod;  
This lily-white village-maid, Mother of God.

L.F., S.J.





*Mother of God with resting Jesus*

Day 27

Beloved Lover of humankind,

Soften our hearts so that we too may have compassion for those who suffer,  
so that we too may give gladly of our time and treasure to those in need.

May nothing we do be done in strife, but in confidence and in peace.

May nothing we do be done in foolish pride, but in lowliness of mind let us  
esteem others as greater than ourselves.

May we esteem the needs of others as greater than our own.

May we look with kindness and compassion upon their burdens.

May our hearts become as tender wombs prepared to receive your grace,  
that in due time may we bring forth the joyful fruit of your Spirit.

May this mind be in us, which was also in Christ Jesus: That being God be  
made himself impoverished, and took upon himself the form of a servant,  
bumbled himself, and was obedient unto death—yet a death that has  
brought all to life.

May we suspect our own power to say yes to whatever our God asks of us.

We ask this in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy  
Spirit, both now and ever, and unto the ages of ages. Amen.

— Scott Cairns

# Oh Come, Oh Come, Immanuel!



*Christ Immanuel, Mosaic San Marco, Venice*



