Meditations on the Birth of Jesus
A Renovaré Advent Resource for Spiritual Renewal

MIRIAM DIXON & MARGARET CAMPBELL
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Miriam Dixon & Margaret Campbell

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Georges de La Tour. The Nativity, also titled The Newborn. c. 1644. Musée des Beaux-Arts. Rennes, France.


Georges de La Tour. St. Joseph the Carpenter. c. 1642 The Louvre. Paris, France

Rembrandt van Rijn. The Adoration of the Shepherds: With the Lamp. c. 1654
Forward

Long time Renovaré Team members Miriam (Mimi) Dixon and Margaret Campbell have teamed up to provide us with a stunning verbal and visual journey through the Advent season.

Mimi’s words grip our heart. We journey with her through a whole range of emotions: fear and angst and hope against hope and ecstatic joy. Like Mary we are led to ponder all these things in our heart.

Margaret opens up for us the vast world of Advent Art. She guides us to meditate upon the wonder of the Incarnation through artistic works by Georges de La Tour and Fra Filippo Lippi and Rembrandt van Rijn. Unpacking each artistic work ever so carefully we are invited to gaze lovingly upon the differing aspects of Immanuel—God with us.

May Meditations on the Birth of Jesus welcome us into new vistas of the Advent miracle.

Richard J. Foster
Advent 2019
Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, “God is with us.”

—Matthew 1:18-25
Invitation

During this season of Advent, we invite you into a fresh experience of the incarnation of our Lord Jesus. The stories are familiar, yet we anticipate that the Lord has something new as we immerse our senses and imaginations in the events as they unfold. The journey awaits—Won’t you come?

Come, be present to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as they gaze upon the world they have made. What do they see and hear?

Come, listen as the Divine Persons contemplate how best to redeem the beloved image-bearers, who are collapsing under the weight of sin.

Come, marvel at the mystery of the incarnation, at the lengths to which God goes to get close to us by becoming human in Jesus of Nazareth.

Come, wonder at the way God chooses to work through ordinary people like Mary and Joseph.

Come, notice how our triune God works patiently, simply, and quietly behind the scenes to make divine love and life available to all people.

Come, consider your personal invitation to be a participant in God’s ongoing redemptive action in the world.

Our four-week journey through Advent is shaped by two ancient spiritual practices: Lectio Divina (divine reading) and Visio Divina (divine seeing). To receive the most benefit, consider setting aside thirty to forty-five minutes each day to carefully read and reflect on the Scripture and image for the week. Find a comfortable space free from interruptions to look, reflect, respond, and receive.
**Lectio Divina: What do you hear?**

1. **Request.** Ask God to guide your thoughts and impressions through the Holy Spirit.

2. **Read.** Read the story as though you are personally present. Where do you picture yourself in the scene? Use your five senses: What do you hear, see, smell, taste, touch?

3. **Reflect.** Saint Ignatius said that if you wish to know where the Holy Spirit is at work in your life, you must pay special attention to your emotions. What draws you in the story? Where do you feel resistance? Record any words or phrases that stand out. Are you hearing a personal word or invitation?

4. **Respond and Receive.** You may choose to write a prayer of response. Conclude by resting in what you have received.

**Visio Divina: What do you see?**

Learning to see is like learning to listen. Observational skills can be honed. A visual language can be learned. How? By practicing attentiveness. God, the divine Creator, gave us creation to see, to enjoy, and as a way to experience God’s goodness. Evidence of God’s creativity surrounds us.

Art provides a new set of glasses through which the viewer can see the world. The artist communicates his or her vision through the subject, the medium, and the graphic elements of color, line, shape, light, and shade.

The ancient practice of Visio Divina embraces visual art as a means of prayer. By its nature, art challenges our ideas, enlarges our view of reality, gives courage in the face of suffering, inspires creativity, and celebrates beauty. All of this helps us be more present to God’s ongoing redemptive action in the world around us.

The intention of Visio Divina, or “divine seeing,” is to help us imagine and enter into the words of Scripture more deeply through visual art. The steps for Visio Divina mirror those of Lectio Divina:
1. **Request.** Ask God to guide your thoughts and impressions through the Holy Spirit.

