



How does a weary world rejoice?

Artist statements for Advent–Baptism of the Lord

While we hope viewers develop their own interpretations of the art we create, we offer these artist statements as theological reflections on our process creating these works. You are welcome to share these artist statements in worship bulletins, church newsletters, or online, and you may also incorporate them into sermons or worship liturgy (with credit).

The First Sunday of Advent | How does a weary world rejoice?
We acknowledge our weariness



Annunciation to Zechariah

by Lauren Wright Pittman

Inspired by Luke 1:1-23

Acrylic and ink on wood panel

Zechariah is dressed in a breastpiece, ephod, robe, checkered tunic, turban, and sash, just as the book of Exodus specifies. In my painting, gold, blue, purple, and crimson yarns are woven together and bejeweled with engraved stones which bear the names of the sons of Israel (Exodus 28:4).

Zechariah stands in the Holy Place wearing the most meticulous of garments. Does he expect to encounter the divine? Or is he just going through the motions, lighting the incense as an all-too-familiar scent fills the air?

After all these years of fulfilling priestly duties and “living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord” (Luke

1:6), Zechariah and his wife are still childless. Regardless of their desire for children, in their culture and context, childlessness bore the implication of God’s contempt.

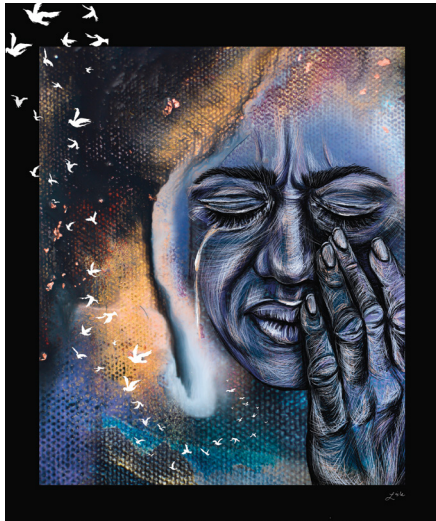
I ruminated on this image... a weary priest wrapped in layered fabrics, colors, symbols, textures, and rare stones that proclaim God’s providence and power. The contrast is not lost on me.

I often try to neglect my weariness by putting on a veneer of unwavering trust in God—while feeling like I may suddenly unravel into a pile of beautifully-curated threads, stones, and gold accessories.

In this image, I decided to depict the angel as smoke from the altar of incense. Zechariah has one hand over his mouth in fear and disbelief, while his other hand cradles the notion—not yet hope—of his son’s existence.

Do you bind up your weariness in a neat and tidy bow, put your head down, and project okay-ness like me? What would it look like to acknowledge our weariness, quit powering through, and open ourselves up to what God might have in store for us? Perhaps we’ll meet an angel. —Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman

The First Sunday of Advent | How does a weary world rejoice?
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Make Your Face Shine

by Lisle Gwynn Garrity

Inspired by Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

Acrylic painting on canvas with digital drawing

For this Advent series, I created a collection of paintings inspired by the Hubble telescope images of the cosmos. The telescope renderings invite you to peer into worlds unknown. The beauty of it all is a balm for the weary. When you gaze upon the colors of the cosmos, how can you keep from rejoicing? Inspired by the luminescent textures of nebula and star clusters, I painted washes of vibrant colors and metallic gold amidst a backdrop of beautiful blackness. These paintings have become the backgrounds for each of my digital drawings in this series.

The day I began working on this image, another mass shooting terrorized our country. This time it happened at a church preschool.¹

One of the children slain was the pastor's daughter. By the time you read this, there will have been more shootings, more unnecessary and completely preventable deaths. The weight of that prediction makes every bone in my body weary beyond repair.

As I read and reread Psalm 80 on that day of mourning, I remembered that politeness is not the language of the weary. The psalmist supplied me with the words I wanted to pray, the words I wanted to scream: *Wake up your power, God! Save us! How long?!*

Then, I began to draw. What emerged was a face shining from the cosmos. I imagined God as Holy Mother or Holy Parent weeping for her creation. I imagined the parents weeping for their children who were so suddenly and brutally taken from them. The mere thought of their grief knocks the wind out of me.

