

ADVENT 2021

A VISUAL DEVOTIONAL

THE NATIVITY AT NIGHT
GEERTGEN TOT SINT JANS



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Instructions

General Instructions

- Resources for the Devotional: The Nativity at Night Devotional (This PDF)
- [The Nativity at Night – Blog Post](#) (for the Reading sections explained below)
- [Skip to the Devotional](#)

Advent 2021 consists of 5 total works of art. 1 each for the four Sundays in Advent and a final work to be delivered to your inbox on Christmas Morning. The Blog Post will be reproduced here for your convenience and following the blog post will be a devotional. This week it is in three parts. You can work that into your week however you like – either taking it in an all-in-one sitting or spreading it out during the week.

The works for each week are as follows:

Week 1 – We Light Amsterdam (an art installation)

Week 2 - The Slave Ship, J. M. W. Turner

Week 3 - IThemba Tower, Johannesburg (an art installation)

Week 4 - Nativity at Night, Geertgen tot Sint Jans

Christmas Morning - A Meat Stall with the Holy Family Giving Alms, Pieter Aertsen

These works are far from traditional and nudge us to think about Advent and our ongoing celebration of the incarnation in new and fresh ways. The theme of the series is Light out of Darkness. Glad you are joining me for this journey.

Part 1 Messages of Hope

This week we are going to be looking at an oil painting from the late 1400's by the Netherlandish painter Geertgen tot Sint Jans. The nativity at Night was intended to be used as a devotional tool and to lead believers into a deeper communion with God.

Read the Blogpost, [here](#), or in the following pages:

The Nativity at Night



The Nativity at Night by Geertgen tot Sint Jans, painted in 1490, was a devotional tool. Encouraging believers to contemplate the nativity was thought to bring the believer into greater communion with God. Specifically, contemplating Christ birth was meant to facilitate the viewer in bringing forth their

own spiritual rebirth. Geertgen was an Early Netherlandish painter whose career lasted just 10 years, but his accomplished style and realistic portrayals still call to us. The painting shows the Nativity of Jesus and an Annunciation to the Shepherds.

Female Piety

There is no provenance for this work, meaning we cannot trace its ownership from its creation to today. Art, particularly during the medieval and renaissance periods, was often created with a specific audience in mind. When we know the audience we often have clues as to the artist's intentions and what he/she was trying to communicate. In the case of the Nativity at Night we don't have this luxury. However, I've run across a few academic papers that suggest this painting was created for women, either commissioned for a convent (specifically the Sisters of the Convent of Our Lady of Visitation, outside Haarlem) or a Beguines, which I will explain later. I've chosen to move forward in my analysis assuming that this is the case. I feel that a female audience fits the painting, and holding that viewpoint gives us a unique perspective as we analyze the work.

During the late medieval period there were several influences on Christian communities, (particularly women) that influenced artists, and this painting. Primarily these are the Modern Devotion Movement, The Golden Legend, and Saint Bridget of Sweden.

The Modern Devotion Movement



The Modern Devotion movement called for religious reforms and a renewal of pious practices like humility, simplicity, and obedience. The writings of Gerard Groote, a founder of the Modern Devotion movement, spread throughout the Low Countries. Groote called for the clergy to return to the true apostolic traditions and called individuals back to a pure inward spirituality that reflected humility and obedience.

The Night Nativity reflects Groote's emphasis on the importance of remaking the soul through spiritual rebirth, specifically by contemplating the Nativity. Groote repeatedly used the metaphor of birth and Christ's incarnation as a route for believers to transform themselves into the image of Christ. His writings on this topic were translated and spread throughout the Low Countries. Artists of the day would have been familiar with his writings, particularly because

it provided them with visual images they could use as metaphors that were easily understood by their audience.

The Night Nativity and The Modern Devotion Movement

Devotional pieces, like *The Night Nativity*, were commissioned with the purpose of encouraging the viewer to place themselves into the Biblical narrative. In doing this, it was thought that the devotee would begin to see with the eyes of the heart, and to enter into an ever-deeper communion with God. The Modern Devotion movement found visual aids, like paintings, helped stimulate the spiritual imagination. With practice, believers could reach deeper intellectual understanding of the Biblical stories and expand their inner spiritual lives.

The Modern Devotion Movement embraced Female Spirituality

Groote, who founded the Modern Devotion Movement, included women from the outset, even using his family home to create a community for lay religious women. The values of the movement, particularly humility and obedience, were seen as feminine and so it was natural for artists to make use of the image of the Virgin to incite devotees to contemplate the beauty and strength in humility. Additionally, giving birth, a uniquely feminine task, became a sacred metaphor for our spiritual birth in Christ.