2. **Gaze.** Take in the painting. Notice its structure, the placement of the people and objects in the artwork, the shape and form, the use of light and shadow, the empty spaces. What catches your attention?

3. **Reflect** on what you see. Pay attention to your impressions, thoughts, and feelings. How does the image deepen your understanding of the text?

4. **Respond and Receive.** Carry the details of the image with you through the coming week in the way you might carry a word from *Lectio Divina* with you. You may find that God is inviting you to pray as the appropriate response to what he has shown you. What is God’s invitation? Receive what God has shown you and rest in a posture of obedience and devotion.

The four Advent texts are accompanied by a reflection and prayer written by Mimi, an image selected by Margaret,¹ and questions to ponder or discuss. May your heart be touched anew with wonder and joy as we celebrate together the incarnation of our Lord Jesus.

¹ View artwork in color at [renovare.org/birth](renovare.org/birth)
In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

—John 1:1–4
First Week of Advent

Lectio Divina: John 1:1–18

Spend a period of time in personal reflection, following the four steps outlined in the introduction.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John testified to him and cried out, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’”) From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.
Imagine a time before time, when reality is defined by light, color, and beauty. At the center is a triune Being who is the Artist and the Palette and the Studio. With broad strokes the Originator crafts a universe of galaxies and stars. Then a smaller brush is taken up and extravagant details painted into a single garden planet, an emerald and sapphire sphere flowering and flowing and teeming and trilling with life. It is breathtaking, but there is no one around whose breath can be taken. It is time now for the Maker’s *magnum opus*—a sculpted self-portrait animated by the breath of life. The members of the Trinity intend to share with these image-bearers the intimate fellowship they themselves have eternally enjoyed. It is very good.

But something goes terribly wrong. The creatures rebel. Darkness enters the world, a darkness which attempts to overshadow the Life that is the light of all humankind.

The scene is bleak. A mind-set of scarcity has taken root which manifests in corporate behavior. People feel vulnerable; they are afraid; they build walls to shut others out. God’s grand experiment is in decay.

*How will the Divine Three respond to what they see? What will they do?*

“The heart of God is an open wound of love.”1 John illustrates this insight. In a few short sentences, he takes us from the beauty of God’s creation and hope for humanity to the collapse of the dream. Thankfully, God chooses not to crumple and toss aside the spoiled project. Instead, a rescue plan is devised. The Trinity will offer humanity a second chance, a way back. But the God-sized problem will require a God-sized solution. It will require God to absorb the devastation we have released. The hemorrhage we have opened will require the life-blood of God’s own Son to close.

Listening in on this conversation, I recognize myself as the

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1 Richard Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart’s True Home*
subject of their loving consultation. The realization fills my heart with shame. I am part of the mess. In my thoughts, words, and deeds I have personally participated in the dissolution of God’s intended harmony. I am the reason Jesus came. I am responsible for his suffering and terrible sacrifice.

I throw myself upon the mercy of God in repentance, and hear John declare, “From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace” (1:16).

What wondrous love is this, O my soul, O my soul.
What wondrous love is this, O my soul.
What wondrous love is this that caused the Lord of bliss
To bear the dreadful curse for my soul, for my soul,
To bear the dreadful curse for my soul.

Use your imagination to hear the voice of Jesus assuring you of his love, of his forgiveness, his salvation.

Hear him invite you to be his disciple and learn from him what a restored relationship with God looks like.

A disciple is a person who reads the words of Scripture prayerfully, entering the stories, listening for God’s personal word. A disciple is a person who speaks often with God in prayer. A disciple is a person who watches what Jesus did to maintain a constant communication with God and then does likewise. A disciple is a person who adopts the practices of Jesus as his or her own. A disciple follows Jesus into the world, lavishing upon others the divine love we have so gratefully received.

Hear the longing of God to be connected to you. It is God’s invitation to enter more deeply into loving fellowship with the Trinity. This is the life that you were designed to live. This is the gift of Christmas.

Dear heavenly Father, Lord Jesus Christ, indwelling Holy Spirit—we are homesick for you. Thank you for planting in every human
heart this desire and capacity to respond to you. You have pursued us with love. In sending Jesus to provide salvation, you have lavished kindness upon us. You always call us home—feeding our hunger, satisfying our thirst. Thank you for drawing us into this fresh experience of Advent. Come to us anew, Lord Jesus; make your home in our willing hearts. Amen.
Visio Divina

Spend a period of time in personal reflection, following the four steps outlined in the introduction.