As I completed the image, I added a flock of doves flying out from the void into which God's tears fall. The doves represent the Spirit let loose in our world, flapping their wings into every desperate corner. I added them not as a statement, but as a plea: *please, God, make your face shine so we might be saved.* —**Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity**

¹ On March 27, 2023, a shooter took the lives of 3 children and 3 adults at The Covenant School in Nashville, TN.

The Second Sunday of Advent | How does a weary world rejoice?
We find joy in connection



Two Mothers

by Nicolette Peñaranda

Inspired by Luke 1:24-45

Acrylic, ink, and mixed media collage on canvas

A couple of months before I took on this project, I was forced into early labor and birthed our second child. Needless to say, I was still pretty raw with emotions and was processing the trauma. During that time, I found myself in isolation. Our days were spent driving back and forth to the NICU to check on our 3 lb. infant. It was terrifying and tiresome. But during that time, so many wonderful people sought us out. We were gifted food, baby clothes, childcare, and rest. But the greatest gift was the comfort I received from other people who had given birth. There was this sacred sharing of birth stories and postpartum depression. Parents passed on beautiful garments that they, too, received after birthing a preemie. Some of these pieces looked like they had been

passed down many times before, like each thread held a memory from a different family.

We were connected.

It is because of this connection that parents share that I felt instantly connected to paying homage to Frida Kahlo's *Two Fridas*.² Rather than being connected from veins of the heart, Mary and Elizabeth would be connected through the uterus.

Nearly a quarter of Black women between ages 18 and 30 have fibroids while also being the racial demographic with the highest maternal death rate in the United States. More than 100,000 women undergo some form of mastectomy each year. Globally, an estimated 14% of girls give birth before the age of 18. Where do these realities meet the heart of scripture? How do we see the struggles of infertility or empathize with the vulnerability that comes with not being a socially-accepted pregnant person?

While Elizabeth is crowned with holy gray hair and a dress marked with the blood of previous miscarriages, Mary sits next to her holding a childhood doll, draped in the jewelry, flowers, and silks of a traditional Middle Eastern Jewish bride. Their stories and experiences are vastly different. But Mary sought out her kin. This reminds me that we do not need to do the hard things alone. There is power in connection.

With you, there is joy. —Rev. Nicolette Peñaranda

² *Two Fridas* (Frida Kahlo, 1939) is considered to be a self-portrait in which one Frida is wearing European clothes and the other is in a traditional Mexican dress. The two women are connected by their anatomical hearts.

The Second Sunday of Advent | How does a weary world rejoice?
We find joy in connection



Comfort, O Comfort

by Lauren Wright Pittman

Inspired by Isaiah 40:1-11

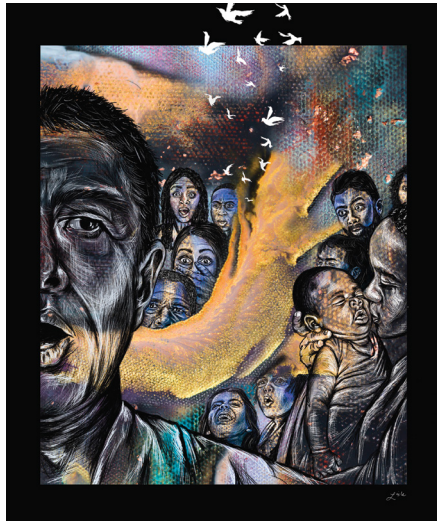
Digital painting

I wanted to create an image that spoke tenderly to the viewer as this text does to the reader. “Comfort, O comfort my people” (Isaiah 40:1). When I’ve read this text before, the shepherding metaphor has only yielded masculine imagery in my mind. It makes sense with the text’s pronouns that I would imagine a masculine figure. It was also ingrained in me— through translations, biblical art, movies, children’s pageants, etc.—that shepherds were always men. I learned recently, however, that women were shepherds too. Some young women were trained and worked as shepherds before they were married; this notion completely added new dimension and depth to the shepherding metaphor. I decided to use imagery of modern-day shepherds to inspire this image.

