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THE WORLA VIRGINIA

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Cover Art by Chrissie Crosby

From Mother Anne M. Turner *Rector*



Dear Friends in Christ,

I encourage you to take a second look at the cover of this issue of Grace Notes.

If you are like me, you looked quickly. You saw a woman in blue and assumed that in the month of December that woman must be the Virgin Mary. But this cover is not so simple.

It does not show a woman from the early chapters of Luke's gospel, as we might expect, preparing for the birth of Jesus. Instead, this image is taken from Luke 7:36-50, which tells the story of a sinful woman who anoints Jesus with oil, weeping the whole time. This story took on enormous meaning for me this past year. I was profoundly moved when I realized that our editors had (without my knowing) chosen this particular art for this particular season.

Our theme for Advent this year is "The Nearness of God." It is tempting to believe that God's nearness will be accompanied only by soft lighting and warm feelings. But the reality is that God is often equally present in gut-wrenching sobs, in dark shadows, or in loss. We are drawn to God most powerfully by our need.

Our tradition speaks to this pattern. We are taught that God comes near to us through the incarnation. The incarnation is a direct response to human suffering. It is not simply a creative act but rather God's answer to Adam's fall in the garden of Eden. If there were no fall, there would be no need for redemption. If we did not struggle, there would be no need for closeness. It is a terrible and wonderful paradox.

We all live outside the gates of Eden. Even when the twinkling lights of December are strung and parties are underway, we suffer. It's true globally, it's true here at Grace Church, and I believe it is true in most of our lives. We are all sinners. We find ourselves close to God not out of our innocence but rather because we have fallen.

And yet the nearness of God enables new lives. The second-century theologian Irenaeus wrote about the doctrine of recapitulation, in which Jesus came as the second Adam. When we allow God into our worst suffering, that intimacy we share with God allows us to be reborn.

We need God to be near us right now. Our lives are hard. Our world feels precarious. God's presence takes all this profound vulnerability and remakes it into promise.

I see the promise already. This community has been through a year with much suffering in it, and I believe that this suffering has turned Grace Church toward a new intimacy with God. I believe that intimacy will make renewed mission possible for us. I hope to talk more about those mission possibilities in Epiphany.

But in this moment—still Advent—I hope we can simply know that God is near. Whatever we suffer. However we hope. God draws near to us, and that nearness makes us new.

Yours in Christ,



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Grace Notes Submissions and Publication Schedule

Grace Notes is published every other month by Grace Episcopal Church, Alexandria, Virginia. All parishioners are encouraged to contribute articles and photos. The deadline for the next issue is February 15. Articles and photos should be emailed to <u>grace.notes@gracealex.org</u> and will be subject to editing. The Grace Notes team includes Addie Budnick (*Design*), Chrissie Crosby (*Co-editor*), Teresa Preston (*Final Proofreader*), and Kemp Williams (*Co-editor*).



THE REV. SANTIAGO RODRIGUEZ, ASSOCIATE RECTOR

"Love Me Tender," crooned Elvis Presley in his timeless 1956 classic. While the song's origins may vary in interpretation, its enduring appeal lies in its expression of a universal longing: the need for a love that meets us in our most vulnerable places-a tender, healing love. For me, tenderness is gentleness infused with deep care and attention.

Tenderness is a shepherd carrying a lamb across his shoulders, his steps careful to avoid jolting the small, fragile creature. It is the first snowfall blanketing a weary world, muffling noise and tucking the earth into a hushed embrace of rest. It is a hand offering water to a parched plant, coaxing life back into dry soil with quiet patience. It is a bird shielding her chicks beneath outstretched wings, her own body a barrier of safety amidst the storm. And perhaps most beautifully, tenderness is a mother cradling her newborn in the early morning light, her hand tracing the curve of her baby's cheek, her whispers a lullaby of love. This image recalls for me the icon of Our Lady of Tender Mercy that adorned the chapel of the Jesuit Novitiate in Montréal. Mary's love for the Christ child radiates in the way she cradles him, her cheek gently pressed to his, her gaze full of both profound tenderness and unshakable strength.

