



# PICTURING ADVENT

PREPARING FOR CHRISTMAS WITH  
THE GOSPEL OF LUKE AND FINE ART



Name:



# INTRODUCTION

## INTRODUCTION

This workbook is intended to serve as a four-week study through Advent. You may choose to use this booklet for a Sunday School Class, a Bible Study, private devotions, or just for fun.

Each section, intended to accompany one week of Advent, contains a Bible passage from Luke's gospel. The passages begin with the annunciation to Mary and end with the birth of Christ.

Following the Bible passage, each section offers discussion questions to guide your group in thinking about how you might envision the passage.

The study then moves to two paintings of each passage, along with a brief commentary on the works of art. To help your group engage with the paintings, the study provides a page of discussion questions about each work and a page of questions to guide comparison of the pairs.

Each day then concludes with a prayer. You may choose to read the included prayer exactly as written, or to use it as springboard as you pray with your group.

Feel free to supplement this study with your own favorite paintings or works of art. Depending on the time you have available, you may also wish to ask the group to create works of art themselves to illustrate each passage.



## SECTION 1: ANNUNCIATION

## **Luke 1:26-38, KJV**

**26** And in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth,

**27** To a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary.

**28** And the angel came in unto her, and said, Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women.

**29** And when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be.

**30** And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God.

**31** And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS.

**32** He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David:

**33** And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end.

**34** Then said Mary unto the angel, How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?

**35** And the angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.

**36** And, behold, thy cousin Elisabeth, she hath also conceived a son in her old age: and this is the sixth month with her, who was called barren.

**37** For with God nothing shall be impossible.

**38** And Mary said, Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word. And the angel departed from her.

## Imagining the Scene

This passage is famously called “The Annunciation to Mary” or just “The Annunciation.”

Many artists have depicted the events of this passage throughout history. Before looking at some of those portrayals, take a few minutes to imagine how you might paint this passage.

What would you include?

What colors would you use?

Describe the setting you envision.



*Ecce Ancilla  
Domine  
(Behold, the  
Handmaid of  
the Lord)*

*or*

*The  
Annunciation*

Dante Gabriel  
Rosetti

1850

## ***Ecce Ancilla Domine or The Annunciation – Rosetti***

On the very first day of 1853, Rossetti thought he had finished some alterations which he had undertaken in his old oil picture of *The Annunciation* dubbed “the blessed white eyesore” in one of his familiar letters, and in another, “the blessed white daub” He proceeds – “Yesterday after giving up the angel’s head as a bad job (owing to William’s malevolent expression) at about one o’clock, I took to working it up out of my own intelligence, and got it better by a great deal than it has yet been. I have put a gilt saucer behind his head.” However the work done on January 1st proved to be not quite final; the picture was still in hand up to the 15<sup>th</sup> of the month, or thereabouts.

– *Dante Gabriel Rossetti As Designer and Writer*

Rosetti, William Michael, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. 1889. *Dante Gabriel Rossetti As Designer and Writer*. Notes by W. M. Rossetti, including a prose paraphrase of *The House of Life*. Pp. xv. 302. London: Cassell & Co.

## Rosetti Discussion Questions

What emotions did this painting elicit in you?

What did you like about it?

What didn't you like?

How would you describe this painting to a friend who hadn't seen it?

How does it compare to the image in your mind?

What do you think of Rosetti's description "the blessed white eyesore"?

Why do you think Rosetti used so much white?



*The Annunciation*

Leonardo Da Vinci (disputed)

1472

## *The Annunciation – Da Vinci*

The painting represents the Virgin as a young lady of rank sitting outside the door of her palace upon a terrace looking onto a flowery meadow with a descent to a park in the background. She is seated in front of a richly-sculptured antique reading-desk of marble, turning over the leaves of a folio, when the angel suddenly kneels before her with his stalk of lilies and his message. She does not start up from her seat – a proceeding which would be difficult enough, considering the numerous yards of material in which she is wrapped, but contents herself with a slight movement of the hand as an expression of surprise, a surprise that is hardly to be read in her face.

– *Leonardo Da Vinci; the Florentine Years of Leonardo & Verrocchio*,  
Jens Thiis

Thiis, Jens, and Jessie Muir. 1913. *Leonardo da Vinci; the Florentine years of Leonardo & Verrocchio*. Boston: Small, Maynard & Co.

## Da Vinci Discussion Questions

What emotions did this painting elicit in you?

What did you like about it?

What didn't you like?

How would you describe this painting to a friend who hadn't seen it?

How does it compare to the image in your mind?

The excerpt about this painting mentions the expression on Mary's face. What do you think of Da Vinci's portrayal of her expression?

How does Da Vinci's angel compare with what you imagine?