In *The Night Nativity* we are meant to see an intimate moment between Mary and her son. We are meant, not just to observe Mary, but to learn from and emulate her. If women were the target audience for this work, using a woman and motherhood as the model makes sense.

Geertgen Leaves Space for Us at the Manger

This work is relatively small, inviting the viewer to come close and sit awhile. This is not a large, impressive altarpiece that would inspire awe in a congregation, but a small, intimate painting that calls out to us as individuals to draw near.

There is a space left for us in the foreground of the painting. We too can kneel before the manger and consider the miracle of God come to Earth. These elements are meant to aid us in our devotional practices, to assist us in coming into the presence of God.

More than that, we are meant to contemplate the role that Mary played. Incarnation literally means God taking on flesh. Mary, in her vulnerable, human body, took on the task of the incarnation. She provided the way for Christ to be born in the flesh, and as we



can see in this work, she was more than just the vehicle for the infant Christ. There is a true relationship, an intimate connection between the Virgin and her son.

This tender portrayal of mother and child gave hope to the viewer that they too could have a deeper, more intimate, relationship with God.

The Golden Legend

The Golden Legend is a collection of stories of the saints and various miracles that was originally collected and published by Jacobus de Varagine. These stories, often fantastic, provided artists of the Middle Ages and Renaissance an abundance of images and stories to pull from. Much of the imagery from Christian art owes its origins, not to the Bible, but to the stories from the Golden Legend. These legends were familiar, not just to the clergy, but the lay people as well, making them useful as teaching tools.

In The Golden Legend, de Varagine says that Christ is the enlightener whose advent will cure the spiritual blindness of humanity. As the Golden Legend was often mined by artists for images, the idea of Christ as the enlightener was irresistible. In fact, a whole theology of light grew up around the idea.

Thomas Aquinas, the most influential theologian of the late Middle Ages preached of transforming the soul through the birth of Christ by becoming children of the light.

The faithful were believed to have had their eyes opened to the light. Here we see Mary, with her eyes opened, as she gazes adoringly on her son and her savior. The light streams from the Christ Child engulfing Mary in its brilliance.

The use of light in this painting is reminiscent of the light and shadow used by the baroque artists of the 17th century. In Baroque art the light is used to create drama, to heighten our emotions. Here, Geertgen uses the light to create intimacy, and to invite us into the miracle of Christ birth.

Saint Bridget and Her Visions

As a mother, one of my first thoughts when I view this painting is the rather jarring visual of a naked newborn with no blankets to keep him warm. There is no way, having just given birth, I'd have laid a baby down like this. I can see the shepherds in the background of the painting have a campfire going to warm themselves. I can also see that Mary and Joseph are warmly dressed, so it is rather shocking that the baby is laying exposed, and one would presume cold.

Newborns feel so tiny, so vulnerable in those first weeks of life. In the Biblical record of the nativity, it is noted that the infant is immediately wrapped in swaddling clothes, so there has to be a good reason that the artist has chosen to present the infant in this rather disturbing state.



The reason for this presentation of the Christ Child is due to a woman, Saint Bridget. Bridget of Sweden lived in the 1300's, and after the death of her husband became a nun. Her life was marked by charity, mystical visions, and campaigns against corruption in the church.

Her vision of the nativity became a great influence on nativity art. One of the striking elements was that the Christ Child was lying on the ground and emitting a great light.

The Vision

Here is a portion of Saint Bridget's vision:

"the virgin knelt down with great veneration in an attitude of prayer, and her back was turned to the manger. While she was standing thus in prayer, I saw the child in her womb move and suddenly in a moment she gave birth to her son, from whom radiated such an ineffable light and splendor, that the sun was not comparable to it, nor did the candle that St. Joseph had put there, give any light at all, the divine light totally annihilating the material light of the candle. I saw the glorious infant lying on the ground naked and shining. His body was pure from any kind of soil and impurity. Then I heard also the singing of the angels, which was of miraculous sweetness and great beauty."

Bridget's visions and divine encounters with the Virgin Mary were unique in the documented sources of the time. In particular, her visions called the devotee to consider the incarnation through the eyes of Mary, bringing a uniquely female perspective to the practice.

Mary as Mother

One of the distinctive aspects of medieval piety was devotion to the infant Christ. This was particularly true among women believers. Women were encouraged to imagine themselves in the role of Mary or one of the midwives, and thus create a mystical union between themselves and the Christ Child. Motherhood had much to teach every believer about how to follow Christ, but the lessons were easily absorbed by women who had experienced giving birth and bonding with an infant.

The maternal relationship between Christ and the Virgin was intimate and served as a metaphor for the union between Christ and the soul.



Just as Mary carried Christ and brought him into the world, our souls unite with Christ and bring about spiritual rebirth. Just as physical birth involves labor, so does the transformation of a soul. A transformation that, like Mary giving birth, yields a more intimate relationship with God.