This icon reminds me of the mothers in my own life: my grandmother, my mom, my wife. I've seen photos of them holding their babies close to their hearts, breathing in the blessed scent of baby curls. These images carry an unspoken truth: their tenderness is born of a fierce, sacrificial love. A mother's tenderness is not weakness; it is strength. It is the kind of love that would face any danger, fight any battle, and make any sacrifice for the beloved.

So, too, is God's tenderness. It is the love that calls us out of our calloused and self-centered lives into a radical, transformative love. Tenderness is God stooping low, as when Jesus washed the disciples' feet. It is love that does not demand or rush but waits patiently, like waves steadily embracing the shore.

Tenderness is the hand that comforts rather than controls, the voice that soothes rather than scolds, the heart that forgives rather than resents. It is strength wrapped in gentleness, like the wind bending to kiss the petals of a flower. It is the ache of compassion, cradling another's pain as if it were its own.

In this season of Advent and Christmas, we encounter God's tenderness in the Incarnation. The infinite stoops to become finite, the Almighty becomes a vulnerable infant. God draws near to us-not in grandeur, but in humility, whispering through the stillness of a Bethlehem night: "You are safe here. You are loved."



Tenderness is the quiet miracle of being seen and cherished, not for what we do, but for who we are. It is God's heartbeat felt in the smallest of moments-a tear wiped away, a hand held, a burden lifted. Tenderness is the language of love spoken in actions too gentle for words, the divine embrace of a world that too often forgets how to be soft.

This is the way God loves us-with infinite tenderness, meeting us in our need and holding us with unwavering care. And this is the way God calls us to love one another-with gentleness, compassion, and the courage to be vulnerable.



Theotokos of Tender Mercy, written by Cheryl Ann Pituch

her Ð THE REV. EMMA BRICE. ASSISTANT RECTOR FOR FAMILY MINISTRIES & GRACE SCHOOL CHAPLAIN

Drawing Near in Advent

Last month, I spent ten days in Kansas City with my nephew (3.5 years old), my other nephew (2 years old), and my niece (almost 4 months old). We did so many festive activities like visiting a holiday market, decorating ornaments as gifts, eating chocolate from Advent calendars, watching Christmas movies, and more. I learned important cultural references from Paw Patrol and Ms. Rachel. It was joyous and wonderful and EXHAUSTING! All three kids were sick, they slept at our house most nights to give their parents a break, and holiday excitement turned into meltdowns just about every day.

Per usual, I am in awe of parents and how you manage to juggle the needs of your little ones while also existing as a human. It truly blows my mind.

The magic of this time of year is really palpable when you're around children, but the busyness of it all can also feel distracting from any spiritual grounding or preparation before entering into the mystery of Christmas. I want to draw nearer to God in this holy season, but my to-do list is longer than ever and I'm tired. It is far too easy to place God on the back-burner. After all, Jesus will still be born whether I prepare or not, but Santa might not make it if I don't get my act together.

This has led me to reflect on how to place Christ at the center of this Christmas season without making my spiritual life feel like another item on my to-do list. Here is my fool-proof solution! Jk, I don't have a solution, but I have a few ideas to try out, and I would love to hear your reflections as well.

My ideas aren't so much items to add to my routine but rather a change of my own posture toward this season. I want to embark on an intentional naming (silently or aloud) of when I notice God's nearness. Maybe it will be in a child's smile or maybe it'll be in a beautiful snowfall. God is already present and near to us in so many ways.

God is just as present in the chaos of Christmas with children as God is present in a more quiet, peaceful setting. God does not only speak to us through silence. God speaks to us through shouting and play and big feelings. God is near us and all the children in our lives. I wonder what it might look like to appreciate God's nearness in the chaos of December as well as in the quiet moments.