A shepherd is at once fierce and tender, willing to face the most dangerous of predators in the dead of night while warmly cradling the most vulnerable of the flock.

In this image, the shepherd nurtures a lamb while leading the flock through fields of tall grasses and flowers. The fuschia flowers in the foreground are marjoram flowers that represent comfort and the steadfastness of God’s word even in the midst of the leveling of the land. The shepherd’s clothes have repeated medallions with simplified imagery of a straight highway in the wilderness. Within the stylized landscape, a voice proclaims the coming glory of the Lord. —Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman

The Third Sunday of Advent | How does a weary world rejoice?
We allow ourselves to be amazed



What Wonder Turns Into

by Lisle Gwynn Garrity

Inspired by Luke 1:57-66

Acrylic painting on canvas with digital drawing

When was the last time you were truly amazed? I don't mean surprised; there is much about this world that should shock us. I mean *amazed*—wrapped up in wonder, absorbed in an unexpected delight.

I love witnessing the moments when my one-year-old daughter allows amazement to wash over her like a gentle rain: her jaw drops open, her eyes widen and stay fixed, and for a rare moment, she gets very still. This recently happened when she discovered the kids across the street playing basketball for the first time. Her senses have not yet grown dull to the magic surrounding her.

In this image, I wanted to capture the moment Zechariah's voice returns to him. I decided to depict only half of Zechariah's face; this miracle is not really about him, but about what happens through him. When he confirms John's name, he sheds his distrust of the angel's impossible news. His skepticism and weariness subside as he awakens to the joy in his midst. He allows himself to be amazed.

Zechariah's voice pours out of him, parting the surrounding crowd like the Red Sea, stirring each person into confusion and bewilderment. The blessing of his song spills over to his son, who is held tenderly by his mother.

Elizabeth is the only person in this scene who is not presently swept up in wonder. I believe Elizabeth has spent months allowing herself to be amazed. She was in isolation for the first five months of her pregnancy (Luke 1:24). Perhaps she needed that time to go inward—to heal from the trauma of her infertility, to trust the promise of life in her womb, to attune herself to her child. She was capsized with awe the day Mary showed up at her doorstep.

And so, when Zechariah's voice returns, Elizabeth's senses have not grown dull. Instead, her amazement has metabolized into something new: attunement for her child. It has transformed into love and deep trust. It has turned into joy. When we allow ourselves to be amazed, we might be surprised what that wonder can turn into.

—Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity

The Third Sunday of Advent | How does a weary world rejoice?
We allow ourselves to be amazed



Watercourses

by Hannah Garrity

Inspired by Psalm 126

Oil paint, charcoal, and copper leaf on canvas

This painting is a meditation on the holy watercourses of the Negeb and all of the metaphors within that image. I painted with oil paint, charcoal, and copper leaf on canvas; the copper represents joy in our weary world.

For God, we are weary and we see no end to the weariness. Lament with us. Holy One, you are steadfast in your love like the watercourses of the Negeb. In your name, we call out evil. When we do, we are glimmers of hope. By your example, we act in the ways of Jesus. When we do, we are shimmers of joy. We often fall short; forgive us. We strive on, for when we succeed, your new heaven shines through. Strive with us.

Mother God, in this time of ascending fear, how do we stay aware of the needs of the world, active toward the renewal of your people, and focused on the specifics that are in your control through your call to us? Keep awake with us.

Adonai, it is in your name that we give ourselves time to lament. With you, we cry together. When our ancestors emerged from exile, by the rivers of Babylon, we sat down, and there we wept when we remembered Zion. The power of nostalgia—is it getting in the way of your work? Cry with us.

Holy Wisdom, we allow ourselves to be amazed, to dream, to lean into your call to garner your gifts the way raindrops become creeks and creeks become coursing rivers. We challenge ourselves to see the glimmers of hope in the murky waters of our current time. We beg you for clarity, but no, you continue to show us the way through subtle nudges, not obvious signs. We must flow on in endless song. How can we keep from singing? Perhaps our tears and our songs are one. Sing with us.

