

Advent IV - Peace



You Will Need

Colored paper
Scissors
Markers
Stapler, glue, or tape

Disclaimer

Before you begin, you should know that Advent is my favorite season of the church year. This is partly because I love Mary and during Advent we get to talk about Mary. This means we are in my happy place this week – it is all about Mary! I believe the Protestant church has long ignored and misrepresented a very important person in Scripture. In my work, I seek to begin undoing that wrong.



This week, the fourth and final week of Advent, we are going to look more closely at the person of Mary. The image to the left is a traditional image of Mary, the mother of Jesus, which hangs in the National Gallery in London. Looking at the image and remembering what you have read in Scripture, what do you know about Mary. How would you describe her?

This piece is entitled “The Virgin in Prayer” by Sassoferrato (1609-1685), an Italian painter. As you know, there are many images depicting Mary with pale skin dressed in blue robes. On these pages, you will see radically different images of Mary. Her dress, skin tone, and background will vary. Each artist is attempting to say something new and unique about Mary. As you look at the images, pay attention to what resonates with you and what does not.

Light the fourth Advent candle, the candle representing PEACE

Read Luke 1:26-38

²⁶ When Elizabeth was six months pregnant, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a city in Galilee, ²⁷ to a virgin who was engaged to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David’s house. The virgin’s name was Mary. ²⁸ When the angel came to her, he said, “Rejoice, favored one! The Lord is with you!” ²⁹ She was confused by these words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. ³⁰ The angel said, “Don’t be afraid, Mary. God is honoring you. ³¹ Look! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³² He will be great and he will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of David his father. ³³ He will rule over Jacob’s house forever, and there will be no end to his kingdom.”

³⁴ Then Mary said to the angel, “How will this happen since I am a virgin?”

³⁵ The angel replied, “The Holy Spirit will come over you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore, the one who is to be born will be holy. He will be called God’s Son. ³⁶ Look, even in her old age, your relative Elizabeth has conceived a son. This woman who was labeled ‘unable to conceive’ is now six months pregnant. ³⁷ Nothing is impossible for God.”

³⁸ Then Mary said, “I am the Lord’s servant. Let it be with me just as you have said.” Then the angel left her.



Artwork by Anthony VanArsdale for the National Black Catholic Congress

A Little About Mary

Read verses 26 & 27 again. Where did God send the angel Gabriel?

Nazareth, located in the region of Galilee, was a tiny town. It was not an impressive city or anywhere anyone wanted to visit. It was just a poor town in the middle of nowhere. Mary was a poor girl from the sticks.

Mary was not only a poor small town girl, she was also young. She was engaged but not yet married. It is likely her father would have arranged the marriage but while she was engaged, she would have lived at home with her family. She would not move to her husband's home for a full year and only after a week-long wedding celebration.

Mary was also Jewish and lived in a land occupied by the Roman Empire. She and her people were an occupied people, bound by foreign laws and rulers. Mary had virtually no power and was considered little more than property. She could not determine her future within her family or community. She was silenced and powerless.

- Why do you think these details about Mary are important?
- What is the difference between someone who is silenced and someone who is quiet?
- Why is attributing qualities like meek, mild, and obedient to a woman in Mary's position and then idealizing those qualities problematic?
- If you were to think of a modern equivalent of Mary, who would she be? Think of groups of people rather than an individual.

Favored One

Now, knowing what you do about Mary, look at the Scripture again and consider:

- How did the angel Gabriel, representing & speaking on God's behalf, greet Mary?
- The text tells us she was confused by his greeting. Why do you think she was confused? Consider why "favored one" would make no sense to her.

From the first words the angel speaks, the narrative of who Mary is in the world begins to change. Mary the powerless, the silenced, the poor girl from nowhere is called favored and then offered the honorific given to Moses and her ancestors of "God is with you."

- The angel continues. What does he offer Mary?
- What does he say about the child she will carry?
- Again, Mary is confused (rightly so!). Why?