During the seventeenth century, the French painter Georges de La Tour painted The Nativity, also titled The Newborn. The sleeping infant is just below the center point of the composition of three figures: the infant, Mary, and Mary’s mother. A single candle shielded from our view lights the scene and focuses our attention on the infant Jesus, the light of the world who casts out the darkness. The white color of the swaddling cloth symbolizes purity. Mary’s red dress prefigures the sacrificial death of Christ. The simplicity of form, color, shadow, and light work together to create an intimate and focused stillness that helps us behold the child with reverent and hopeful expectation.

Going Deeper

1. Can you identify with the yearning expressed in John’s description of God’s response to the condition of our world? Try to capture your feelings in a creative way. Write a poem, make a work of art, talk to the Lord while you take a walk.

2. Describe your most recent experience of God watering your dried-up hope in an unexpected way.

3. Can you think of anyone in your life who needs some kindness? What is one specific way you can bless them this week?
Here am I, the servant of the Lord.
—Luke 1:38
Second Week of Advent


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, favored 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 favor 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.
Ask the Lord to help you enter the scene. Picture the place where Mary was and what she was doing when the angel Gabriel appeared.

What do you see? What do you smell? What do you hear?

Notice the change of expression on Mary’s face as she catches sight of the angelic messenger. How does he appear? Observe his expression as he engages Mary in conversation. Notice the movement of their bodies as the conversation unfolds.

Imagine yourself in the place of Mary. What goes through your mind as you receive the angel’s straightforward announcement of God’s intent? How does it strike you?

The “breaking in” of God does not have to be a frightening experience. It can be an awakening moment, a deepening moment.

Might this have been Mary’s experience?

The angel declares, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you” (v. 28). This salutation tells us quite a bit about Mary. She dwells in the shadow of the Most High. For her, God is not far off. She knows who she is—a child of an infinitely good, wise, and powerful heavenly Father whom she desires to please.

Mary’s heroes are Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Miriam, David, Deborah. She loves the way God works through ordinary people. She dreams about Messiah’s arrival: What would he be like?

Mary is engaged to a godly man named Joseph, a descendant of the great King David. She eagerly anticipates the day when they will marry and start their own family in Nazareth.

These things are not far from her mind when the angel arrives. His sudden appearance is startling, his message more so. Without preamble, Gabriel announces that the time has come for God’s promise to be fulfilled. Mary will become
pregnant and deliver the Son of the Most High!

Mary never imagined such a conversation taking place with anyone on earth, much less her. She was an appreciative spectator of divine events, not a participant.

“How can this be, since I am a virgin?”

Unlike Zechariah who asked, “How will I know that this is so?” (v. 18), Mary’s question to the angel comes from a pure heart. She desires understanding, not proof.

Gabriel replies that her virginity poses no problem whatsoever; the power of the Holy Spirit will overshadow her so that the child she bears will be called the Son of God.

It is a tall order for Mary to believe the news of this eternally unprecedented event. So the archangel bolsters her faith with a testimony—her barren relative Elizabeth is now pregnant in her old age, for “nothing will be impossible with God” (v. 37).

Nothing is impossible with God.

There is no time for Mary to consult with Joseph, her parents, or even Elizabeth. Gabriel awaits an answer. She must decide.

This is not the future she imagined. This wasn’t in the plans. The angel’s words were less request and more message—news of God’s better way. Still, like Zechariah she must choose how to receive it.

When God breaks in we have a choice: embrace or reject, believe or doubt. Either we abandon ourselves to God’s path, the steps of which are only revealed as each foot is lifted in obedience, or we cling to our own path with its illusion of certainty.

Mary chooses to embrace and believe: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word” (v. 38).

We can see why Mary enjoyed God's favor. Favor consists
in our close conformity with the order established by God; we accept God’s choice for us.

It is hard to believe that God’s redemption plan depended upon the obedient cooperation of a teenage girl. Yet it did. And in the course of ordinary events, souls still today are called by God to a life of perfect submission where we have a role in God’s ongoing work. It seems risky, but it is God’s way.