Holy Word, may our actions match your call, your claim on our lives. May we come together in our lament to sow the change your justice calls forth. Sow with us, we pray, that our next generation may reap our tears with shouts of joy. Amen. —**Hannah Garrity**

The Fourth Sunday of Advent | How does a weary world rejoice?
We sing stories of hope



Embroidered Borders

by Nicolette Peñaranda

Inspired by Luke 1:46-55

Acrylic, ink, and mixed media collage on canvas

Two years before the birth of Jesus, during the Pax Romana, one of the worst public executions happened a half day's walk away from where Mary grew up.³ She came of age during a time of occupation, more than likely unable to recall a time of true peace and liberation. Mary's song rings of a dream that not only she but her ancestors dreamed of, and she would be the one to give birth to the savior of her people.

Fast forward thousands of years and the same land where Mary grew up is still being occupied. One can imagine that the cries for liberation and the prayers for justice still ring down the streets of Bethlehem. To me, Mary's song of praise is still valid for the women of Palestine and for the people who still raise their children under the duress of war and occupation.

This image is a nod to Palestine. The background operates as a foundation, built with the colors of the Palestinian flag and with collaged scriptures that celebrate women. Elizabeth and Mary are both in Palestinian regalia but from different generations. Elizabeth, centered and holding her belly, is in an outfit inspired by a photograph of a woman from Ramallah, dated sometime between 1929-1946.⁴ This was intended to emphasize the generational differences between the two. Mary, on the other hand, is in more contemporary Palestinian fashion. A stipple effect was used to highlight the intricacy of Palestinian embroidery in both garments.

What felt important to me is the placement of Mary and Elizabeth. Rarely does Elizabeth get to be the center of the story, as her pregnancy becomes an accompaniment piece to the birth of Jesus. But here, Elizabeth is in the foreground. She gets to be the star while Mary places her arms around her, comforting her, and proclaiming the good news of what is to come. Mary is the hope that we see in all youth. —Rev. Nicolette Peñaranda

³ For more context, read: "Birth of a Revolutionary: The Shaping of Jesus' Politics," in *The Politics of Jesus*, by Obery M. Hendricks, Jr. (New York: Three Leaves Press, 2006).

⁴ "Ramallah woman," photograph taken either by the American Colony Photo Department or the Matson Photo Service between 1929 and 1946. At the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ramallah_woman_15029v.jpg

The Fourth Sunday of Advent | How does a weary world rejoice?
We sing stories of hope



Prophecy

by Hannah Garrity

Inspired by Luke 1:67-80

Oil paint, charcoal, and copper leaf on canvas

This painting engages the flow of Zechariah's prophecy. I painted in oil on canvas; the copper leaf represents God's healing love. Copper has qualities that interact with its surroundings. When coiled, it can harness electricity out of thin air. When used in body wrapping, it can support internal self-repair. When used in pots and pans, it disperses heat evenly. When used in the womb, it causes the blood to flow monthly. When used in piping, it allows clean water to flow.

Over the years, I have been drawn to taking away plastics in my artwork. It is not always possible because acrylic paint and PVC pipe are such accessible media. But the natural materials draw me in physically, emotionally. In my work, I return to copper to hold banners up, to build

sculpture, to create motion, and to capture light in an installation. It is a natural material that is prevalent in buildings. You can buy it at your local hardware store.

Here, the copper represents aspects of discipleship. It represents the presence of God in our lives and our actions—the presence of God in Zechariah's prophecy and in John's life and work.

The image is inspired by waters meeting one another. This intersecting flow portrays Zechariah's words meeting John the Baptist's life. It is a crashing toward, a central meeting place, a potential energy meeting a kinetic being.