Mary & the Angel in Japanese art

Mary is being invited to participate in something beyond imagining. It seemed impossible to her so the angel offered her proof. What is interesting about this proof? What else could the angel have used as proof that nothing is impossible with God? (It isn't as if God didn't do all kinds of amazing things in Genesis!)

Notice that the story of Jesus, the most central person in our faith, begins with two women—with Mary and Elizabeth. (For Elizabeth's story, look at Luke 1:5-24). The proof of God's work in the world is the pregnancy of an older woman and a young unwed girl child. What does this say about God?

Meek & Mild vs. Strong & Courageous

Mary has often been portrayed as meek, mild, and submissive. She is the obedient one and has been revered in the church for this quality.

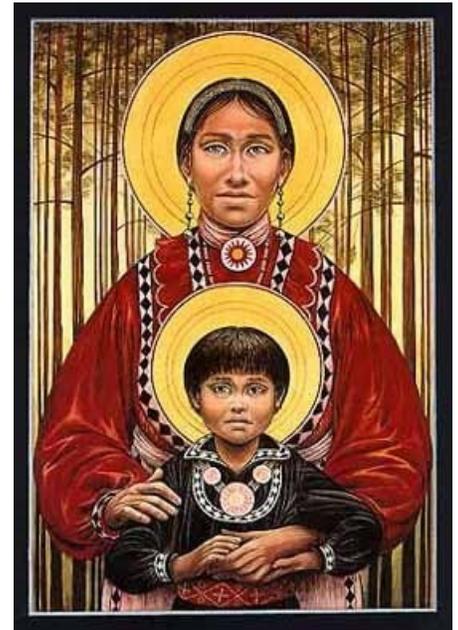
However, this is a limited view of Mary and robs her of full personhood. It has also done damage to women's place within the church and society. As we need to reclaim the meaning of the first chapter of Genesis to begin undoing years of bad theology that has led to the degradation of the environment, so we need to reclaim Mary.

- After Mary is invited to take part in God's activity in the world, what does she say? What does this young girl who is not yet married say to the idea of getting pregnant out of wedlock?
- How would you describe that decision?
- What might be the reaction of her father? Her future husband? Her community?

Imagine if she had no power as a young girl engaged to be married what it would be like to be a young girl who had disgraced her family and future husband by getting pregnant out of wedlock. Does she sound meek and mild?

Scripture is dominated by men, many of whom are faithful and courageous and of course, flawed (as are all of us) - think Moses, Abraham, Peter, etc. There are far fewer women named within our sacred texts. Can you name some of them? Of these, one of the most important and revered is Mary, but Mary has been used to teach obedience and humility.

- Why is this so problematic in a society that values men's voices over women's, that pays women less for the same job, and is structured to benefit white men, rather than women or people of color?
- What damage does this do to young women reading and learning about Biblical characters?
- How has the church and culture used this image of Mary to keep women "in their place?"



Choctaw Virgin Mother & Child
by Fr. John Giuliani



Mary & Elizabeth by Lauren Wright Pittman

Now, let us reimagine Mary and give her, her due.

- Rather than meek, mild, submissive, and obedient, what adjectives would you give Mary?
- What did it require of her to trust God and agree to this pregnancy?
- What did it require of her to raise a baby, a baby she knew would have a special calling?
- What did it require of her to see her son hung on a cross to die (she remained when even his closest friends, the disciples, ran off)?

The difference in how we articulate who Mary was is essential to her empowerment. If we name Mary as meek, mild, and submissive, we remove her agency. If, however, we see her as a brave and courageous woman who said "yes" and agreed to be a part of something bigger than herself, then we empower her and all women. God helped to claim this truth for her. How? (remember the angels words.) Why are God's words to her so important?

God Works with Human Beings

One of the incredible things about this story is that God came to Mary through the angel Gabriel and invited her to be part of something amazing. God chose to work with a human person to bring Jesus into the world. Mary was part of the team, so to speak. God needed her and depended on her, just as Mary needed and depended on God. Mary could have said “no” but she decided to say “yes.” She claimed her own power and personhood and decided to be a part of this new thing that God was doing.