On the surface, there is little about Mary that would recommend her. She lived a hidden, ordinary life. Her exalted status underscored in Gabriel’s greeting only becomes visible in her complete abandonment to the will and purpose of God.

When Mary visits Elizabeth (vv. 39–56), she is filled wonder and gratitude for being included in God’s eternal plan of salvation. She has little clarity about what this actually entails, but she is certain that God knows. And for Mary, that is enough.
**Visio Divina**

The Italian Renaissance artist Fra Filippo Lippi painted *The Annunciation* in the mid fifteenth century. Fra Lippi was a Carmelite friar who lived a complicated, troubled life but painted devotional subjects with understanding and clarity. The viewer is drawn into the intimate scene by the semicircular structure of the painting. The use of perspective communicates that this is a real event. Visual simplicity is achieved by placing the two kneeling figures opposite one another. On the right Mary is holding a book, symbolizing the Word of God become flesh. Gabriel, easily identified by his golden wings, is holding a lily, a symbol of purity. The diagonal rays of light extend from the dove toward Mary as she listens humbly as Gabriel declares, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.”

**Going Deeper**

1. Look at the picture of Mary’s conversation with Gabriel. What do you notice? How does the image illuminate and deepen your understanding of the biblical text?
2. Has there been a time when you experienced the “in-breaking” of God? What has been the lasting impact of your response?
3. Do you see yourself as having a part in God’s unfolding plan? What might it mean for you to say, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word”?
4. At the end of the day, make a list of times you felt God’s presence. You may be surprised at how many times God broke into your life today.
Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.
—1 Samuel 3:9
Third Week of Advent

*Lectio Divina: Matthew 1:18-25*

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

“Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,”

which means, “God is with us.” When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.
For a man whose role is so critical to God’s plan, little is known about Joseph. The fact for which he is most famous will be revealed later in Matthew when people attempt to reconcile an extraordinary Jesus with his ordinary family: “Is not this the carpenter’s son?” (13:55).

A carpenter is trained to make plans and follow plans. Details matter to a woodworker. Joseph’s work reflects his life: structured and well-ordered. A person’s name and family line mean everything in this culture, and there is no greater line than that of King David. Joseph represents it well.

Just as he would craft a beautiful table, Joseph is crafting a well-built life. Then a massive splinter pierces his heart.

Joseph’s fiancée comes to him with heartbreaking news: she is pregnant. Her demeanor is baffling; she has no remorse. The sting of her unfaithfulness is compounded by her claims about the baby’s origin. Of course, God could do what Mary purports. But God never had. And if God ever did, certainly it would not involve ordinary small-town folk like them. No, the explanation is clear. Now Joseph must decide what to do.

By Jewish law, a man betrayed by infidelity could bring his fiancée or wife to court for trial. Conviction could mean death by stoning. This option turns Joseph’s stomach. He loves Mary and has no desire to see her die or be publicly humiliated. Still, his reputation, his family’s reputation, and the honor of the family business must be preserved. With tremendous grief, he decides to privately sign legal documents.

Plan in place, Joseph attempts to get some rest. But both plan and rest are interrupted when an angel of the Lord appears in a dream.

Pause here to ask yourself, Why didn’t the angel appear earlier? Joseph’s heartache and sorrow would have been minimized. His deliberation and planning would have been unnecessary. God, we must remember, times things to perfection, and the reason is
always for our good. What then might be God’s intent for Joseph in the delay?

Take a moment to consider when a cherished plan of yours was interrupted. Did you experience it as a shattered dream, a tragedy, an irreparable loss? This is how Joseph experienced the death of his future with Mary. He never saw it coming.

When all seemed lost with Mary, God intervened. The angel tells him, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus” (vv. 20–21).

How many times do we wish God would show up to tell us what is going on? We might imagine this dream clears things up for Joseph. But in truth, accepting the message is complicated. Joseph knows the blame will fall on him. Families will be dishonored; business will suffer. Everything he worked so hard to build will become vulnerable. If only the angel would visit their families, or the town gossip! But it was not to be. As Mary’s pregnancy became visible, heads shook and tongues wagged.

