

THE LIGHT SHINES  
IN THE DARKNESS,  
AND THE  
DARKNESS HAS NOT  
OVERCOME IT.

JOHN 1:5



*Reflections for the Season of Advent*



## ABOUT THE ARTIST

### KIM A. RIVERA

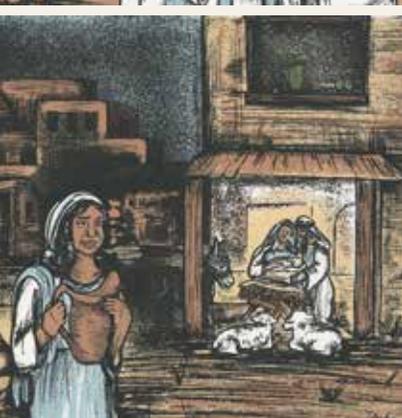
Our artist for the 2021 Advent art, Kim A. Rivera, desires to create work that brings forth truth, conveys emotion and challenges the viewer to reflect on the art. “We live in an ever-evolving world filled with distractions, conflict and a need for efficiency. Our relationships and appreciation to the world continues to change and evolve with the culture that surrounds us.”

Kim said she creates because art is universal, relational and evocative. “Art forces us to pause and contemplate what is immediately in front of us while guiding us to a deeper truth. Through art we can foster community, form a newfound appreciation of the world and people around us, and prompt change through beauty.”

For more information about Kim and to explore more of her work, we invite you to check out her website at: [www.kimarivera.com](http://www.kimarivera.com).

### HOW IT'S MADE

Screen printing is a stencil-based printmaking technique. Ink is pushed through unblocked sections of a fine mesh screen with a squeegee using different “stencil-based” methods. The primary method Kim prefers is photo emulsion. In this process, a screen is coated with a light-sensitive solution and stored in a dark room. Designs are either created digitally and printed, hand drawn on transparencies or stenciled using Rubylith or other light-blocking material. Once the screen is ready for light exposure, the designs get placed on an exposure unit with the mesh side of the screen on top. A vacuum seals the screen and designs in place and exposes light for a predetermined time. When complete, the unexposed areas of the screen are washed away with water leaving behind a stencil on the emulsion that allows ink to pass through. The prepared screen then gets secured to a printing station, the paper gets registered under the screen and ink gets pushed through the open sections of the screen. Finally, this process can be repeated to layer different colors on top of each other to compose the finished artwork.





*CHA is pleased to offer a Visio Divina reflection series to support its members through their Advent journey. Each week participants are invited to consider the hope, excitement, wonder and confusion of the story from a unique perspective. While perhaps not always given significant attention, these oft-overlooked characters of the Nativity story have much to contribute to the spiritual life. Built around five newly commissioned works of art, imaginative prayer and invitations to reflection, the series is offered digitally as well as in print.*

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## **VISIO DIVINA**

The prayer of Visio Divina, or “divine seeing,” involves the contemplation of art in conversation with God. In a society that is evermore inundated with images, Visio Divina invites us to slow down and truly look. We open the eyes of our soul and see how God is illuminated for us in art. This practice does not require any special knowledge or appreciation of art, just a willingness to attend to and interact with the colors, textures, forms and overall impressions. As you gaze on the piece, taking in each detail and being attentive to the feelings that arise as you gaze, Visio Divina is an invitation to wonder. The image comes alive with personal meaning meant just for us at this point in our spiritual journey.

## **IMAGINATIVE PRAYER**

Distinct from but related to Visio Divina, imaginative prayer involves the act of placing yourself in a particular scripture scene and imagining yourself an active participant in it. We play the story out in our mind’s eye as though it were a movie, paying attention to the sights, sounds, smells and feelings of the event.

We connect with the characters: We feel what they feel, hear what they hear, smell what they smell and actively participate in the story. In short, we daydream as though we are there and let our imaginations run wild.

Through visualizing the story as though we are an active participant in it, and in this case, using art to support us in our prayer, we make present to ourselves the ways in which God is speaking to our current life’s context. How do we relate in this present season to a story we already know? How does knowing the story but approaching it from a different perspective change or shift our experience of it? As you can imagine, using art and Visio Divina as a starting point for our prayer can be helpful in visualizing the scene so that, as we place ourselves there, we notice more readily that which God is calling us to notice. Indeed, we use our imaginations to dig into the story as it relates to our lived experience so that God can connect with us in a deeply personal way, and so that we might more intimately connect with God’s desires for us.