The Night Nativity pictures Mary as young, pure, with a white head covering and hands held in adoration. She gazes at Christ with love and devotion. We are meant to see both the awe of a new mother, and the worship she offers to her Savior.

Joseph and His Candle

Contrasting with this intimate portrayal of Mary we have Joseph standing off to one side holding a candle. Joseph's picture here matches the vision by Saint Bridget. We can barely tell that he has a candle, it's light is so faint compared to the light that shines from the Christ Child.

During the Middle Ages Joseph was often painted off to the side, turned away, or even asleep to preserve Mary's purity during the childbirth process. His assistance was not needed during the birthing process as the Golden Legend tells us, midwives attended the birth and bathed the newborn infant.

We should also note that while Joseph is off in the shadows, we, the viewer, are placed in a more privileged position. We could be one of the midwives as we move into the space the artist has provided in the foreground. As women we would be allowed to come closer, to participate in, or at least witness, this intimate family scene.

Reversed Hieratic Scale



Along with being naked, and glowing, the other characteristic of Jesus in this work is his size. Of course, all newborns are small, but here both the angels and the Christ Child are smaller than they should be.

During this period one of the devices artists used was hieratic scale. This means that the artist painted figures in paintings based on their importance. The more important a person was, the larger they would be. Insignificant figures would often be quite small. As we can see here Mary is substantial, perhaps even large compared to the building she is in. By contrast, both the Christ Child and the angels are quite small.

This is the reverse of how Hieratic Scale is usually used. Here we have the heavenly beings and the Christ Child rendered in a diminished way. The artist had to have been making a point.

One reason for this seeming contradiction is that the Modern Devotion Movement stressed that being 'naked and small' like the infant Christ should be a pillar for a devoted Christian. Humility was a core tenant of the movement. Christ demonstrated, by leaving heaven and coming to earth as a helpless child, that humility was the road

to a relationship with God. We are to become small, like a child, to enter God's kingdom and Jesus is showing us the way.

Additionally, the Modern Devotion Movement's ascetic values of obedience and simplicity countered the abuses and excesses of the clergy and ruling classes. Jesus came to conquer the evil that feeds itself on prestige, wealth, power, and violence. Christ would spend his adult ministry turning the idea of power and privilege on its head. Christ elevated the 'least of these' to positions of respect and walked among those who occupied the edges of society treating them with dignity.

The small size of the angels emphasizes the message that heaven judges by a different scale than man. The angels are not just small, but childlike, perhaps to further emphasize Mary's role as a mother.

The Night

Artists of the Middle Ages did not title their paintings. The practice of applying a title began much, much later, and the titles are very inconsistent. Generally, a title is given to a painting just as a way for people to identify the painting. As this work appears to be a night scene, which is somewhat unusual for a nativity, it earned the title, The Nativity at Night.

Actually, this is a bit inaccurate. In its original form the work would have looked quite different. First, the sky and Mary's robe were painted with the pigment, aqua marine, which is a beautiful shade of deep blue. Aqua marine oxidizes over time and turns black. So the color and tone of this work is significantly different than it would have appeared in 1490. Additionally, the paint would have abraded over the course of 530 years and gradually eroded or worn down, further diminishing the paint's initial brilliance.

To add to the problem, in the early 1900's the painting survived a fire, and its surface was further damaged and colored.

All of this to say, while I personally love the deep colors and contemplative mood of this canvas, it likely looked quite different when the artist finished it.

Annunciation to the Shepherds

The background of the painting includes a small vignette of the Annunciation to the Shepherds. The angel in the annunciation stands out against the black sky and emphasizes theme that with Christ birth light has come into the darkness. Huddled around small campfire the shepherds are gathered.

Augustine's Christmas Sermon

To sum up what I feel is the message of this painting I think we can go to one of Saint Augustine's Christmas sermons where he says, "Conceive Christ by faith, give birth to Him through your works, so that your heart may be doing in the law of Christ what the womb of Mary did in the flesh of Christ."



Addendum

Beguine's Provide Additional Insight into Female Piety in the Low Countries

While researching this work I came across the Beguine's and I found the stories of their women and the message of the Night Nativity to have many points of connection, so I thought I'd share a bit about them, and link to some articles about them.



Groote's (founder of the Modern Devotion Movement) work went beyond writing. He turned his home into the first Beguine, a community for women who wished to serve God and pursue a simpler life. Over time these "Beguines" sprang up across the Netherlands and Germany. The houses, or communities flourished for a time and were often comprised of well to do women or widows who sought a role in life outside being a wife or nun. Varying in size from a single woman in her home, to communities with up to 400 women, Beguines, in many ways, defy easy categorization.