Can you think of other times in the Bible that God worked with and through human beings (if you get stumped, consider the Old Testament!)?

In each instance, God affirms the lives of regular human beings. None of them are remarkable or perfect or rich or famous or important. Most are the opposite, including Mary.



A painting in the Brooklyn Mythology series by Tim Okamura

Why All this Matters to Us

First, we have just reclaimed Mary as a courageous and empowered woman. This has important ramifications as we teach people about their faith. It means that instead of presenting young girls with a role model who is quiet and submissive, we are teaching them that they can be bold, daring, risky, and bring about change. They have a unique and important role to play in this life. That role is not to have babies and sit silently in the background but to have babies or not, and play a central part in God’s vision of healing for our world.



Second, we are working to do our part to save and protect the Monarch butterfly and other important pollinators like the honeybee. Remember what the angel Gabriel told Mary about God? What is possible with God?

One could wonder and many have, why God does not simply fix the problem and save the monarchs for us. Why doesn’t God get us out of all our messes? That would make things a lot easier!

But what do we know about the way God works in the world?
Who does God work with and through?



Also, if God fixed our messes, how would that empower us or allow us to claim our personhood? We would be little more than puppets.

Nothing is impossible with God but we have to take part and play our role. If Mary had said “no,” the story would be very different. If we do nothing, it is unlikely we can save the monarch. But, with God’s help, with faith, with hope and doing our part, all things are possible. Here is the hope inherent in our faith.



The Nativity by He Qi, a Chinese born American artist

Mary in Art

The pieces of art on these pages were selected because they do not look like the nativity scenes in our homes nor the images of Mary we usually see at church or in art galleries. Look again at the images.

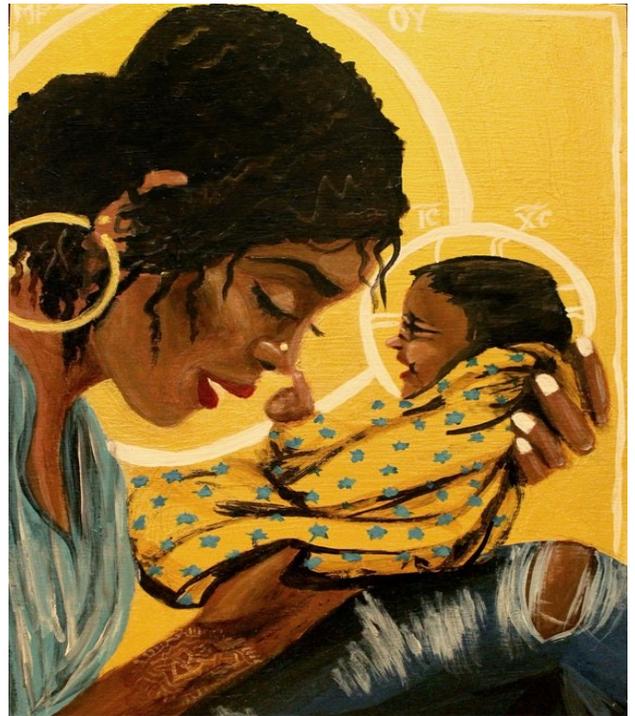
- Which is your favorite?
- Why do you like it?
- Which really stretched your image of Mary?
- How is it different from other images of Mary you have seen?
- Why do you think it is important that we see images of Mary in which she is not pale and white?
- How is this further empowering women?

If you are interested, look online for other images of Mary. It is particularly interesting to search “black Madonna.”

Peace & Mary

Mary was a strong and powerful woman but not in the ways we usually think of power. She was a poor unmarried mother, after all. In her community, she had no real power to change anything, but still, she was the one chosen by God. When the angel asked Mary to take part, God affirmed Mary’s value and worth.

