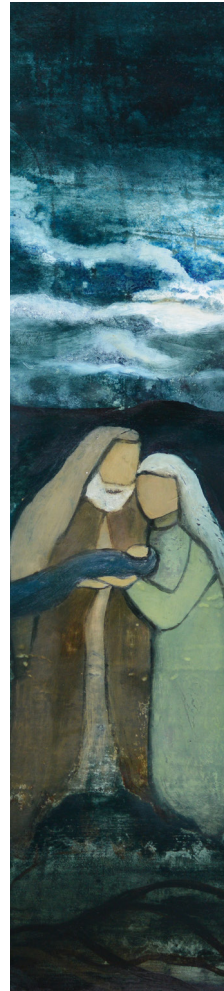
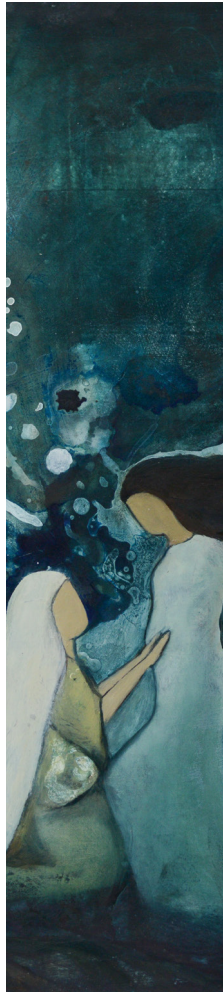
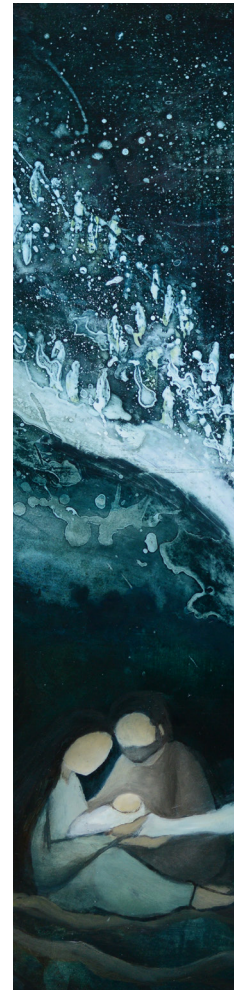


a
pregnant

pause



An Advent
Experience



INTERVARSITY



Note from the Artist

As an artist I have often considered the creative process as an act of birthing something new into the world. There are many months of preparation and anticipation in solitude as the piece grows from within, drawing from my very flesh, blood, and breath. And, of course, like any pregnancy, there are growing pains as I yield myself to something new stretching within in me.

Then after many months, the piece can no longer be contained, and the labor process begins. Through pain and struggle, the work must be released to live and breathe on its own. To deliver something so personal and fragile into the world is a vulnerable act, yet one of the most beautiful moments this world offers.

It is no exaggeration to say that in creating this series for Advent, I have experienced this work on an incredibly personal level. Shortly after God conceived this idea in me, I conceived a child. Advent means *coming* or *arrival*. As participants in Advent, we are to engage this season the same way an expectant mother does—with anticipation as we await the birth of something new.

This work is entitled *A Pregnant Pause*, because like the title, if we pause in the midst of this busy season to reflect on Christ through this work, I believe these moments will be pregnant with rich meaning and significance.

My prayer for you is that when this piece is delivered, it would evoke the same kind of awe that a newborn child creates. To stare in the eyes of a newborn, one faces both the fragility of life and yet the mystery of the eternal all at once. May you find yourself wrapped up in the wonder of both as you behold the Christ Child in your arms. May the distractions and anxious thoughts melt away as you behold something that has the breath of life within it.

How to Engage This Devotional

Each section contains a number of different elements: a painting, Scripture passage, written reflection, questions, and a guided prayer. I encourage you to see each component as an opportunity to converse with God. Take the time to step away from distraction and allow God to meet you through this work. Enjoy His presence with you and respond as He leads.