*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.*

LUKE 1:26-31

# THE ANGEL GABRIEL EN ROUTE TO MARY

## WEEK ONE

As you gaze on the image of the angel Gabriel, where do your eyes linger? What do you notice? Can you imagine yourself there on the journey with Gabriel, God's messenger? Angels can be difficult beings to truly appreciate. Historically, in some parts of the Hebrew scriptures, angels are described as potentially terrifying individuals: amalgamated animal bodies of varying terror with wings and other oddities. In other places, angels take on a more familiar human form but with an added transcendence that is difficult for words to capture. To complicate things further, as beings that are not bound by time, angels are privy to knowledge of both human events and Godly events in a way that we might never fully understand.

In this case, as we encounter ourselves journeying with Gabriel to the Annunciation, consider Gabriel's perspective. Having been with God since the beginning of time, and as someone who will continue to know God's goodness until the end of time, there will be much for Gabriel to communicate with Mary in their visit. Gabriel knows the story, perhaps not unlike how we do in our own time. How many times in our lifetimes have we heard the Christmas story? Of course, there is the matter of a Savior to be born, of God coming to earth in human form and as a vulnerable infant, no less. But also, there is the matter that she, an unwed teenager, will become pregnant with that Savior, and likely has countless questions as to how it will all come to pass.

Unlike Mary, Gabriel has the benefit of knowing what is to happen, and of the transformation the world will see as a result of the infant Jesus. Gabriel knows of the radical shift Jesus' life and ministry will bring to the world, and the ways in which humanity will be called to live out that shift for ages to come. Finally, Gabriel knows well God's unwavering commitment of love to God's people, it is at the essence of Gabriel's very being and is a love that also endures into our own.

As you imagine yourself there with Gabriel en route to share with Mary this unbelievable news, how do you relate? Perhaps we are like Gabriel: We know the story of what will happen and, having experienced its goodness, we are eager to live into its hope fully.

Angelic tradition reminds us that angels like Gabriel are to be understood as "ministering spirits." They are unique conduits of the divine in that while they communicate decisions of God, they are also ministers, beings intended to guide us back toward God. Angels walk with us in that which troubles us, and like Gabriel to Mary, remind us that "the Lord is with you."

Who are the ministering spirits in your life? As you continue your journey with and toward God, where in your life are you encountering Gabriel? Conversely, how are we a ministering spirit to others? How do our own words and actions serve as a reminder to others of God's unwavering commitment to us?

# THE ANNUNCIATION AND ST. ANN

## WEEK TWO

In gazing on the image of St. Ann, Mary's mother, with Mary and Gabriel, what do you notice? Where do you see yourself? Can you imagine yourself there? Maybe you stand next to St. Ann outside the door, or maybe you're a friend who was visiting Mary when Gabriel arrives. Wherever you are in this image, consider the perspective of St. Ann.

A mother brings her daughter's laundry to her, a simple act of love, and encounters this most incredible sight. As she waits to be permitted entry, hoping to give her daughter privacy, she learns astonishing news.

*"How can this be?"*

Surely, this is a question Mary's mother is also asking: "How can this be? And why must this happen to *my* daughter?"

As any parent can relate, Ann is both protective and in awe of her child. In these trying years of pandemic, our communities have borne witness to many difficult things the children in our lives have carried with grace — mask wearing, virtual school, an inability to spend time with family and friends. Not only have we stood in awe of their courage but we have worked tirelessly to protect them from harm and encourage them in the face of uncertainty. Similarly, Ann hopes to support her

child in whatever way she can, and especially in the uncertainty she faces in freely choosing to give birth to the Son of God. How do you imagine St. Ann comforting Mary in those first few moments after the angel Gabriel leaves her? Perhaps they sit speechless for a while, or cry together in wonder and fear.

The story of the Annunciation is one of relationship and accompaniment. God reaches out to us, expresses a desire for intimacy with us and then leaves us to freely choose whether or not to engage in relationship. However, we are never alone. Rather, we are offered accompaniment, support and encouragement in the form of those who love us and in those relationships with family and friends who are similarly seeking holiness.

What is God asking you to bring into the world? Who is supporting you in it? How do your relationships with the "St. Anns" of our lives help us to better hold space for what God is doing in it? Conversely, how are you supporting others in their own journey toward holiness? Finally, when life feels difficult or impossible, whose accompaniment reminds you of God's desire for you?



*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. Mary said, “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word.”*

LUKE 1:34-35; 38



*Once when [Zechariah] was serving as priest in his division's turn before God, the angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right of the altar of incense. Zechariah was troubled by what he saw, and fear came upon him. But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, because your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall name him John. Then Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years." And the angel said to him in reply, "I am Gabriel, who stand before God. I was sent to speak to you and to announce to you this good news. But now you will be speechless and unable to talk until the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled at their proper time."*

LUKE 1:8, 11-13, 18-20

# THE VISITATION AND ZECHARIAH

## WEEK THREE

As you gaze upon the image of Zechariah and the visitation of Mary and Elizabeth, what captures your attention? Where do your eyes linger? Is it the figure of the two women — one older and one younger — both with unexpected but welcome pregnancies? Or is it the watchful face of Zechariah peering out the window? Can you place yourself there with them? Imagine the excited and nervous exclamations between Mary and Elizabeth and the contrast of Zechariah's silence.

