



HOUSE OF GOD

MARY, JESUS, AND THE
MEANING OF CHRISTMAS



INTRODUCTION



Advent (from the Latin word *adventus*, meaning “coming” or “arrival”) is a season dedicated to getting ready for Jesus to arrive. For four weeks, we focus our hearts on two things: first, the birth of Jesus, and second, the promise of God coming again to fill the world with even more hope, peace, joy, and love.

Advent is also a time of year when Mary comes center stage. We see her kneeling beside Jesus in the stable; we hear her sing her powerful song, the Magnificat; and if we're lucky, we might even get to dress up in blue and play her in the Christmas pageant. Other than that, in many churches today, we don't really give Mary much thought.

For thousands of years, however, Christians have held a special place in their hearts for Mary. All over the world, she's captured imaginations as Theotokos (“Bearer of God” or “House of God”). But her identity doesn't stop there! She's also known by a host of other names: “Our Lady of Sorrows,” “Our Lady of Guadalupe,” “The First Disciple,” “Our Lady of the Palm,” and many more.

So this Advent season, as we prepare for Jesus to arrive, let's get to know Mary a little bit better: exploring some of her many names and filling out her ordinary, extraordinary, inspiring portrait – all the while learning how we, too, can become bearers of God.



HOW TO USE THIS POSTER AND DEVOTIONAL



Put up the poster somewhere conspicuous (maybe the fridge?), so you can check off activities each week as you do them, in no particular order.

And keep this devotional handy (maybe the dining room table?) for two reasons: first, to follow the weekly devotional services; and second, for guidance with some of the activities on the poster.

Together, the poster and devotional can help you and yours savor the mysteries of Advent – and enrich your experience of Christmas morning when it comes. Inspired by Mary, our goal over these four weeks will be to make our homes (and our hearts!) “houses of God.”

OUR LADY OF SORROWS

WEEK ONE

LIGHT

One candle (for hope)

READ

"But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Child of God coming in clouds' with great power and glory." + Mark 13:24-26



MEDITATE

Painting Mary in blue was an expression of devotion. She was, after all, Jesus' mother: she nursed him, took care of him when he was sick, whispered bedtime prayers into his ear, taught him the stories of scripture, and suffered the agony of losing him too soon. In this way, Mary has served as a comfort to grieving parents who have lost children.

From this angle, Mary is sometimes known as "Our Lady of Sorrows," a comfort to all who have experienced the darkening of the sun and the falling of stars. With Mary by our side, we can soften and attune our hearts to the world's suffering near and far, and at the same time call out for the "Child of God" to come again with great power, glory, and hope for all.

PRAY

Dear God, thank you for Mary, Our Lady of Sorrows, and all the ways her story gives us hope – even and especially when our hearts are broken. Be with us this week as we walk through the shadows of suffering and light a candle of hope. Help us to notice the deep blue of the night sky just before dawn – and even though the stars may fall, guide us toward a new world full of healing and glory for all. In Jesus' name, Amen.



MORNING MANTRAS



A mantra is a word or phrase that, when spoken aloud, softly whispered, or silently repeated in the mind, can change the way we think and feel and act. In Sanskrit, the word mantra means “sacred utterance.”

Throughout Advent, try these weekly morning mantras and affirmations (inspired by Christmas carols!) to help change the way you think and feel and act.

HOW TO PRACTICE

Find a quiet place to sit and listen to the world around you.

- Take a few deep breaths in and out.
- Pick a morning mantra that connects to you and your heart.
- Close your eyes and let go of any tension in your body.
- Start repeating the mantra: aloud, in a whisper, or silently.
- Speak each word slowly.
- When your mind wanders, bring it back to your mantra.
- Breathe in, breathe out, and recite the mantra for as long as you can (five minutes, ten minutes, or more. Working up to 20 minutes a day by the end of Advent would be awesome!).
- After you finish, take a few seconds to sit in the sweetness of the moment, transitioning back into your daily routine.
- If you wish, sing the entire Christmas carol through once (the one from which the mantra is drawn) – and notice how the mantra helps deepen its meaning.
- Carry your mantra, this moment, and the carol with you throughout the day.