A careful review of God’s action in human history puts Mary and Joseph’s experience into perspective. Following their exodus from Egypt, the people of Israel experienced forty years of wandering in the wilderness. During that time their relationship with God was taken to a new level. Their story changed. The former slaves learned how to honor and worship the Lord.

What if apparent delays and shattered dreams are a way of recalibrating our relationship with God? What if God is deliberately drawing our attention away from circumstances into a responsive, listening posture of receptivity?

Joseph hears from God in a dream and chooses a difficult path. He accepts God’s version of events and moves forward. He takes Mary as his wife and seeks God’s direction and counsel as he commits to raise Jesus as his own son.

Through faithful obedience and resilient resolve, Joseph joins
Mary in participating in God’s great plan of redemption.

Heavenly Father, Lord Jesus Christ, indwelling Holy Spirit—I hear you whisper, “Your life is unfolding right here where you are. I am always breaking in with something new and fresh and alive. I have prepared a place for you in my plan that will give you the greatest joy and satisfaction in life. Be part of my new creation!” Lord Jesus, give me courage to leave the details to you and follow. May your will be done in my life. Amen.
**Visio Divina**

In *Saint Joseph in the Carpenter’s Shop*, Georges de La Tour uses a single strong light source, a candle, to focus our attention on Jesus as he watches his earthly father work. The use of light and shadow also creates the strong vertical line that extends from Joseph’s eyes, down his left arm, to the cross-shaped auger. In this intimate scene, Joseph is bending down toward Jesus as he drills into wooden beam similar to the horizontal beam of a cross. As a young Jesus holds the candle, we imagine he understands his future as the “Light of the World.”

Georges de La Tour’s art was forgotten for over two hundred years. His paintings were rediscovered early in the twentieth century.

**Going Deeper**

1. Gaze upon the image. What do you notice? Imagine the conversation between Joseph and Jesus. What are they saying? What do you overhear? If you were present in that room, what would you want to ask them?
2. Joseph believed his dream was from God and acted on it. How do you typically hear from God? How do you know that it is truly God who is speaking?
3. How might God use frustrating circumstances and disappointments to get our attention? Has this been your experience?
4. How would our lives be different if we responded in obedience to all that God has revealed?
I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.
—Luke 2:10
Fourth Week of Advent

*Lectio Divina: 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 Savior, 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 favors!”

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.
Joseph and Mary are the subject of local gossip when the news cycle suddenly shifts. No longer is Mary’s pregnancy the talk of the town; now everyone is complaining about the order issued by Emperor Augustus requiring that every Jew twelve years of age and older travel to their ancestral city to be registered. Not registering amounts to criminal tax evasion.

The timing couldn’t be worse. Mary is in her ninth month; any day the baby might arrive. Nevertheless, they pack up and head to Bethlehem, some ninety miles to the south. Mary’s condition means frequent stops, making the long journey longer. They finally arrive only to find all available lodging is occupied.

Imagine being in this position. Joseph must find a place, and fast. A compassionate innkeeper offers space in a cave that serves as a stable. The space is dark and dank, crowded with animals, but it will have to do. Joseph makes a bed of fresh straw for Mary, who now is in full labor.

Move closer to where they are crouched near the opening to the cave. What smells are they trying to avoid? What sounds do you hear? This is no place for God’s Son to be born. The world goes on outside, oblivious to the new creation which has begun.

The newborn Jesus draws his first breath of earth’s air, and heaving cries fill the small cave. Exhausted, Mary and Joseph carefully wrap the newborn in strips of cloth and lay him in a feeding trough heaped with fresh hay. He quiets. Mary and Joseph huddle together, gazing into the infant face of God.

Luke does not linger here. He draws our attention to a steep valley nearby where a group of shepherds are settling their sheep for the night. They are in quiet conversation when an announcement arrives of such importance that it will immortalize these forgettable men. It is the news of the century, of the millennium, of all millennia. If Augustus made a list of those who should receive such news, these men would be last. That they are first tells us something about the kind of kingdom now breaking in upon
humanity. A bright light switches on like a spotlight, illuminating them, and an imposing angel appears. Terrified, they shrink back.

The angel speaks. What does his voice sound like? How does he appear? Notice the stunned expressions on the faces of the shepherds, the movement of their bodies.

“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 Savior, 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” (vv. 10–12).