It is more important that you engage with Him than whether you get through all the content. Allow the Holy Spirit to bring you to a place of rest, refreshment, and transformation in His way and at His pace.

Visio Divina, or *divine looking*, is a way of reflecting on a piece of art as a way of prayer. When we meditate on a visual created out of response in worship, it can provide a gateway that the Spirit uses to deepen our perspective and get right to the heart of things. Praying through art enriches our experience of God's word by helping us to encounter Him through the imagination.

Scripture: This series will lead you through 4 passages from the book of Luke. Read each passage slowly and invite the Lord to speak His voice to you through His Word.

Reflection: This is a poetic response to the story as it unfolds. It is meant to guide you to a place of awe in worship as well as to personal reflection on how the Scripture story intersects with your story.

Questions to Ponder: A guide to help you apply the story in the Scripture to your life. It is also created to help you dive deeper into deeper reflection and prayer.

Guided Prayer: A set prayer intended to draw out the main ideas from the Scripture and reflection and lead you through prayerful response.

The Motif of the Jesse Tree: You will find in the lower left corner of the paintings a Jesse Tree inspired by the passage in Isaiah 11:1, 10–11.

*Out a shoot will come up from the stump of
Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit...*

Within the withering tree grows the new shoot—the Christ child. This image will serve as a theme in the paintings representing the ways God brings new life out of what is old, dead, and decaying. Through Christ, He makes all things new. It will also be a reminder of God's covenant faithfulness to *reclaim the surviving remnant* and carry out the promise of salvation through Israel to all of the nations, a recurring theme through the Gospel of Luke.

Annunciation



Visio Divina

Let your eyes move through the painting. What catches your eye? Focus on that portion of the work and sit with it for a minute.

Breathe in and out and let your body and mind slow down as you meditate on the piece. Invite the Lord to speak to you about what you see.

What feelings does this work evoke? What kind of prayer rises from within you as you ponder it?

Read Luke 1:26–38

Reflection

Gabriel arrives to Mary in this pivotal scene to announce a great mystery about to take place: an infinite God will grow within a finite space. Power will be wrapped in weakness. Heaven will collide with earth to form the Son of the Most High within her womb.

When Mary receives this news, her response is quite practical:

How is this physically possible, since I am a virgin?

When the Spirit of God hovers over creation, impossible things are formed out of nothing. When God breathes into dust, he makes it come alive.

So here we find Mary in the middle of this paradox. Surely the tension must be erupting under the surface. It is the most natural thing for Mary to conceive a child, and yet it is the most supernatural thing she could possibly imagine. She was built for this, and yet she is totally unprepared.

She is disturbed and afraid, but the one thing most needed crystalizes in her mind: she belongs to the God who handcrafted her for his purposes.

Mary yields herself as dust again to the God who formed her with these words:

I am the Lord's servant, may your word to me be fulfilled.

It is in this moment—this brilliant entry point—that the incarnation is conceived in Mary's reserved, but willing yes.

As creation yields to creator, he breathes in her the breath of life to form the timeless into something new. And as he grows within her, she too will expand to accommodate what is far beyond her understanding. The transcendent God will inhabit and yet stretch within her every limitation.

And our limitations too, if we are willing.

The Spirit of God that hovered over creation hovers over us, waiting for us to yield, to allow an eternal God to grow within the most vulnerable parts of us. This is the beautiful mystery of the Annunciation: the very things that make us human are the very things God chooses to dwell within. This is the kind of work he has been doing from the beginning and it is the kind of work he is still doing today—breathing eternal life into mortal flesh.

In the midst of the ways we feel stretched around Christmas, may this one truth stretch within the innermost place: we are finite dust made to host the eternal.

Questions to Ponder

1. In what ways have you come face-to-face with your weaknesses and limitations this week? How do you feel about them?
2. What might it look like to let God meet you in the midst of where you feel the weakest?
3. How might God want to breathe new life into you when you do?