"SOMETIMES YOUR JOY IS THE
SOURCE OF YOUR SMILE, BUT
SOMETIMES YOUR SMILE CAN BE
THE SOURCE OF YOUR JOY."
+ THICH NHAT HANH



WEEK ONE

Morning mantras inspired by "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel"

After mourning, rejoicing.
After strife, peace.
God shall come to thee.
Come, Emmanuel, come.
Breathe out despair, breathe in hope.



WEEK TWO

Morning mantras inspired by "Silent Night"

All is calm. All is bright.
God's child, tender and mild.
Heavenly peace.
I am surrounded by Love's pure light.
Breathe out conflict, breathe in peace.



WEEK THREE

Morning mantras inspired by "Joy to the World"

I am surrounded by joy.
My heart is open to receive.
Heaven and nature sings.
Embrace the wonders of God's love.
Breathe out sorrow, breathe in joy.



WEEK FOUR

Morning Mantras inspired by "Go Tell it on the Mountain"

Behold throughout the heavens.
There shone a holy light.
Over the hills and everywhere.
Go, tell it on the mountain.
Breathe out fear, breathe in love.



MOON-INSPIRED CHRISTMAS ORNAMENT

The title is centered and surrounded by several yellow, multi-pointed stars of varying sizes, some with a slight glow effect.

In this week's scripture, Jesus speaks poetically about suffering, comparing it to the sun darkening, the moon not giving its light, and the stars falling from the sky. But fear not: Jesus promises that God will transform suffering with creative power and dazzling glory.

What a perfect week to make some dazzling, moon-inspired Christmas ornaments with some simple, accessible supplies!

MATERIALS

Aluminum foil
Construction paper
A few coins
Scissors
Glue

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Draw a circle (you could use the top of a drinking glass) on the aluminum foil and cut it out.
2. Gently crinkle up the aluminum foil circle.
3. Carefully open the foil circle and flatten it out.
4. Place a few coins underneath the foil circle, and press down around the coins' edges.
5. Flip the foil circle over (leaving the coins behind) – and behold, moon craters!
6. Glue your moon onto a circle of construction paper, make a hole at the top, attach a little piece of yarn, and pop your silvery, cratered moon onto your Christmas tree (or anywhere it will reflect God's light).

OUR LADY OF GUADALUPE WEEK TWO



LIGHT

Two candles (for hope and peace)

READ

Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of God shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together. + Isaiah 40:4-5

MEDITATE

Our Lady of Guadalupe holds a special place in Mexican and Mexican-American Christianity and culture. According to tradition, one winter day in the early 1500s, Mary appeared to Juan Diego, a man of Aztec descent, to ask him to build a chapel in her name. Juan Diego reported this to the local bishop – but the bishop demanded a sign to prove that it was actually Mary who appeared to him.

A short time later, Mary appeared again to Juan Diego – this time showing him where he could pick some roses, even though it was winter. She instructed him to collect as many roses as his cloak could carry and take them to the bishop. Juan Diego did exactly that, and when he opened his cloak, hundreds of roses fell to the floor – and imprinted on his cloak was a beautiful, life-sized image of Mary, now known as Our Lady of Guadalupe. The bishop was so stunned by the miracle that he promptly made arrangements to build a church in Mary's honor on Tepeyac Hill.

In a world full of conflict and division, the mountains and valleys that separate us can seem overwhelming: the rich often exploit the poor, people of color are frequently marginalized, ethnic groups oppose each other as enemies. But the story of Our Lady of Guadalupe offers a glimpse of a new world where divisions are overcome, a world of peace and reconciliation: Mary appears to an indigenous, marginalized young man, speaking his native language, and ultimately gracing him with a portrait on his cloak, painted with roses, in which her skin color resembles his. In this way, she

teaches us that God sides with the poor, the marginalized, and the vulnerable – and when God reveals God’s glory, every mountain of division is made low, conflict’s “uneven ground” becomes level, and all people see it together!