## **The Annunciation Final Discussion Questions**

Compare and contrast the Rosetti and Da Vinci images.

Rosetti and Da Vinci chose very different settings for their paintings. How do the settings affect their portrayals?

Which do you prefer? Why?

What did these paintings do well in portraying the story?

What did they miss?

How do images such as these influence the way you read the passage?

## SECTION 1: ANNUNCIATION – CLOSING PRAYER

Lord,

We thank you for the ways you reveal yourself to us.

We ask you to open our eyes and ears to your presence in our lives.

We give you thanks for the people around us who have followed your calling and have been blessings to us.

During this season in particular, we ask that you would draw us closer to you. Help us to see who you are calling us to be and what you are calling us to do.

Help us to notice the people around us who are in need of our love and grace, and show us how we can proclaim your love to them.

In Jesus' name we pray,

Amen.



## SECTION 2: Visitation

Luke 1:39-45, KJV

**39** And Mary arose in those days, and went into the hill country with haste, into a city of Juda;

**40** And entered into the house of Zacharias, and saluted Elisabeth.

**41** And it came to pass, that, when Elisabeth heard the salutation of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elisabeth was filled with the Holy Ghost:

**42** And she spake out with a loud voice, and said, Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb.

**43** And whence is this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?

**44** For, lo, as soon as the voice of thy salutation sounded in mine ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy.

**45** And blessed is she that believed: for there shall be a performance of those things which were told her from the Lord.

## Imagining the Scene

People often refer to this passage as “The Visitation.”

Artists often include a number of figures in portrayals of The Visitation and frequently highlight an age difference between Mary and Elisabeth. There is quite a bit of action in these verses—action that artists try to capture in different ways.

Who might you include in a painting of this passage?

What emotions would you want to convey?

Which part of the action would be your focus?



*Visitation*

Giotto

1306

## *Visitation – Giotto*

Notice also the solid Giottesque haloes round the heads of the two saints; the dainty embroidery on the Virgin's robe, which foreshadows Fra Angelico; the very characteristic faces of the attendants behind the Madonna, with a roundness of outline most typical of their painter; and last of all, the manner in which the figures are still to a great extent enveloped and concealed in perfect sheets of drapery. This is particularly conspicuous in the turbaned attendant behind St. Elisabeth. Indeed while the two principal personages display a vigour of action hitherto unknown in Italian art, the arms and hands of the turbaned attendant are almost as lifeless as a Roman mosaic. Giotto took great pains with his Virgin and his St. Elisabeth, but appears to have made no special effort to give life and reality to these accessory personages.

### *– Evolution in Italian Art*

Allen, Grant. 1908. *Evolution in Italian Art*. London: G. Richards.

## **Giotto Discussion Questions**

What emotions did this painting elicit in you?

What did you like about it?

What didn't you like?

How would you describe this painting to a friend who hadn't seen it?

How does it compare to the image in your mind?

The excerpt argued that Mary and Elizabeth look more life-like than their attendants. Do you agree or disagree? Why?

What do the arrangement and posture of the figures convey?



*Visitation*  
Raphael  
1517

## ***Visitation* – Raphael**

“The Visitation” portrays the aged St. Elizabeth joyfully saluting the Virgin with the words “Blessed art thou among women;” while in the background St. John is seen baptizing Jesus in the River Jordan. It was painted at the order of Branconio for a church at Aquila, in the Abruzzi Mountains, and was held in such reverence that no one was allowed to copy it. This was transferred to the Spanish Escorial in 1655, and was carried to Paris by Napoleon, and returned to Madrid after the peace of 1815.

– *Raphael*

Sweetser, M. F. 1879. *Raphael*. Boston: J.R. Osgood and Company.

## Raphael Discussion Questions

What emotions did this painting elicit in you?

What did you like about it?

What didn't you like?

How would you describe this painting to a friend who hadn't seen it?

How does it compare to the image in your mind?

Raphael included an image of the Baptism of Christ in the background of this painting. Why might he have included it?

Raphael included only two figures in the foreground of this painting. How does that affect the story's retelling?

## Visitation Final Discussion Questions

Compare and contrast the Giotto and Raphael images.

Which do you prefer? Why?

Giotto included figures around Mary and Elizabeth, while Raphael relegated additional detail to the background. Which method is more effective in portraying the passage?

What did these paintings do well in portraying the story?

What did they miss?

How do images like these impact the way you read the passage?

## SECTION 2: VISITATION – CLOSING PRAYER

Lord,

We thank you for the people you have placed in our lives who show us your love and remind us of your calling.

We give you thanks for friends, family, and neighbors. We thank you for those with whom we share common interests, hobbies, work, or concerns.

We thank you for the blessing of fellowship we have with one another as we gather for study, service, and worship.

Open our eyes to those who are alone or who feel lonely. Show us how we can offer the blessing of fellowship to one another.