**Closing Prayer**

Father, I thank you for my limitations and that you have created me this way. Thank you that you choose to dwell within my limited time, energy, space, and emotional or mental capacity. Help me to be a willing host today as I look for ways you want to breathe into each finite moment.

Amen.

The Magnificat



Visio Divina

Let your eyes move through the painting. What catches your eye? Focus on that portion of the work and sit with it for a minute.

Breathe in and out and let your body and mind slow down as you meditate on the piece. Invite the Lord to speak to you about what you see.

What feelings does this work evoke? What kind of prayer rises from within you as you ponder it?

Read Luke 1:39–56

Reflection

Mary hurried to visit Elizabeth—to confirm and to glimpse a dream in the flesh. Could this be real? The visitation from Gabriel must have felt so surreal. Yet surely by now the reality must be sinking in. Mary has had a three- to five-day journey to think about what it will mean to be pregnant with the Messiah.

On the heels of her yes will follow not only the physical cost: the exhaustion, the nausea, and the aches of one's flesh stretching to make room for him. There will also be the other growing pains: the public scorn, the familial shame, and her life completely reshaped by his.

How far would she be willing to stretch?

Whatever trepidation she wrestled with must have melted away when she glimpsed Elizabeth standing before her, ripe with hope. Truly, blessed is she who believes the Lord would fulfill his promises to her. Her belief is now made visible. Gabriel's words resounding in her heart:

For no word from God will ever fail.

A holy exchange begins as Elizabeth bursts forth a shout of praise from the womb—ushering from John and the Spirit leaping within her a canticle that cannot be confined within her body. And as her song rises, it warmly wraps around Mary and hovers over her, sinking deeply into her soul and stirring something from within. In the innermost place, Elizabeth's tune calls forth an aria from Mary and it sweetly dances through her lips—the great magnificat.

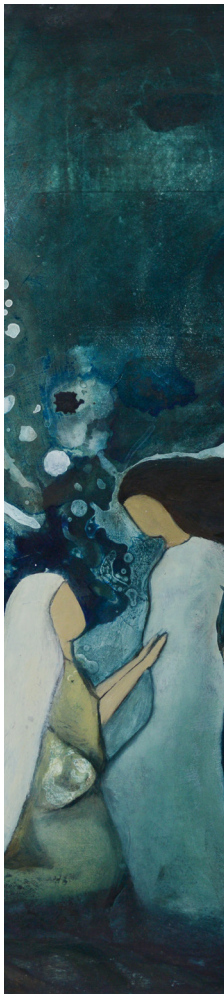
While the Annunciation was Mary's beginning, this is her becoming. Mary moves in this moment from humble willingness to accept God's call to awareness of the significance of what it means. She sees herself and her calling as part of something much bigger than herself. She recognizes the kairos moment for what it is—that God is weaving the fulfillment of past, present, and future together within her womb. Within her very flesh he is fulfilling the promise he made not only to her, but also to Israel and all future generations. In the midst of the impending darkness, hopelessness, and waiting of their time, God would bring a Savior through her!

As her soul expands to fathom this boundless reality, it is this melody that is ushered forth to give it form. Her soul resounds with deep gratitude that he has chosen to fill her, a lowly servant girl with his good gifts. And then in a sweeping report of history, Mary proclaims that this is who God has always been—he chooses the small, weak, and lowly things of this world to bless. He fills those who are hungry, but the full he turns away.

What a relief to Mary, given her empty condition. She had nothing to bring to the Lord but her very flesh: no wealth, no familial stature, no great accomplishments, nothing but the vessel the Lord had already given her—her mind, body and soul. And what he filled her with nourished not only herself, but also every nation through her. What great cause for praise indeed!

Questions to Ponder

1. Have you ever had someone speak into your life in a way that called forth your truest self to shine? Thank God for them and consider thanking them!
2. Invite God to show you how your calling intersects with his grand salvation story in history. What is your magnificat?
3. In what ways are you empty (physically, spiritually, emotionally, or socially) and need the Lord to fill you? How might you be "full" and need to empty yourself in order to receive his grace?