Hang in there parents. I am praying for you, and I am here if you want to vent or laugh or cry.

Faithfully, Mother Emma+

> This reflection first appeared in the December 4 edition of Growing at Grace: The Weekly Word for Families with Children and Youth

Operations & Communication @ Grace



DIRECTOR OF OPERATIONS & COMMUNICATION

KEVIN HAMILTON.

My eyes welled up with tears as I read the card handed to me by a parishioner after she told me to read it whenever I had a moment. The card acknowledged the five year anniversary of my father's death. I had mentioned it in a previous Grace Notes article, and this parishioner had noted it on her calendar when she read the article.

That moment, for me, was a holy moment. I felt the nearness of God and experienced a healing balm as I read the sentiments so lovingly expressed. A parishioner, who didn't even know I existed in this world when my father died, had in that moment brought the tender love of Jesus into my grief journey. She was the "card writer of Jesus" simply by doing what the Spirit had prompted her to do many months before.

I have many stories that I could share in which I have been the beneficiary of beautiful expressions of love from the Grace community. I have also heard many of your stories and have seen firsthand these types of expressions lived out by you all in abundance toward one another. There are stories of parishioners caring for each other's families during difficult seasons, covering meals when people are experiencing loss or difficult medical issues, driving one another to doctor's appointments, and many, many more.

It is my desire to help ensure the tools that are available to you to do the work of being there for one another are as useful as possible. This last year, the staff spent a significant amount of time working on phase one of our church database update which is now complete. For those who access our online Breeze Directory, you should now see many more parishioners listed than previously. This should help you in reaching out to one another.

If you have any issues accessing Breeze or would like to request access for the first time, please email me at <u>kevin.hamilton@gracealex.org</u> or call the church office. When you log in, you can also update your own information if needed, including your address, phone numbers, and emails. I'll have more on Breeze in the coming year.

"Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours." — Mother Teresa of Calcutta



RUCHE, DIRECTOR OF MUSIC



Christmas Eve

The choir and handbell ensemble have been hard at work preparing for the Christmas season. By the time you read this, the choir will have presented the annual Advent Lessons and Carols on December 8 at 5 pm.

This year, for the Christmas Eve services, the music offered will be a bit different, but no less fun and exciting. There will be the usual half-hour prelude before the 5 pm service, but this year it will be a mixture of organ music followed by seasonal music played by the handbell ensemble. They will also play during the Offertory and Communion.

At the 11 pm service, the half-hour prelude will be seasonal music played by yours truly on the organ, but rest assured, there will be plenty of seasonal hymns sung during the service! The choir will offer two anthems: "Ding Dong Merrily on High" arranged by Sir David Willcocks and "Christmas Lullaby" by John Rutter.



First Sunday after Christmas, December 29

For that Sunday, there will be the annual Christmas Lessons and Carols where hymns are sung as a response to readings. The choir will also offer two anthems for this service, one being a beautiful setting of the traditional text "Lully, Lulla, Lullay" by English composer Philip Stopford.

Feast of the Holy Name

The choir will be back at it again on Wednesday, January 1 at noon. They will sing the appropriate anthem by American composer Everett Titcomb "Jesus! Name of Wondrous Love."







AMANDA HUNGERFORD, INTERIM HEAD OF SCHOOL

As the holiday season unfolds, the joy of the season is palpable throughout our school community. It shines through in the lively conversations that fill the hallways, the sparkle in the eyes of our students as they hear familiar Christmas carols, and the excitement that spreads as each class takes part in decorating their classrooms. At Grace, we cherish how each grade finds its own special way to celebrate this time of year, infusing the season with meaning, creativity, and joy.