PRAY

Dear God, thank you for Mary, Our Lady of Guadalupe, and the ways her story gives us peace – even in the midst of a world so full of conflict. Be with us this week as we walk through the shadows of hostility and war, and light a candle of peace. Help us to create “level ground” in our homes, neighborhoods, and around the world, so we can all come together again in love and understanding. In Jesus’ name, Amen.



Whether it’s for budget reasons, justice reasons, environmental reasons, and/or to combat consumerism, many individuals and families are experimenting with rethinking gifts this Christmas.

If simplifying the season seems interesting to you, here are some practical ideas to try on Christmas morning that just might become family traditions instead of (or alongside) gift-giving.

- Have a cup of Christmas tea (sweetened with maple syrup) with fresh-baked cinnamon rolls
- Complete a Christmas puzzle together as a family
- Have a Christmas movie marathon – with everyone’s favorite snacks!
- Fill each person’s stockings with little written messages about why you love them
- Have a Christmas carol dance party – and/or go caroling in the neighborhood
- Make a pie together for Christmas Day
- Have a Christmas picnic (even if it’s cold outside)
- Wear Christmas socks, sweaters, or pajamas all day
- Give a monetary gift to each person’s favorite cause – and let them know about the gift on Christmas morning!

THE FIRST DISCIPLE

WEEK THREE



LIGHT

Three candles (for hope, peace, and joy)

READ

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for God has looked with favor on the lowliness of God's servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is God's name. Divine mercy is for those who fear God from generation to generation. God has shown a strong arm, and scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. God has brought down the powerful from their thrones; lifted up the lowly; filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty; and helped God's servant, Israel, in remembrance of divine mercy, according to the promise God made to our ancestors, to Abraham and Sarah and Hagar and to their descendants forever." + Luke 1:46-55

MEDITATE

Mary has always stood out in the Gospel story as a wonderful example of what faith looks like. In fact, come to think of it, Mary is the first disciple: she's the first to hear and embrace the good news, and when Gabriel asks her to become the mother of God, she says "Yes" – but not before asking the angel a question of her own: "How can this be?"

This teenage girl, grounded and confident enough to question God's own messenger, helps us remember that faith is about asking questions, expressing wonder and doubt, and being open-minded enough to push past conventional expectations. In this sense, Advent is about adventure. Mary's faith isn't blind obedience; it's an active, creative, adventurous kind of faith, a faith that gives birth to joy.

For as it turns out, Mary's style of faithful adventure isn't grim and serious – she breaks out in joyful, revolutionary song! When we hear her sing her Magnificat, it's hard not to smile. Her questioning, creative, adventurous faith is so strong that she's able to look around the broken world and joyously declare that God's work of redemption has already begun: bringing the mighty down from their thrones, lifting up the lowly, and filling the

hungry with good things. Mary's faith gives her eyes to see and a voice to sing of the great things God has done, is doing, and will do.

PRAY

Dear God, thank you for Mary, the First Disciple, and the ways her story gives us joy – even in the midst of a world so full of despair. Be with us this week as we walk through the shadows of grief and sadness, and light a candle of joy. Strengthen our faith; make it as questioning, creative, and adventurous as Mary's. And give us the courage to sing! In Jesus' name, Amen.



HAVE A HOLLY JOLLY CHRISTMAS

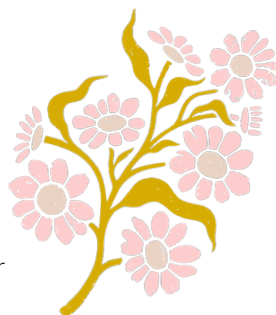
Christmas can be a difficult time of year for mental health and wellbeing. For many, this season comes with grief, worry, and disappointment. If you (or someone you love!) is feeling down, pick something from the list below to leaven your (or their) spirits.

