

THEOTOKOS

Mary the God-bearer

a contemplative journey with Mary through Advent

Introduction

There are many ways to think of the story of scripture. One way is to think of it as a series of miraculous births: Sarah gave birth to Isaac in her old age; Moses was adopted by the daughter of the man trying to kill him; Hannah gave birth to the prophet Samuel though she was barren; and Elizabeth was the same, giving birth to John the Baptist.

The God of Israel is constantly defying expectations, bringing life out of barrenness and hope out of apparently hopeless situations. God's promises are not ultimately fulfilled through magnificent displays of power or wrath, nor through military conquest led by great warlords, but through a series of childbirths by faithful women, who nurtured life in their womb.

Seen in the light of this remarkable history, the birth of Jesus Christ by the Virgin Mary is not exactly new. God seems to have a penchant for working in this unsuspecting way. The miraculous birth of Jesus is entirely consistent with — and the crowning fulfilment of — the story of a God, whose salvation is literally being birthed in the world.

In the Eastern tradition of Christianity, Mary is often called *theotokos* — God-bearer. It is a confronting image and one with profound implications for us. What if we can learn from Mary something of our experience of God? What if we are, in a sense, God-bearers too? What if God's salvation is coming into the world through us? What if Christ is being nurtured in us, finding space within us to grow, flourish, and transform the world? What if our bodies are holy temples, dwelling places for God? After all, the Spirit who conceived Christ in Mary is the same Spirit poured out on you and me at Pentecost.

This Advent series invites us to explore that simple idea together. Through careful reading of Mary's story, we will listen for the Spirit's prompting in our own lives, imagining ourselves like Mary as bearers of God into the world.

A bit about the Advent series...

The series assumes that each one of us is a God-bearer. God is coming into the world through you and me and so we should expect we will encounter God in one another, in our conversations, in our listening, in our mutual care for one another. Each discussion will focus on a passage of scripture with no agenda except to listen for what God is saying to us and through us.

The use of iconography. In the Eastern tradition, iconography is an important conduit for prayerful contemplation. Often Protestant traditions have been suspicious of “idolatrous” images of God. But it is a misunderstanding of icons to think of them as idols. Rather, we can think of them as taking seriously the truth of the incarnation: that God is made fully known in the human Jesus Christ. To look upon Christ is to see God. Icons are not themselves the object of worship but, through their depictions of Christ and other biblical figures, they can serve as an aid to our prayer, as we enter into the mystery of God-with-us.

Mary is a common subject for icons. There are a number of ways that she is typically depicted in iconographic art, each pointing to different mysteries for us to contemplate. Each session of this series will feature an icon alongside the bible passage to aid in our contemplation together.

A contemplative reading of scripture. Each session of the series will feature a reading from Luke’s gospel. We are invited to attend carefully to the story, to imagine ourselves in it, to listen for a word, a phrase, a thought that stands out. Do you identify with Mary? Or with another character? Where are you in the story? What is your reaction to the story, not only in your mind but in your heart as well?

This kind of imaginative or contemplative way of reading is a technique for entering more deeply and personally into the scripture passage. We are allowing our own lives to be, in a sense, read by the passage. We are assuming that God has something to say to us in the passage. As the stories of scripture shape our lives, we are invited to become actors in the story, participating in God’s advent in the world.

Advent 1: The Annunciation



"Our Lady of the Sign", 18th Century Iconostasis, Kizhi Monastery, Russia

Gathering

O Lord, open our lips,
that our mouths may proclaim your praise.

Lighting of the first Advent candle

Make your home in us, Holy Spirit of God,
that our lives, body and soul,
may be a temple to your glory.

Clear space in our hearts for hope to grow.

May your salvation be birthed in the world through us.

In Jesus' name, Amen.

Icon: Theotokos Oranta - Mary praying

What do you notice about the icon?

Scripture: Luke 1:26-38 (The Annunciation)

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you."

But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "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 holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God."

Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

What resonated with you in the passage?

What challenged you in the passage?

What might God be saying to us for our context today?

What might God be saying to you in your life?