Kindergarten and first grade are learning about the many festivals of light celebrated around the world, exploring both the religious and cultural traditions that bring warmth and hope during the darkest days of winter. Third-grade students eagerly anticipate the daily surprises in their Advent calendar, which range from fun holiday art projects to games that foster a sense of wonder and community. Meanwhile, junior kindergarten's Christmas tree is becoming a living symbol of the season, as students take turns decorating and undecorating it each day, delighting in the process of making it their own. In chapel, our students celebrate the season with a special visit from St. Nick. And of course, the school is bustling in preparation of our Christmas Program—an event that delights the community and highlights the incredible talent of our students.

Through the eyes of our students, we are reminded daily of the true spirit of the season—of joy, gratitude, and the magic that comes with giving and sharing. It is a season of light, not only in the decorations we hang but in the hearts of our students, faculty, and families. As we approach the holidays, we are filled with gratitude for the warmth of this community and the special moments that make this time of year so meaningful. We look forward to celebrating together and carrying this joy into the new year.



Vestry View

MARY LEWIS HIX, SENIOR WARDEN

The truth of a very familiar saying has been omnipresent with me in recent days. We have heard said many times "It takes a village"...to raise a child, to do good works, to accomplish almost any worthwhile endeavor. Thinking about the phrase began in November, when Alexandria's Andrew Jackson Masonic Lodge recognized the Grace food pantry and Jennifer Pease for the work we are doing to support our community. One of the Masons has been an advocate for our program and recommended our organization for the recognition, which resulted in a ceremony at the Lodge and a gift of \$1,000 for the food pantry. This award was a reminder of the village beyond Grace Church that has sustained the food pantry including the Boy Scout food drives, the truckloads of food donated by the Church of Latter Day Saints, the diapers regularly contributed by the Orthodox church; the individual who delivers homemade bread, the Tom the Turkey collection from Grace Episcopal School, the annual thanksgiving children's give bags and donation drive from St Stephens and St Agnes, and the teams of volunteers who bag the groceries and distribute twice a week. While the food pantry is housed at Grace, the village that sustains the program extends throughout the metropolitan area.



"Tom the Turkey" collection from Grace Episcopal School

Senior Warden Report Continued

Other outreach and justice programs are dependent on similar villages. VOICE is a nonpartisan organization of more than 40 faith communities that organize together seeking to improve the lives of our families, communities, and nation. The modus operandi is that people working together have the power to make change for the betterment of society. And, on a very micro level, a dedicated group of church members throughout Alexandria regularly make sandwiches to provide lunches for those who are hungry in our town. The examples could go on and on and the truth is consistent: people working together are able to accomplish more than a lone individual.



Jen Pease speaks at the Masonic Lodge

In the church we often label the village as "community," and it is in community that we grow into an awareness of God's presence in our day to day lives. This past year the Grace vestry has been community, village, and sustenance to me. Because of the thoughtful contemplation and the continuous prayer of many in the parish and concentrated in the vestry, Grace has embarked on a new chapter in the life of a parish. This accomplishment only occurred because of the village, the community, striving together.

I write to highlight the truth of the power of the village, as well as to challenge the reader. Where, within and without Grace Episcopal Church, is your village? Where do you feel the nearness of God and the impact of your faith? We all have multiple villages: the workplace, the local coffee shop, the gym, the sports team, the Bible study, the pool hall, or the book club. My hope is that within Grace Church you find a community that extends beyond Sunday worship and provides for you the palatable assurance that God is near and at work in your life.

Adult Forum Schedule for December-January

By Anne Clift Boris

Adult Forum is offered Sunday 9:40-10:15 am in person in the St. Mark room on the second floor, or via Zoom (the link is included each Sunday in the worship email). Tea and coffee are available just outside the St. Mark Room from 9:30. All are welcome at any forum; no commitment required.