In Jesus' name we pray,

Amen.

## SECTION 3: THE MAGNIFICAT

Luke 1:46-56, KJV

**46** And Mary said, My soul doth magnify the Lord,

**47** And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.

**48** For he hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden: for, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.

**49** For he that is mighty hath done to me great things; and holy is his name.

**50** And his mercy is on them that fear him from generation to generation.

**51** He hath shewed strength with his arm; he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.

**52** He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree.

**53** He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he hath sent empty away.

**54** He hath helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy;

**55** As he spake to our fathers, to Abraham, and to his seed for ever.

**56** And Mary abode with her about three months, and returned to her own house.

## Imagining the Scene

This passage is typically called “The Magnificat.”

In paintings, Mary is sometimes seen writing the words of her song. In depicting this passage, artists also sometimes play with symbolism and chronology to deepen their messages.

If you were painting this passage, how might you portray Mary’s song?

What emotions would you want to convey?

Is there a part of the passage that would receive greater focus?

What parts might receive less of your focus?



*Mary Writing the Magnificat*

Marie Ellenrieder

1833

### *Mary Writing the Magnificat – Marie Ellenrieder*

Marie Ellenrieder, recognized in Germany as the greatest female artist of the present age, was born at Constance in 1791, studied in Munich, and in 1820 went to Rome to perfect her knowledge of art. Her admiration of the old German masters gave a religious bent to her genius . . . .

So full of ideal grace and beauty are the heads of her women and children, in particular, that it has been said that “she seems to paint in the presence of angels;” her coloring, however, is gray, dull and somber.

– *Famous Painters and Paintings*

Shedd, Julia Ann. 1896. *Famous Painters and Paintings*. Boston: Houghton.

## Ellenrieder Discussion Questions

What emotions did this painting elicit in you?

What did you like about it?

What didn't you like?

How would you describe this painting to a friend who hadn't seen it?

How does it compare to the image in your mind?

Ellenrieder portrays Mary writing in solitude. How does this portrayal compare with your vision of the passage?



*Madonna of the Magnificat*

Botticelli

1481 (1479?)

## *Madonna of the Magnificat* – Botticelli

He represents the Madonna not in the joy of her unparalleled heavenly triumph, but in the melancholy of her unparalleled earthly destiny; not in the consummation but at the outset, of her consecrated life; in the early days of her miraculous motherhood, surrounded not by a choir of seraphic spirits, but by a throng of angelic children, human, yet not altogether earthly, angels incarnate who have retained something of their ethereal nature. Whence did Botticelli derive those enchanting types which, varied and developed, reappear in much of his later work, but which – assuming the *Magnificat* to have been painted in 1479 – do not resemble anything he had painted yet? I think, primarily, from life. Some child's face seen perhaps by chance, caught in a moment of sweet childish eagerness, uplifted in prayer or in solicitous inquiry, impressed itself upon the artist's imagination, and became the basis of a type which, in reproducing, he highly idealized.

– *Botticelli*

## **Botticelli Discussion Questions**

What emotions did this painting elicit in you?

What did you like about it?

What didn't you like?

How would you describe this painting to a friend who hadn't seen it?

How does it compare to the image in your mind?

Botticelli's portrayal of The Magnificat is crowded with figures. How does this crowding affect the way you might read the passage?

## ***The Magnificat* Final Discussion Questions**

Compare and contrast the Ellenrieder and Botticelli images.

Which do you prefer? Why?

What did these paintings do well in portraying the story?

What did they miss?

How do images such as these affect the way you read the passage?

Ellenrieder and Botticelli each chose to depict Mary as physically writing *The Magnificat*. What other methods could an artist use to show her composing these words?

These two paintings portray Mary with fair skin and long blonde hair. How do you picture Mary? What impact do images such as these have on our imaginations?

### SECTION 3: *Magnificat* – CLOSING PRAYER

Lord,

We thank you for the gifts of speech and song, of art and expression, of craft and creation. We thank you for opportunities to praise you in our work and play.

We thank you for those who provide for and lead us in worship, for pastors and preachers, artists and musicians, church officers and staff.

Open our eyes to the many blessings you grant us, and enable our souls to magnify you.

In Jesus' name we pray,

Amen.

## SECTION 4: THE ADORATION OF THE SHEPHERDS

## Luke 2:7-20 KJV

**7** And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.

**8** And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

**9** And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.

**10** And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.

**11** For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.

**12** And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

**13** And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying,

**14** Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

**15** And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.

**16** And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger.

**17** And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child.

**18** And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds.

**19** But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart.

**20** And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.

## Imagining the Scene

For this fourth passage, we skip ahead to the birth of Jesus and the visitation of the shepherds. These episodes are sometimes called The Nativity and The Adoration of the Shepherds, respectively.