The divine messenger is joined suddenly by an immense choir of angels. Hundreds with their mouths wide open, songs spilling out. “Never heard nothing like it before,” they would later say. “Never seen nothing like it! Never will again. It was spectacular. Jaw-dropping.”

Then, as suddenly as the choir appeared, the angels vanish. Just like that.

In the stunned silence, one of the shepherds asks if they should go see this wonderful thing that the Lord had told them about. So they scramble up the hill and canvass the town, searching for a stable and a newborn baby.

Their search is rewarded.

Imagine the scene when the motley shepherds smelling of wood fire and sheep burst in. Picture Joseph and Mary’s startled expressions. The shepherds hurry to the manger and point with wonder and excitement at the baby. He is exactly as the angel described. They were the first to hear the news. Now they are among the first to see the long-awaited Messiah.

Disoriented and tired, Joseph sits up. He leans forward protectively. Mary is quiet, watching, listening as the story tumbles out: something about an angel announcing the birth of the Messiah—and a cosmic choir. “The angel told us where to find him,” the shepherds explain.
After a few minutes they rush out again, spilling into the crowded street outside, telling everyone they meet what the angel had said.

“All who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart” (vv. 18–19).

Did the incongruity of the setting register with the shepherds? Did they stop to wonder why the Messiah was born in a stable attended by animals? Someday we can ask them. For now, we notice.

The arrival of God in human history was humble and awkward and messy. Everything appeared to align against God’s glorious plan being fulfilled. Mary and Joseph were forced at every turn to adjust to unfolding events. Yet through their willing cooperation, God’s will was accomplished and hope was born.
This is the way that God has always chosen to accomplish his divine purposes. God invites ordinary persons in ordinary circumstances to merge their smaller stories with God’s Epic Adventure.

Notice that Mary paid close attention to every detail. She was watching, learning. The setting is not what she had imagined, yet the embodiment of God’s promise and love was asleep in her arms. He stirs in his sleep and turns his face toward the light. Mary smiles. All is well.

*Heavenly Father, Lord Jesus Christ, indwelling Holy Spirit—thank you for your gift of eternal life. My Christmas gift to you is my obedience, my life, my love. Happy Birthday, Jesus!*

**Visio Divina**

In seventeenth-century Holland, Rembrandt van Rijn’s prints, like this one, were more highly regarded than his precisely executed paintings. Printed from a copper plate etching, *The Adoration of the Shepherds: With the Lamp* shows his ability to create light and shade through fine lines and thick lines. The spontaneous lively style welcomes the observer into this extraordinary scene. Rembrandt’s unusual decision to place Joseph in the foreground allows us to see his position in the Holy Family. Holding the sleeping infant, Mary’s quiet presence bridges the space between Joseph and the shepherds. Joseph’s open arms are extended toward the shepherds as they press in to see the Christ child. The semicircular glow from the light of the lamp draws the figures together. In this simple line etching Rembrandt creates the joy and hope of the first Christmas.

**Going Deeper**

1. Look at Rembrandt’s portrayal of the first Christmas. How does the picture make you feel? What draws your
attention? Ponder the message the Lord would have you receive through your meditation.

2. Like the shepherds, have you received a message of hope from the Lord, either directly or through the witness of others? What makes it easy for you to receive this as being God’s word to you? What makes it difficult?

3. The first Christmas was messy. In your current circumstances, what is catching you by surprise? Say a prayer for help to recognize God’s presence in the chaos of interruptions and unfolding events.
View artwork and download a digital version of this devotional at renovare.org/birth
“A stunning verbal and visual journey through the Advent season.” —Richard Foster

During this season of Advent, Renovaré invites you into a fresh experience of the incarnation of our Lord Jesus. The stories are familiar, yet we anticipate that the Lord has something new as we immerse our senses and imaginations in the events as they unfold. The journey awaits—Won’t you come?

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Renovaré is a Christian nonprofit that models, resources, and advocates fullness of life with God experienced, by grace, through the spiritual practices of Jesus and of the historical Church. Christian in commitment, ecumenical in breadth, and international in scope, Renovaré helps people in becoming more like Jesus through print and online resources, gatherings and retreats, and educational initiatives like the Renovaré Institute.