December 8	Christmas Away From Home	John Boris, Dan Pattarini, Evan and Nancy Robinson
December 15	Art of Watching for the Light II	Anne Clift Boris
December 22-29	Christmas Break	No Separate Adult Forum or Sunday School
January 5	Reflecting on the Gifts of the Wise	Fr. Santiago Rodriguez
January 12	Grace at Work: Teaching	Eleanor Reed
January 19	Understanding the Current Housing Insecurity in Alexandria	Lynn Rohrs and Noah Aukerman
January 26	Annual Meeting	No Separate Adult Forum or Sunday School

ADULT FORUM - CALL FOR PRESENTERS FOR 2025

We are now scheduling Adult Forum presenters for 2025. We would like to hear from more people in our "Grace at Work" series, where people talk about how they live out their faith in their work lives, there will be an opportunity in the spring to share meaningful books, and new topic suggestions are also welcome. If you have an idea of something you'd like to present, or something you 'd like someone else to present, please contact Anne Clift Boris.



Regálame tu ternura

FATHER SANTIAGO RODRIGUEZ, ASSOCIATE RECTOR

En su canción Ternura (con Franco Simone), Myriam Hernández nos recuerda que un amor tierno nos cubre como un manto: "Regálame tu ternura." El coro de esta canción expresa algo que todos sentimos: la necesidad de un amor que nos encuentre en nuestros momentos más frágiles, un amor lleno de cuidado y sanación. Para mí, la ternura es una forma de ser amable que muestra cuidado y atención profunda.

La ternura es como un pastor que carga un corderito sobre sus hombros, caminando con cuidado para no lastimarlo. Es como la primera nevada que cubre todo, bajando el ruido y abrazando la tierra con calma. Es como una mano que riega una planta seca, dándole vida con paciencia. Es como un pájaro que extiende sus alas para proteger a sus crías en medio de una tormenta.

La ternura también es como una mamá que sostiene a su bebé recién nacido en la madrugada, acariciando suavemente su mejilla y cantándole palabras llenas de amor. Esto me recuerda un icono que teníamos en la capilla del Noviciado Jesuita en Montreal: Nuestra Señora de la Ternura. En esta imagen, María sostiene al Niño Jesús con tanta delicadeza que sus mejillas se tocan. Sus ojos reflejan un amor profundo y una fuerza enorme. Este icono me hace pensar en las mamás que conozco: mis abuelas, mi mamá, mi esposa. Me gusta ver fotos de ellas sosteniendo a sus bebés, abrazándolos cerca de su corazón, disfrutando su aroma único. Estas imágenes me recuerdan algo importante: el amor de una madre está lleno de fuerza. Es un amor que haría cualquier sacrificio, enfrentaría cualquier peligro y lucharía cualquier batalla por sus hijos. La ternura no es debilidad; es una fuerza poderosa.

Así también es la ternura de Dios. Es un amor que nos llama a dejar de ser duros o egoístas, y nos invita a amar con más profundidad. La ternura es Dios inclinándose hacia nosotros, como cuando Jesús lavó los pies de sus discípulos. Es un amor que no se apura ni exige, sino que espera con paciencia, como las olas que siempre regresan a la orilla. La ternura es la mano que consuela en lugar de controlar, la voz que calma en lugar de criticar, y el corazón que perdona en lugar de guardar rencor. Es fuerza envuelta en suavidad, como el viento acariciando una flor. Es compasión que siente el dolor de otros como propio.



Regálame tu ternura (continúa)

FATHER SANTIAGO RODRIGUEZ, ASSOCIATE RECTOR

En el Adviento y la Navidad, vemos la ternura de Dios en el nacimiento de Jesús. Dios, siendo infinito y todopoderoso, se hace pequeño y vulnerable como un bebé. Dios no viene con poder o grandeza, sino con humildad, susurrando en el silencio de una noche en Belén: "Aquí estás seguro. Eres amado."

Así es como Dios nos ama: con una ternura infinita, encontrándonos en nuestros momentos de necesidad y cuidándonos con un amor inquebrantable. Y así es como Dios nos llama a amar a los demás: con gentileza, compasión y valentía para ser vulnerables.