**Closing Prayer**

Father, I thank you that even though I am small and limited, you have given me a role to play in your great story of redemption. Would you awake in me a magnificat that my life is meant to sing? Help me to also draw this out of others as Elizabeth did for Mary.

Amen.

Zechariah's Song



Visio Divina

Let your eyes move through the painting. What catches your eye? Focus on that portion of the work and sit with it for a minute.

Breathe in and out and let your body and mind slow down as you meditate on the piece. Invite the Lord to speak to you about what you see.

What feelings does this work evoke? What kind of prayer rises from within you as you ponder it?

Read Luke 1:5–25, 57–80

Reflection

Luke 1:6 tells us that Zechariah and Elizabeth were *righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly*. They were the embodiment of the way Israel was supposed to be.

As a priest, Zechariah literally stood in for Israel when he burned the incense in the temple—a representation of the prayers of God's people. It is as if Luke wants us to pay close attention to the symmetry happening here between Zechariah and Israel. *But*, the text says, Zechariah and Elizabeth were *childless*. While the worshipers were praying outside the temple, inside Zechariah offered their prayers in the holy place and they rose in smoke amidst a heavy silence on the other end—400 years of silence; 400 years of barrenness

No more prophets, no fire from the mountains, no visitations from angels or words from the Lord. For centuries, Israel was longing in darkness for a word from God, calling out to him with no response.

And after a long time of inhaling and holding his breath, God finally broke the silence to one man, exhaling a long string of promises that seemed too good to be true for Zechariah.

Not only had God heard the prayers of Israel all these years, but God has also heard the most fragile prayers of Zechariah's heart—his longing for a son. It is as if Zechariah (and perhaps all of Israel with him) thought after this many years of silence on the other end, maybe God was not listening. So they had stopped looking for a response.

But God whispers, I have been listening. I have heard you. And now I will answer with a word that will never fail, with a promise beyond your wildest dreams. When God finally did speak, Zechariah was in total shock:

How can I be sure of this?

Can we really blame him for his doubt? Too many years in darkness and you forget what the light looks like. When one silence is broken, the other begins like a holy meeting in the black of night. God has spoken and Zechariah is made silent with astonishment. Great silence fell over Zechariah like the stillness before dawn—a long pause of pondering and waiting and watching for light like Israel had done for so many years.

And after nine months of anticipation, Zechariah's silence would break with the arrival of the announcer, John the Baptist. A great string of praise would erupt at the proclamation of his name which means *God is gracious*.

Like Mary's magnificat, Zechariah's song breaks forth like the dawn itself, illuminating God's salvific plan with each passing moment and displaying it with awe and beauty. John would be born in the long pause between promise made and promise fulfilled and would burst out of the wilderness shouting, *Make straight the way for the Lord!* He would prepare a road on which the light would travel from heaven to *shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death*. A way that leads people to peace. And the way is called forgiveness.

Questions to Ponder

1. In what ways have you been praying and waiting like Zechariah and Israel for God to respond? How have you felt the deep silence on the other end?
2. How does God meet you in this text?
3. What might it look like for you this Christmas to “prepare a way” for Jesus like John did?

**Closing Prayer**

Father, I thank you that even when I see no evidence of your response, that you hear my prayers. In the midst of silence and waiting for you to speak, help me to trust that you will never fail to illuminate the darkness with the dawn. Prepare my heart, O Lord, to receive the light.

Amen.

The Great Arrival



Visio Divina

Let your eyes move through the painting. What catches your eye? Focus on that portion of the work and sit with it for a minute.

Breathe in and out and let your body and mind slow down as you meditate on the piece. Invite the Lord to speak to you about what you see.

What feelings does this work evoke? What kind of prayer rises from within you as you ponder it?