Zechariah is a small but meaningful figure in the events leading up to the birth of Jesus. Like Mary, he received a visit from an angel telling him that he would have a son. But unlike Mary, Zechariah's questions are met with divine frustration. He is punished with silence for second-guessing God's plan. For the duration of his wife Elizabeth's pregnancy, Zechariah is made mute, unable to speak. The father of John the Baptist, of God's "voice crying out in the desert," is silenced.

Silence can be both liberating and terrifying. Take a moment to attend to the noises around you now. Is it loud or quiet where you are? Are there natural or mechanical sounds? How loud are the thoughts in your head or the feelings that reside below the surface?

External silence is one thing, but internal quiet is another. In what ways do we sometimes crave noise, as a means of avoiding the thoughts or feelings that can rise up out of the silence? As a priest, Zechariah would have spent most of his days praying and teaching; he would've spent time

in the temple talking with his peers about scripture and working with worshippers. His voice might've been a constant companion; and his internal monologue, perhaps like our own, might have also been constant.

Do we live our lives that way today? Externally, television, radio and social media are always running like a ticker in the background. Our patients, residents and co-workers have needs to be met, as do our families and personal lives. Internally, we roll through our to-do lists, reflect on past conversations and plan future agendas. The noise and clamor are endless. It is no wonder that we can sometimes be like Zechariah. It is no wonder that when something sacred happens — when an angel of God shows up directly in front of us — we might miss it entirely. Are we too preoccupied with our own noise to receive the divine message?

Zechariah's silence is the silence of Advent. Like him, we are called to watch and wait for the fulfillment of God's promise. We are called to spend time in Advent listening for God's message of fulfilled hope and miraculous change. We are called to cast aside not only our doubts but also the limitations our disbelief puts on God. Instead, consider how the answers we seek might actually reside in silence. To what does the silence of Advent call you? How are we being called to trust in the good that has been promised?

# THE MAGI SET UP CAMP

## WEEK FOUR

As you consider the image of the Wisemen, where do your eyes linger? What do you notice? Can you place yourself there on the road to Bethlehem? Perhaps with sore muscles and an aching back, you can feel the strain of a day walking and riding. What feelings or thoughts do you imagine them to be having: Are they excited to be near their journey's end, anxious about what they may find or frustrated by another change in plan? After being warned in a dream, do they remember it the same way? Or are their ideas for who and what they might find under the star conflicting or fading?

In beginning their journey, the Magi take a not insignificant leap of faith. They see a new star rising, read the signs and set out in search of that which is wonderfully mysterious. Steadily and faithfully, the three make their way toward Bethlehem in search of something hoped for but yet unknown.

Each of us also has some similar “call” placed on our hearts — an unexplainable desire or vocation from God that can be difficult to articulate to others. It may be our call to serve in health care, to work for justice, to care for a family, to advocate for the environment, to serve the elderly. Whatever the call, it is ours to follow or ignore. Like the Wisemen, we can't know where it will lead us or how it will end. Indeed, living out our unique vocation is our participation in God's work in the world. Especially during Advent, we are called to find and live our vocation, and uncover how we can bear Christ into the world in our actions and words.

Importantly, we do not do it alone. God doesn't call the Wisemen on a fool's errand. They journey at the same time Gabriel journeys to make his announcement to Mary. As Joseph frets about ending his engagement, and Mary is on her way to Elizabeth, the Magi faithfully follow the promise of the star. Each of them individually face their personal calling from God, but also find comfort in the community of one another and those with whom they travel.

Neither does God call **us** on a fool's errand.

The vocation of Catholic health care — to bring God's healing to life in the world — comes with its own challenges and struggles, exhaustions and bumps in the road. We, too, perhaps, experience the sore muscles, the aching back, the physical and emotional strain of the work no matter how good the work is. Just as the Wisemen don't travel alone, neither do we. We move forward together. We never know how our journeys and paths will cross with others or where our gifts and talents might be needed. Like the Wisemen and other characters of the Advent Christmas story, we have those serving alongside us to share the joys, sorrows and frustrations of the journey.

In these last two weeks of Advent, consider what the star is that you are following. What is the vocation that God is asking you to give life to in the world today? What are the gifts you bring to the ministry? Who are your traveling companions and how can you continue to support each other in the strain of the work?