Many objected to the Beguines, as they created a path for women to be independent from husbands, fathers, and the male hierarchy of the church. Beguines allowed women to explore their spiritual lives from a uniquely female perspective, not bound by the vows and practices of conventional religious orders. These lay religious communities didn't operate under a set rule of law, instead they focused on simplicity, freedom, humility, and charity. Characterized by Marian Devotion, an emphasis on the Eucharist, and service to others, the Beguines spirituality was varied and often included mysticism.

The Night Nativity illustrates the roadmap used by the Modern Devotion movement and the Beguines for deepening their communion with God.

Many of the Beguine's stressed two themes: The 'over-passing' or moving past our sin as humans to truly unite with God, and "the more" - that there was always more of God to experience. I find this work, and contemplating the nativity, to fall into this 'The More' category. That there is always more the votary can learn and experience if they lose themselves in the imagery and enter into divine imaging.

Other Posts by Northern Artists on the theme of the Nativity

[Robert Campin's Merode Altarpiece](#)

[Hugo Van Der Goes' Portinari Altarpiece](#)

[Jan Van Eyck's The Annunciation](#)

Sources

<https://www.americamagazine.org/content/all-things/when-they-began-beguines>

<https://www.artway.eu/content.php?id=861&lang=en&action=show>

https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1200&context=art_design_theses

(devotional continued on next page)

The Devotional for The Nativity at Night

Part 2

I find the older my children are, the more miraculous and overwhelming being their mother feels.

Feeling your baby move inside you for the first time is something so wondrous I don't really have the words to describe it. Seeing that newborn infant, fully formed, for the first time is miraculous.

While giving birth is a common experience shared by a large proportion of the population, each birth is unique.

This feeling of mystery and awe grows as we watch our children develop into their adult selves. They are complete, separate individuals. Their conception, just two cells joining together, created this person who stands before me. When I really stop to consider it, I'm overwhelmed.

Thinking about that, while reading some of the writings of the early church fathers about how to process the Nativity as a vehicle for our own spiritual rebirth got me thinking.

So I looked up "conception" in the dictionary. I do this with common terms a lot and this is what it said. **"A thought that is complete, individual, recent, and somewhat intricate."**

Obviously, Webster's was not referring to conception in terms of a baby being conceived, but something more along the lines of, 'the architect's conception of the project was...'

However, I found the intersection of these ideas intriguing.

In my personal religious history, the term spiritual birth or more commonly, being born again, meant saying the sinner's prayer, asking Jesus into my heart.

I've always struggled with this definition of being born again. It didn't set well with me that by reciting a few sentences I was spiritually new. But that was the only context I had for the term.

As I've grown, and read I've come to understand that particular understanding of being 'born again' is a VERY recent development.

I find I resonate more with the idea of a prolonged pregnancy where my thoughts, desires, struggles, personality, and soul grow and develop over time. Then, through that labor, through humility and obedience, I am spiritually reborn. And that rebirth is complete, individual, and somewhat intricate, just like the definition of conception I discovered at Dictionary.com.

I also resonate with the idea of conception being 'recent'. I found that an intriguing addition to the definition above.

In my life I would say I've had several spiritual rebirths (at least I have if I drop the idea of rebirth being the reciting of the sinner's prayer.)

As I contemplate the truths of the nativity story, or the story of the cross, I continue the journey of being spiritually made anew.

How do you view the term, 'born again'?

When you think of spiritual rebirth what comes to mind?

Part 3

Picking up on the idea from Part 2 that our spiritual rebirth, in a sense, is an ongoing process, I wanted to explore the two tenets of the Beguines. If you finished reading the blogpost you will have read the addendum about the Beguine who lived during the late Middle Ages.

These women explored and expanded their inner spiritual lives in a unique community. They were committed to simplicity, humility, and obedience but without the rules and structures of cloistered life. They did not take vows, were free to come and go, and had an intellectual freedom that was unique for women of their time. While they agreed on the values of humility and obedience, how those played out in individual's lives, and in their communities varied. I love that.

I also love their two main tenets, that of 'Over-passing' and 'The More'. I think these do a good job of summing up our job in growing spiritually.

Overpassing is to move past our sin so that we can truly unite with God.

When I read that I see a picture of grace. We move past our sin, past our shame, so that we can unite with God. If we are past our sins there is no guilt, no earning of forgiveness, no proving our worth. We are past that, over it, our sin is dead to us.

What do you think of this term, overpassing? Have you moved past your failures and struggles?

Then we pursue "The More", the second tenet of the Beguines.

There is always more because God is, well, God. There will always be more to know, more to love, more to experience. And after we have moved past our sins, past our failures we continually move into "the More."

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