Holy Mother, your love is mighty—more powerful than all of the forces that act to barricade justice, to block righteousness. Guide us like you guided Zechariah in your ways of peace, in your strength of courage, in your acts of love. Amen. —**Hannah Garrity**



Surrogacy

by Hannah Garrity

Inspired by Luke 2:1-20

Oil paint, charcoal, and copper leaf on canvas

Dr. Christena Cleveland published a book in 2023 called, *God is a Black Woman*.⁵ In it, she shares her powerful testimony describing her journey to meet the Black Madonnas carved centuries ago from lava rock. This resonates with my lifelong yearning for Mother God.

Male language for God has always been a wall to my ability to connect in worship. Now, it is a wall that I break through every week—changing words, rewriting liturgy in the moment, saying “Mother” where “Father” is printed, trying “Lady” where “Lord” is printed. In this case, “Yahweh” is actually best. Who are we to squash God into patriarchy so perpetually?

But when someone else joins me in this necessary work, that is when the barrier is removed. I hear it sometimes: “She,” “Mother.” Almost

always, the liturgist feels the need to explain themselves. In liturgy discussion, gaslighting is common. “We should be more inclusive.” All of a sudden?

Recently, I was standing at The Dwelling at Richmond Hill.⁶ The former slave quarters are open and offered for visitation. After our tour, the idea that one should remove their shoes before entering this holy haven came up. Our tour group was all white people and we discussed this idea from a theoretical standpoint. But earlier, before we entered, I felt it. I was holding a seltzer water can from lunch and felt incredibly rude entering the space with it, so, without understanding, I backtracked and placed my purse and the can outside. I knew not why. After the tour, in our discussion about shoes, our white tour guide mentioned that Black members of the staff felt a great reverence, a holy presence at The Dwelling. The space held the presence of God; it was like entering a sanctuary.

I remember the same feeling when I was young, touring the slave quarters at Monticello.⁷ But now, listening to the Richmond Hill staff testimony, I understood these spaces in a new way, with a reverence for the God-like presence of the Black mother in the depths of oppression.

“Listen to Black women.” This cry has become a mantra over the last few years. I saw in that moment what Cleveland so eloquently explains in her book. In the pigmentocracy we inhabit, the Black mother is the closest figure to God, and “whitemalegod” is the very farthest. He promotes oppression; She is the savior of the most oppressed. And so I listen.

In this painting, Black Mother God has asked her daughter Mary to hold the role of surrogate for the pregnancy of infant Creator. Mary has carried the child to term. She has given birth. God embraces Mary as well as the Holy Infant in gratitude. For without Mary’s surrogacy, the incarnation could not be. —**Hannah Garrity**

⁵ *God is a Black Woman*, by Christena Cleveland. (New York: HarperOne, 2022).

⁶ Richmond Hill is an ecumenical fellowship, residence and urban retreat center in Richmond, VA. On its campus lie the remains of a historic enslaved dwelling. The remains are currently undergoing restoration efforts in order to become a place of learning, reflection, and prayer. Learn more here: richmond.com/opinion/columnists/williams-richmond-hill-seeks-to-uncover-buried-truths-of-enslavement-at-its-site-as-a/article_7b21c63f-3e00-5c86-9e2d-0197ab4deee1.html

⁷ Monticello, VA, was the primary plantation of Thomas Jefferson, a Founding Father and the third president of the United States.

The First Sunday after Christmas | How does a weary world rejoice?
We root ourselves in ritual



Revelation

by Lisle Gwynn Garrity

Inspired by Luke 2:21-38

Acrylic painting on canvas with digital drawing

I wonder what Mary and Joseph expect when they enter the temple to dedicate their newborn son. This customary ritual quickly unravels into an astonishing scene. A stranger named Simeon pronounces Jesus to be a “light” and “revelation,” and his dying wish is fulfilled. A prophet named Anna also draws near to the child, praising God for the redemption he will bring.

Simeon and Anna’s words fill Mary and Joseph with amazement. But that can’t be the only emotion taking up space in the room. For Simeon turns to Mary, perhaps privately, to continue sharing his message: the boy will also become the cause of great turmoil, the catalyst for

opposition. He will expose the inner thoughts of many. A sword will pierce her innermost being. The mother of God will grieve as she bears witness to the suffering of the child she birthed.