Frequently, artists compress the story to depict several moments in one painting. The number of shepherds and their appearance may vary, and the Wise Men, or Magi, may or may not be present.

If you were to portray this passage in a painting, which part of the action would you choose?

What figures might you include?

What tone would you seek to create in your painting?

What response might you seek to elicit from your viewers?



*Adoration of the Shepherds*

Giorgione

1505-1510

## *Adoration of the Shepherds – Giorgione*

Under a grotto to the right, overgrown with ivy and overhung with grasses, the Virgin kneels adoring the Babe, attended by St. Joseph, grey-bearded, self-communing, at rest behind a portion of rock and a remnant of hurdle. To the left two shepherds, who, in another part of the ground, are seen receiving the message of the angel; behind them, a distance in which the turrets, the trees, and hills peculiar to the neighbourhood of Castel franco are seen. With the general character which distinguishes the Ordeal of Moses or the Judgment of Solomon, this landscape has more atmosphere, more luxuriance and richness of objects. A tall tree to the left of the bank, another to the left in the picture, vary the scene. At the foot of the latter a cabin shelters a peasant; there are rocks too, of a soft, worn, vague texture, with greenery sharply made out and delicately finished cropping from the fissures. Reeds, pebbles of transparent colour, are minutely made out. In the distance the bare hillside is yellow-lighted in the setting sun by the glow of coming evening. The square tower commands the houses around all steeped in vague atmosphere. A charming contrast is produced by setting the deep-tinted shepherds in front of the warm, straw-coloured fields, whilst the Virgin and St. Joseph are thrown forward upon the gloomy shadow of the grotto. Humble life is depicted with astonishing realism, and yet without vulgarity.

– *A History of Painting . . .*

Crowe, J. A., and Giovanni Battista Cavalcaselle. 1912. *A History of Painting in North Italy, Venice, Padua, Vicenza, Verona, Ferrara, Milan, Friuli, Brescia from the Fourteenth to the Sixteenth Century*. 2 2. London: Murray.

## Giorgione Discussion Questions

What emotions did this painting elicit in you?

What did you like about it?

What didn't you like?

How would you describe this painting to a friend who hadn't seen it?

How does it compare to the image in your mind?

This painting is filled with background detail. Does it enhance or detract from the overall effect? Why?

This painting shifts the action away from the center and toward the bottom left of the painting. How does that shift affect your experience of the painting?



*The Nativity / The Adoration of the Shepherds*

El Greco

1605-1610

## ***The Nativity / Adoration of the Shepherds – El Greco***

This is introduced as one of the most extreme examples of El Greco's art. The drawing of some of the pieces, as, for instance, the cherub in fore-shortening, the leg of the kneeling shepherd, the side of the Madonna's head, is unbelievable. At the same time, the group is well composed and possibly was the Plan type on which like subjects by Ribera and by Murillo were built up. Observe that the figures are lit by radiance from the Infant Jesus. This idea may have been borrowed from the famous 'La Notte' of Correggio. In-deed, the main lines of the Greek's composition are very similar to that of the Italian's: the lighting is imagined rather than studied from nature. It would be impossible that the face and arm of the kneeling shepherd should be so lit by light from the Child.

The face of the Virgin, despite its singular drawing, has a certain charm, and the head of St. Joseph is eminently Grecoesque, looking, indeed, more like a fierce Jeremiah than a meek Joseph.

– *Masters in Art: El Greco*

*Masters in Art: El Greco*. 1908. Boston: Bates and Guild Co.

## El Greco Discussion Questions

What emotions did this painting elicit in you?

What did you like about it?

What didn't you like?

How would you describe this painting to a friend who hadn't seen it?

How does it compare to the image in your mind?

El Greco's depiction is filled with movement. How does that motion reflect the passage?

The excerpt talks about the lighting that seems to emanate from Jesus. What does that technique accomplish?

## ***Adoration of the Shepherds* Final Discussion Questions**

Compare and contrast the Giorgione and El Greco images.

Which do you prefer? Why?

What did these paintings do well in portraying the story?

What did they miss?

How do images such as these affect the way you read the passage?

The Giorgione and El Greco paintings offer quite different portrayals of the same event. What are the strengths and weaknesses of viewing such different depictions?

## SECTION 4: Nativity – Closing Prayer

Lord,

We thank you that you chose to dwell among us.

We give you thanks for the good tidings of great joy that came to the shepherds so many years ago and that still bring great joy even today.

We thank you for your peace and goodwill.

We ask you to give us strength and courage to proclaim your good news everywhere we go, so glorifying and praising you for the blessings we have seen.

In Jesus Name we pray,

Amen.

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Scripture quotations from King James Version  
of the Bible