*After [the Magi's] audience with the king they set out. And behold, the star that they had seen at its rising preceded them, until it came and stopped over the place where the child was. They were overjoyed at seeing the star, and on entering the house they saw the child with Mary his mother. They prostrated themselves and did him homage. Then they opened their treasures and offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed for their country by another way.*

MATTHEW 2:9-12



*Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.*

THE BIRTH OF JESUS — LUKE 2:4-7

# THE NATIVITY AND THE MIDWIVES

## CHRISTMAS

As you gaze on this image of the nativity, where do your eyes linger? What do you notice? Can you place yourself there ... perhaps in the window enjoying a warm beverage, or fetching water with the midwife? How is it both different from and similar to other nativities you have seen? Have you ever wondered who might have helped Mary deliver her child? What if the birth of Jesus didn't happen in a secluded stable, but in a home overflowing with guests?

Tradition and legend tell us Jesus was born in a stable. We see image after image that portrays the living God taking his first breath in a barn in the middle of nowhere alone with his mother, foster father and a handful of farm animals. After all, there was no room for them in the inn, and the manger bed was the best that could be managed. And yet, what if it wasn't that way? What if it isn't the dramatic story of a frantic young father and his actively laboring wife seeking shelter in a motel at the last moment but something different altogether?

The Greek word translated as "inn" in scripture doesn't technically refer as much to a hotel or a paid room, but rather, to a private family "guest space." Not only this, a close reading of scripture suggests that Joseph and Mary had likely been in Bethlehem for a few days before delivery. So, if not a hurried rush ending in an isolated barn, what was the Creator of the Universe's first night on earth like?

Archaeology shows us that houses in the first century included a built-in space for animals in either the front or back of the structure. Sometimes it was even a cave. This setup kept the animals close at night for two reasons. First, livestock are valuable and keeping them close is a security measure. Second, though, the nights were cold and close proximity capitalized on their heat. Families lived and slept in a raised room close to or even opening into the stable. A guest space (what scripture translates as an "inn") would have been adjacent, upstairs on a second floor or even on the roof. Given all the activity and mess that surround birth, the smaller guest space may not have been sufficient and so, we find them in the larger space where the animals lie.

Continue to imagine ... because they were going to be counted for the census in Bethlehem, where Joseph was from, he likely still had family there. In some ways, Joseph and Mary make the same trek you might make this holiday season to visit extended family out of town, and they likely weren't the only ones coming in for the census. Hospitality remains an integral part of Middle Eastern culture, and the Holy Family very likely would have been welcomed warmly and cared for well by their extended family. The birth of their first child would have been cause for celebration, and they might have received many offerings of support from the local women.

Perhaps this bit of translation and archeology seems insignificant, but it changes the game. Did Mary pace the courtyard to ease her labor pains with companions to support her on either side? Were there others who climbed up and down the stairs for linens, water and food? The everlasting Son might've been rocked by his aunt or peeked at coyly, cautiously, by his second cousins.

The living God chooses to be born amid the chaos and noise of a family gathering. God becomes human on the ground level — our level.

Certainly, and perhaps more than we typically take the time to focus on, it was like every other human birth, but were there also clues to the eternal significance of the moment? Did the woman running for water notice the quiet calm and attentiveness of the animals? Did children playing gaze up at a star that shone with the light of a full moon? Did the midwife, coaching Mary, hear a dove roosted above the rafters, cooing a lullaby? When the infant finally emerged, was there a rush of the spirit — like freedom and grace, forgiveness and love? With the voice that would eventually command the sea and seasons, what was the sound of his first cry? How did the community that surrounded them make meaning of these tiny miracles they noticed?

In Catholic health care we take note of the sacred experiences and sacramental moments of every day — the times when grace flings the doors open and floods the world. It may be the first clean scan after a cancer battle. It may be a moment of forgiveness between family members. It may be a community benefit program that saves lives. It may be a shared embrace.

Just as happened that night in Bethlehem so long ago, God shows up in the noise and the mess and the chaos of our daily lives. God makes them holy. The season of Christmas preparation is one of joyful noise, but that noise can also be a distraction to the spiritual themes of the season. Too easily, Christmas overruns Advent such that by Dec. 26, trees and nativities are packaged up before the leftovers are even gone. Yet, the Christmas season continues for many weeks beyond. The promise of Christmas and of Advent is the promise that we are not alone, we are held, loved and witnessed to in the twists and turns, the rush and the rumors. God will always call out to us, meet us where we are. We need only to respond. How are you called to continue to lean into both the silence and the noise beyond the Christmas season? How can you continue to encounter the divine in the sacred, sacramental moments of your everyday relationships?



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The mission of the Catholic Health Association of the United States (CHA) is to advance the Catholic health ministry of the United States in caring for people and communities.

Catholic health care is a ministry of the Catholic Church continuing Jesus' mission of love and healing in the world today. Composed of more than 600 hospitals and 1,600 long-term care and other health facilities in all 50 states, the Catholic health ministry is the largest group of nonprofit health care providers in the nation.

At the national level, these organizations join together in the Catholic Health Association of the United States.

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