Theotokos of Tender Mercy, written by Cheryl Ann Pituch

An Occasional

Barbara Morris

Flight to Heaven

It was pitch black and eerily quiet on our military base in Japan on New Year's Eve, 1969, when, shortly before midnight, Ward and I left the base and headed to a near-by village, hoping to celebrate with the Japanese at a Buddhist temple. We were eager to watch the Buddhist New Year tradition of ridding the earth of 108 evils by striking a bronze bell called a bonsho. With each strike an evil desire such as greed, lust, rage, hate, etc., was removed from human souls and flung from the earth.

Bonsho can range from one or two pounds to 20 or even 50 tons! The bells are struck with wooden, handheld mallets or logs the size of a telephone pole.

We were a bit nervous, but our guidebook assured us we would be welcome.

On approaching the darkened village, we heard the first reverberating sound of the bonsho, faint at first but as we neared the temple, its deep, resonant tones filled the high air-and our hearts. It seemed to call to us.

In the large temple courtyard the darkness was lit softly by hundreds of bobbing paper lanterns strung from high-hung straw ropes. In the center of the yard a huge bonsho hung from the roof of an open-sided structure. Next to it, a group of solemn, black-robed Buddhist monks chanted rhythmically. On each pronounced beat they bowed in unison, their robes moving as smoothly as a flowing ocean wave.

Closer to us, a line of villagers, many wearing colorful kimono, waited to ring the bell.

In turn, each person bowed three times, then grasped a thick straw rope tied to an overhead 20-foot-long log. Slowly, slowly, with all their strength, he (or she) drew the log back and held it there momentarily before releasing it to swing silently, swiftly forward to strike the bell. At that dynamic moment the monks bowed as the deep pealing bell pulsed and reverberated through the courtyard sending another evil high into the night sky.

continued on the next page

Flight to Heaven, cont.

A moment later an elderly village couple shyly approached and gestured to us to join them in line to ring the bell. It was an honor we had hoped for, but never dreamed would happen.

At my turn, I trembled visibly, but when I bowed three times, then grasped the thick straw rope and felt the weight and my connection to the log, the tenseness drained away as I became absorbed in the ritual I was honored to perform.

Strangely, although this was a Buddhist ceremony, among these friendly, welcoming Japanese villagers and monks, I felt a strong sense of God's presence binding us together. So when "my" bell rang out its rich, deep gong, I envisioned, not evil desires fleeing into the night, but a graceful flight of thankful prayers, for my many blessings, including this awesome experience among these welcoming people. It seemed to be the perfect place to offer prayers and to sense the nearness of God.

I will never forget that long ago night when, at the ringing of a beautiful bell, Japanese ritual beliefs and my prayers together took flight to Heaven.



A traditional bonsho bell in a Buddhist temple

Nurturing the Nearness of God

In a world where we have routines for nearly everything—our routes to work (or, if we're retired, to our volunteer activities), our physical fitness regimens, and our weekday and weekend schedules—it's amazing how many of us forget to create a routine for meeting our spiritual needs. We run around in an attempt to be at our appointments on time and meet our other obligations. In our efforts to be as productive as possible, however, our spiritual needs often take a backseat. After all, taking care of our spiritual needs doesn't pay our bills or tone our abdominal muscles. We may even wonder who has time for daily prayer or meditation or writing in their journals when there are more pressing matters to take care of. But truth is, nurturing ourselves spiritually is what gives us the grounding that we need to stay near to God and keep our lives on track. It took me years to discover this for myself.

How we choose to nurture ourselves spiritually is, obviously, a personal choice. For me, it's a daily three-part routine. First, I read the daily reflection in "Forward Day by Day" and spend a little time thinking about how its message applies to me. Second, I pray whatever my favorite morning prayer is at that time (it changes periodically). And third, I write in my journal, often including thoughts and feelings about what I hear God saying to me that day. For some people, meditating may be what they need to stay near to God. While spending 10-20 minutes with your eyes closed and your brain devoid of thought may seem like a lot of time doing nothing, this state of nothingness actually allows us to stay calm and focused, so we can listen to what God might be saying to us. Meditation doesn't work for everyone, but you never know until you try it.