Read Luke 2:1–20

Reflection

When travel would have been the most cumbersome for pregnant Mary, their little family was forced to make the strenuous trek to Bethlehem by a political roll call. Mary would not labor in the comfort of home positioned on soft blankets with familiar smells, but in the hay pungent with the stench of cow dung. She and Joseph would not deliver their son among the welcome embrace of family and friends, but under the estranged gaze of chewing donkeys.

How painful and humiliating it must have been to lay their child for whom so much was promised in such a pitiful and undignified cradle as a feeding trough. Everything about Jesus' birth lacked the kind of human dignity one would expect for even a common child, let alone a king. And what's more, the angels announce King Jesus' arrival not with trumpets to a whole kingdom, but with singing angels to a few shepherds on the margins of society.

The contrast is striking

A king received in a stable.

The holy birthed into dirt.

Heavenly fanfare in an earthy field.

Lofty angels herald to lowly shepherds.

Brilliant glory illuminates the dark night.

All are pointing to this good news

that would be for all the people.

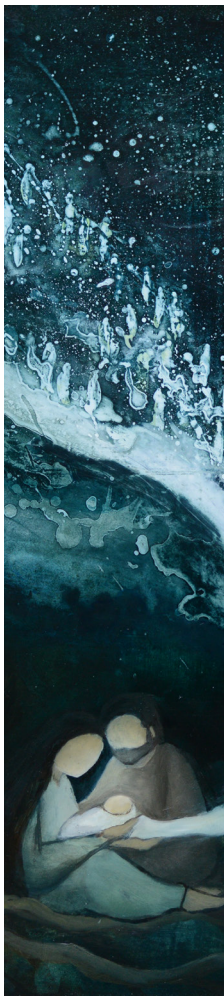
If it was not clear enough who was included in this, the angel says to the shepherds, *a Savior has been born to you*; to you, the humble who go unseen, to you who tend to smelly sheep. A Savior has been born to you. And what better sign to testify that this Savior had truly come for them than what Jesus became? A newborn resting in a feeding trough; the epitome of human weakness and lowliness.

When the shepherds arrived and Mary heard them tell their story, she pondered all of this in her heart. Jesus was teaching her even as a newborn what the Father is like. He is not put off by the sweat, stench, and dirt of our world. He chooses to enter right in (and lead her there too!). Though he is the King of all Kings, there is nowhere so foul he is too proud to go and no person so common he is too lofty to embrace.

The fact that God chose to be born among manure tells us that the way we prepare for him is not the same way we prepare for receiving celebrities—through the display of earthly showiness. In fact, the way he is asking us to prepare for him may just be the opposite; through emptying ourselves of any human glory that might get in the way of receiving a heavenly one. Because it is in the most simple, weak, and messy parts of the world that the veil to heaven becomes thin enough to glimpse the divine.

Questions to Ponder

1. Think of a time where you felt the most messy or weak. Hear the angel's words, *a Savior has been born to you*. Picture Jesus arriving to you as an infant for you to hold. How do you feel? What is your response?
2. Is there any kind of "human glory" you have been striving for that he wants you or your family to put aside in order to make room for him this Christmas?
3. Who are the lowly and where are the messy places you would rather avoid? How might this passage challenge your perspective or interactions with them?

**Closing Prayer**

Father, thank you for going through great lengths to enter our humanness, showing us that even in our most ordinary and disheveled moments, you desire to draw near. Help me lay aside any human glory I have been striving for that gets in the way of receiving you. And help me to receive others in their messiness too.

Amen.



About the Artist

Bette Lynn Dickinson serves with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship/USA, developing staff and students through spiritual formation and the arts. As a prophetic artist, author, and speaker, Bette invites audiences to connect with God through metaphors and images of the spiritual journey.

Whatever subject matter she chooses, she seeks to unveil the eternal realm, allowing the viewer to ponder the unseen through her work.

Dickinson received her Bachelor of Arts degree in 2008 from Western Michigan University and her Master of Divinity in 2011 from Grand Rapids Theological Seminary. She is also an ordained minister in the Reformed Church in America.

View more of her work and order prints at www.bettedickinson.com