Peace is a product of understanding that we are loved by God. This means everyone else is loved by God too—all people, even the ones who are nothing like us, even those we do not like, even those who give us a hard time, even those who do bad things. This can be hard to wrap our heads around. It is difficult to imagine God loving those who commit horrible crimes or degrade other human beings, yet if we affirm that God loves all, then we need to make space for God’s love and grace to work in all lives, even the ones we do not understand. Can you think of examples of those to whom you find it hard to extend God’s grace and love?



Mary & Jesus Modern Icon by Gracie Morbitzer

Peace is present when we respect, value, honor, and empower others. It grows as we seek to understand and have compassion for others. It blooms and grows when we care about ourselves, others, and the world. Peace comes through love, which is what Mary was given by God, and then gave to the world. Mary offered us peace.

Can you share an example of greater peace coming through understanding and mutual respect?

Advent Week IV Project— Peace Prayer Chains

This week you are invited to create a family peace prayer chain as a way to pray for peace for yourself, others, and the world.

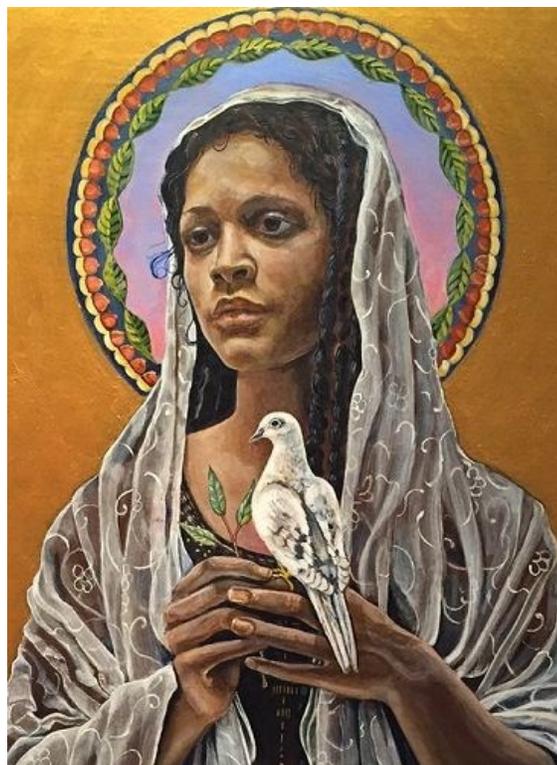
To create your peace prayer chain:

- Cut an inch or inch and a half strips of colored paper. You may want to make your chain red and green, or all white, or rainbow. Pick the colors you want to use and cut out at least five strips for each member of your family.
- Write a prayer, person, place, situation, or draw a picture of something or someone for which you want to pray on a strip of paper. Do not forget your own name!
- Use one strip of paper per prayer or name or place.
- Be sure to include someone with whom you disagree or someone you do not really like—we are called to pray for them as well if we want to know and bring peace.
- Write or draw as many names and situations as you are able.
- Make a circle with one strip and glue, tape, or staple it.
- Begin linking each strip of paper making a long paper chain.
- You may use these prayers to decorate your tree or drape around your door frames. Put them somewhere you will see them to remind you of your desire and prayers for peace. May they also remind you to pray for all people. Remember, peace happens when we respect, seek to understand, honor, and care for all people, even those who are different.
- Consider placing the supplies near the chains so you can add people, places, and situations throughout the coming weeks.

Take a picture of your peace prayer chain or chains and send it to Sally or Jim. If you are willing, we would like to share a picture of your prayer chains on the church website.

Mary in Poetry

Mary is not only a popular subject of the visual arts, she is also featured in song and poetry. On the next page, a poem by Denise Levertov speaks brilliantly to Mary's courage and agency. She also connects her decisions to the ones we must make throughout our lives. Poetry, like story, speaks to a deeper truth. What truth does it speak to you?



Black Madonna by Sue Ellen Parkinson

Resources:

He Qi at <https://www.heqiart.com/>

Tim Okamura at <https://www.timokamura.com/>

Gracie Morbitzer at <https://www.themodernsaints.com/>

Sue Ellen Parkinson at <https://www.sueellenparkinson.com/>