Having a daily routine for nurturing our nearness to God lets us feed energy to our souls on a regular basis and can serve us well if our lives suddenly take an unexpected turn into a difficult period. This kind of routine grounds our spirits in our bodies so that we stay in touch with God as we move through each day. Nurturing ourselves spiritually allows us to not only stay on track in our lives, but it also allows our lives to stay on track with what God wants of us.

Is this kind of routine even more important during the Advent/Christmas season? You might be expecting me to say "yes," but instead I believe the answer is "no, not really." At this time of the year we have many reminders of God's works coming to us from "outside ourselves" on a regular basis. I believe that it's at other times of the year, especially between Easter and Advent, that we benefit from routine reminders the most, when the world outside ourselves is focused on politics, conflict, and so many other things. At least for me, that's when I most need my routine that cultivates the "nearness of God."

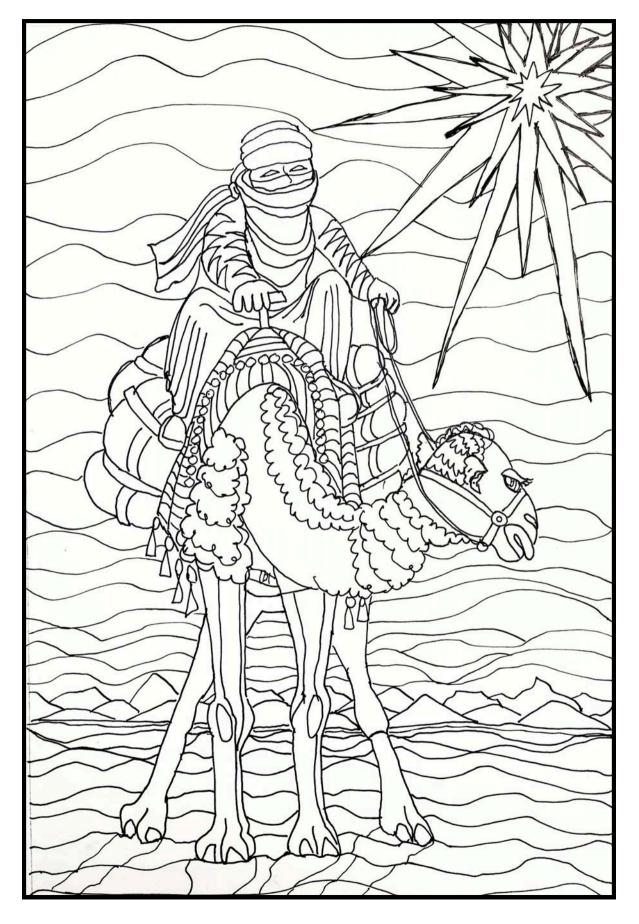
– June Huber





And Mary 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.







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Khacki Berry, Youth Formation Liaison Lauren Gustafson, GES Board Member Mary Hix, Senior Warden Dan Pattarini, Evangelism Liaison Rushad Thomas, Children's Formation Liaison

Vestry Class of 2026

Chad Eckles, Fellowship Liaison Morgan Miller, Pastoral Care Liaison Sarah Schultz, Register Mary Stewart, Adult Formation & Stewardship Liaison Eric Waskowicz, Junior Warden



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Vestry Class of 2025

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Parish Team Leads

Children's Programs - Kristen Woodiwiss Evangelism - Mindy Van Wart Fellowship - Lynn Rohrs Outreach and Justice - Jennifer Pease Pastoral Care - John Boris Stewardship - Sarah Glass Worship - John Thompson Youth Programs - Heather Kelly

Photo Credit: Canva.com