- **DO SOMETHING YOU LOVED AS A KID**
Sing goofy songs, break out the crayons or some favorite board games, play in the snow (if you have it!)
- **UNPLUG**
Try a screen sabbath for a while (even a few hours!). Down time does wonders.
- **TAKE A MENTAL BREAK**
Close your eyes and imagine a place you love. Use all your senses to go there and feel free to stay as long as you like.
- **PLAY A FAVORITE SONG**
Music releases feel-good hormones!
- **GET OUT IN NATURE**
- **SEEK OUT POSITIVE PEOPLE**
Good moods and positivity are contagious

WEEKLY SEARCH PARTY

INTRODUCTION

Through the centuries, art has played an important role in Christian life. Before people could read or write, images conveyed the tradition's treasured stories and ideas. Church walls were covered in frescoes, paintings, mosaics, and stained-glass windows, images people could "read" and remember and apply to their lives.



The same is true today! Looking at great works of art, past and present, can let us see the world with new eyes – and focusing on images of Mary can inspire us to explore how we, too, can help bring God more fully into the world.

“THEOTOKOS”

Search images for “Theotokos.” Most representations of Mary as “Theotokos” are icons. In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, icons are like little windows or mirrors that show us whom we are meant to be. So, when you look at images of Mary as the “House of God” or “Bearer of God,” think about how you could bring God more fully into the world this week.

“OUR LADY OF SORROWS”

Search images for “Our Lady of Sorrows.” Every life includes sorrows, and Mary is often considered our companion who suffers with us – she’s even sometimes referred to as “Our Lady of Compassion” (from *com-*, “with,” and *passio*, “suffering”).

“OUR LADY OF GUADALUPE”

Search images for “Our Lady of Guadalupe.” If you spend some time looking at these images, you’ll notice lots of cool details, including 1) her blue cloak full of stars; 2) her necklace, engraved with a cross; and 3) behind her, the rays of the sun. What do these symbols mean to you?

“BLACK MADONNA”

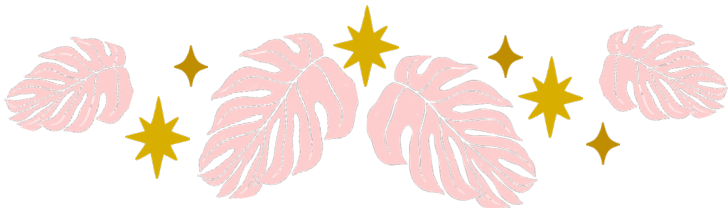
Search images for “Black Madonna.” For centuries, Mary has been portrayed with a rainbow of skin colors. The “Black Madonna,” long popular in both painting and sculpture, is a tradition that’s been interpreted as an example of God’s truth that everyone – and in particular those who’ve been marginalized – deserves to be honored, respected, and celebrated.

“THE MIRACLE OF THE PALM TREE”

Search images and music for “The Miracle of the Palm Tree.” The Metropolitan Museum of Art has a great sculpture depicting this story, and Emmylou Harris’ version of “Cherry Tree Carol” presents it through music (with a cherry tree, of course, rather than a date palm!). Both of these works of art, among many others, derive from an ancient story featuring a tree bending down towards Mary while she’s pregnant, or towards Mary and Jesus during their flight into Egypt.

“THE LABOR-PAINS CAME UPON HER,
BY THE TRUNK OF A PALM-TREE. SHE
SAID, “I WISH I HAD DIED BEFORE THIS,
AND BEEN COMPLETELY FORGOTTEN.”
WHEREUPON A VOICE CALLED TO HER
FROM BENEATH HER: “DO NOT WORRY;
GOD HAS PLACED A STREAM BENEATH
YOU. AND SHAKE THE TRUNK OF THE
PALM-TREE TOWARDS YOU, AND IT
WILL DROP RIPE DATES BY YOU. SO EAT,
AND DRINK, AND BE CONSOLED.”

+ QURAN, MARY 19:23-26



MIRACLE OF THE PALM WEEK FOUR

LIGHT

Four candles (for hope, peace, joy, and love)



READ

The angel said to Mary, “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; the child will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a child; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.” + Luke 1:35-37

MEDITATE

In the Quran, the sacred scripture of Islam, there’s a story that Mary gave birth to Jesus under a date palm tree. As she was experiencing the labor of childbirth, she held onto the tree and heard a voice saying, “Shake the trunk of the palm tree toward thyself, and it will drop its fresh ripe dates upon thee.”