In this image, Simeon bestows his blessing and prophecy with the urgency of a man desperate to say everything that needs to be said before his time runs out. Anna looks off into the distance, as if peering into the future. Her devotion to God over the years has sharpened her gaze; she knows redemption when she sees it.

In the top left, I depicted Jesus’ hand being cradled by the hands of his parents. This tender moment is frozen in time, like a Polaroid photograph placed in a scrapbook. Mary and Joseph treasure their child as they receive the fullness of his calling. I imagine them memorizing each wrinkle and tiny fingernail, treasuring the smallness of a hand that will one day become a strong fist, fighting for justice for the oppressed and liberation for those held captive. —**Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity**

Baptism of the Lord | How does a weary world rejoice?
We trust our belovedness



Beloved

by Lauren Wright Pittman

Inspired by Luke 3:21-22

Digital painting and collage

Luke's account of Jesus' baptism is brief and vague. He was baptized among "all the people" (Luke 3:21) by an unnamed baptizer, and until he prays, the scene is rather unremarkable. During his prayer, however, an iconic scene unfolds with the heavens opening, the Holy Spirit descending in the form of a dove, and a voice booming from heaven.

As I considered how I might visually respond to this text, it was difficult to imagine this event with a beginner's mind. I've seen lots of imagery of Jesus in the water with clouds breaking open and a dove descending, or Jesus bursting out of water into a beam of light. These images are powerful, but I wasn't sure if creating a similar image would be helpful, or if I'd be offering insight into the text that hadn't already been visually explored.

I began to meditate on what was unspoken and implied in Luke's account, and one moment that stuck out in my imagination was the moment Jesus was underwater. How did Jesus feel when he held his breath and descended into the river?

This image offers a snapshot of Jesus right before he steps into his calling, on the threshold of spectacular affirmation. He is completely suspended, embraced, and upheld by the waters of baptism. The water's surface is choppy. The future is unknown and precarious. His path is a lonely and formidable one, eventually leading to his suffering and death.

Despite what is to come, Jesus reaches toward the surface. Two fish are drawn to the light of his halo, foreshadowing his companionship with fishers and his miraculous feeding of the five thousand. All of creation is leaning into his call.

This is what trusting your belovedness feels like—muscles and bones relieved of gravity's burden, serenity, weightlessness, oneness with creation, and the warmth of God's love permeating every cell of your body and every corner of your soul. —Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman



About the artists



Rev. Nicolette (Faison) Peñaranda

Rev. Nicolette “Nic” (*she/her*) is a pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America serving as the Program Director for African Descent Ministries. Nic is the creator of MONadvocacy, a racial justice resource grounded in play, as well as the “Talks at the Desk” series which celebrates the voices of leaders in the ELCA African descent community: livinglutheran.org/2022/02/a-love-letter-to-african-descent-communities.

She is passionate about queer Black liberation, cultivating diverse leadership in faith spaces, and the art of creation. She is also the illustrator of *God’s Holy Darkness*, written by Sharei Green and Beckah Selnick (Beaming Books, 2022). The book deconstructs anti-Blackness in Christian theology by celebrating instances in the story of God’s people when darkness, blackness, and night are beautiful, good, and holy.



Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity

Lisle Gwynn Garrity (*she/her*) is a Pastorist (pastor + artist), retreat leader, and creative entrepreneur seeking to fill the church with more color, paint, mystery, and creativity. She founded A Sanctified Art with the conviction that, in order to thrive, the church needs more creative expression and art-filled freedom.



Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman

Lauren (*she/her*) is an artist, graphic designer, and theologian. She uses paint, metallic inks, and Apple pencil to image the layered complexity she experiences in scripture texts. She also helps faith communities share their vibrant stories through branding & design services.



Hannah Garrity

Hannah (*she/her*) is an artist and an athlete, a daughter and a mother, a facilitator and a producer, a leader and a teammate. She is the Director of Christian Faith, Life, and Arts at Second Presbyterian Church in Richmond, Va, an art in worship workshop leader wherever she is called, and a liturgical installation artist at the Montreat Conference Center, Montreat, NC.