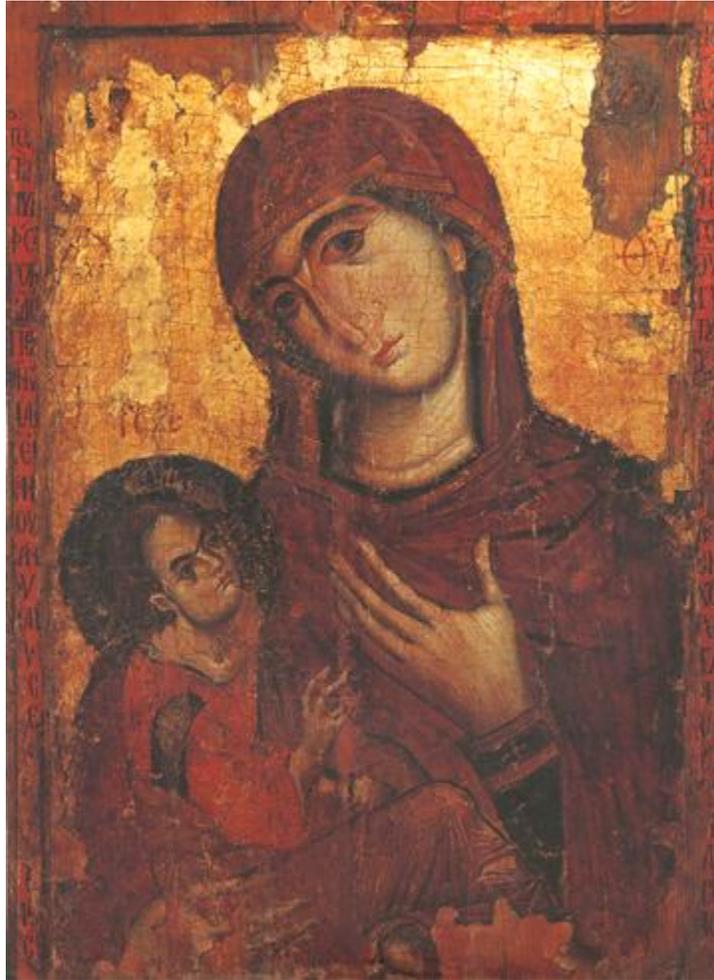
Sending

Based on Luke 2:29-32

In patient listening and in honest speaking,
in prayerful pondering and in mutual caring,
in trusting vulnerability and in earnest questioning,
you have been with us, tonight, O God.

And you will go with us into the night.
Send us, your servants, in peace,
according to your Word,
For our eyes have seen your salvation,
which you prepare in our presence.
It is an enduring light in the darkness
so that we may know you and glorify you
this day and every day. Amen.

Advent 2: Mary Visits Elizabeth



Gathering

O Lord, open our lips,
that our mouths may proclaim your praise.

Lighting of the second Advent candle

Fill us with your eye-opening Spirit, O God,
that we may learn to recognise Christ in one another.

May we call one another blessed,
sharing each other's joys and burdens.

We pray in the name of Jesus, who stirs up contagious joy in us.
Amen.

Icon: Theotokos Hodegetria - Mary the guide

What do you notice about the icon?

Scripture: Luke 1:39-45

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

What resonated with you in the passage?

What challenged you in the passage?

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What might God be saying to you in your life?

Sending

Based on Luke 2:29-32

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And you will go with us into the night.
Send us, your servants, in peace, according to your Word,
for our eyes have seen your salvation, which you prepare in our presence.
It is an enduring light in the darkness so that we may know you
and glorify you this day and every day. Amen.

Advent 3: Mary's Song of Praise



Gathering

O Lord, open our lips,
that our mouths may proclaim your praise.

Lighting of the third Advent candle

We lift our hearts to you, O God, as you lift up the lowly.

Dethrone all that is proud and self-serving within us,
and magnify all that is meek and humble.

For you overturn the ways of the world,
raising up those who have been brought low,
and granting them immeasurable worth in your glorious presence.

In Jesus' name, Amen.

Icon: Theotokos Panakranta - Mary enthroned

What do you notice about the icon?

Scripture: Luke 1:46-55

And Mary said,
“My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

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What challenged you in the passage?

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Sending

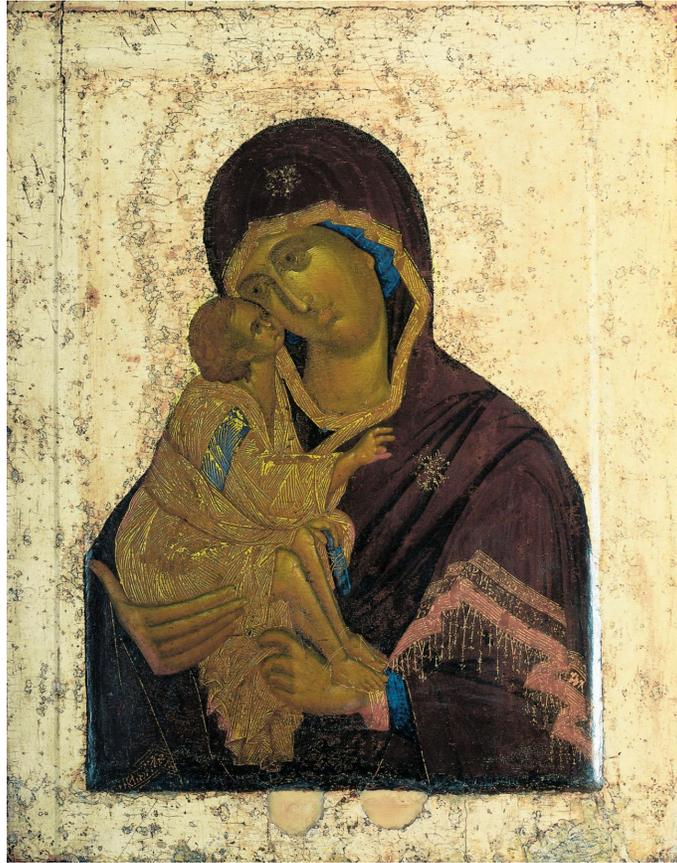
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And you will go with us into the night.

Send us, your servants, in peace, according to your Word,
for our eyes have seen your salvation, which you prepare in our presence.
It is an enduring light in the darkness so that we may know you
and glorify you this day and every day. Amen.

Advent 4: The Birth of Jesus



"Our Lady of the Don", 14th C., Donskoy Monastery

Gathering

O Lord, open our lips,
that our mouths may proclaim your praise.

Lighting of the fourth Advent candle

Hold us in our weariness and in our pain, embracing God.
And by your Spirit, open our hearts, that our pain and suffering
may become a vehicle for your compassionate love coming into the world.
May our suffering be a sign of Christ's nearness with us,
as your new creation is born within us, between us, and around us.
In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Icon: Theotokos Eleusa - Mary of Tenderness

What do you notice about the icon?

Scripture: Luke 2:1-20

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

“Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favours!”

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

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What might God be saying to you in your life?

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