Similarly, among Christian communities, a legend has long circulated about a miraculous palm tree on the way to Egypt. As Joseph, Mary, and Jesus were fleeing King Herod’s reign of terror, they sought rest under that tree. Seeing that it was full of fruit, the baby reached toward the tree – and it bent down so his mother could pick dates from its branches.


Stories like these can capture our imaginations and help us to reflect. Here was a world – much like our own – full of violence and cruelty, with the king’s assassins closing in. And yet here was a world – much like our own! – in which God cares for God’s children with grace as sweet as a date or (following Emmylou Harris’ “Cherry Tree Carol”) a cluster of cherries.

And there’s Mary, full of grace, at the center of it all – but this isn’t a woman who’s merely “meek and mild.” There’s a reason doctors and midwives advise against travel during the late stage of pregnancy: having a baby is hard, especially when you’re far from home – and yet, Mary makes her way to Bethlehem for the census, delivers Jesus in a barn, and then is forced to flee to Egypt with a little one at her breast. She’s both tender and


fierce, strong and gentle, a wonder to behold in her own right – for as the angel Gabriel put it, “nothing is impossible with God”!

PRAY

Dear God, thank you for Mary, and how her story inspires us to love in fierce, tender, wondrous ways – even in the midst of a world full of violence. Be with us this week as we walk through the shadows of hate and indifference, and light a candle of love. Help open our minds and hearts so that we, too, can believe in your impossible, wondrous grace. In Jesus’ name, Amen.



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.



+ LUKE 1:16-19

CHRISTMAS EVE

LIGHT

Five candles (for hope, peace, joy, love – and Jesus)

READ

Luke 2:1-20

Pull out your favorite Bible (or snuggle up around the glow of your phone) and read Luke’s nativity story out loud. Feel free to go around the circle, reading verse by verse, so everyone can participate in proclaiming this “good news of great joy for all people.”

MEDITATE

We often think of Christmas Eve as a night of cozy silence, when “all is calm” and “all is bright” – and surely it had its moments of quiet and serenity. But at the same time, when you ask people to describe, in three



words, what it feels like to labor and give birth to a baby, the answers help fill out the picture:

- Quick, Scary, Amazing.
- Long, Empowering, Miraculous.
- Exciting, Hard, Weird.
- Exhausting, Messy, Wonderful.
- Frantic, Funny, Surreal.
- Endless, Life-Changing, Lovely.
- Bloody Hard Work!
- Surprising, Intense, Worth it!

What do you think Mary's labor and delivery were like? When you imagine her, the "House of God," bearing God in her body – God, the creator of both the universe and unicornfish (look them up, they're amazing!) – and then delivering God, pushing God out into the world, what do you envision? Struggle? Ecstasy? Tears? Joy? All these things and more?

Mary is the mother of Jesus, yes, the body of that newborn baby – and she's also the mother of the church, the Body of Christ. The First Disciple. Our Lady of Sorrows. Our Lady of Guadalupe. Our Lady of the Palm. All these names and more.

Mary personifies compassion and nourishment, faith and ferocity, reconciliation and sing-at-the-top-of-your-lungs joy. As we take our last step toward Christmas morning, let's follow her lead, each in our own way becoming little houses of God, God-bearers, singers in Mary's magnificent choir – bringing a little more grace and beauty into God's weary, wonderful world.

My soul magnifies the Lord!

Merry almost Christmas!

"IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORD, AND THE WORD WAS WITH GOD, AND THE WORD WAS GOD. THE WORD WAS IN THE BEGINNING WITH GOD. ALL THINGS CAME INTO BEING THROUGH THE WORD, AND WITHOUT THE WORD NOT ONE THING CAME INTO BEING. WHAT HAS COME INTO BEING THROUGH THE WORD WAS LIFE. AND THE LIFE WAS THE LIGHT OF ALL PEOPLE."





ADVENT & CHRISTMAS EVENTS

