

Because the world is passing through a dark period, in which its very existence is threatened, it is more important than ever to be open to the astonishingly good news of Christmas: God has taken on our flesh, and through that inconceivable act God has brought joy and hope to all creation. It is news meant for all time, not merely the past, even though our busy, materialistic culture tends to clutter our minds and makes this truth hard to grasp. One of the richest reminders of its meaning is the visual story told in the classical Byzantine icon of the Nativity, which both shows us the event and continues to reveal new meaning for us in this divine entry into human affairs.

In the fifth and sixth centuries, pilgrims visited the Holy Land and brought back images of the crypt from the church that Constantine built in Bethlehem, which was believed to be centered around the very cave in which Jesus was born. Icons based on these images, painted by prayerful, anonymous artists, absorbed the biblical story of Luke and added details that became part of traditional celebrations of the feast. In a world where few could read and books were unavailable, St. Basil the Great pointed out that what the word transmits through the ear, painting silently shows through the image, and by these two means, mutually accompanying one another...we receive knowledge of the same thing.

Traditionally painted Nativity icons have continued to follow the form devised by these early artists. The icon is unified by the central figure of the baby lying in a dark cave cut into a stony mountain, with the many actors present at the scene or arriving later, grouped around him. A ray of light from a small piece of starry sky visible at the top of the icon streams down through this dark world directly onto the baby, who is wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a small manger. Such a short voyage for a god, reads a poem by Mary Karr, and you arrived in animal form so as not to scorch us with your glory. As if to emphasize the connection, the ox and ass who gaze at him in gentle companionship are even nearer to him than his mother. They are not mentioned in the Gospels, but they are essential to the church's interpretation of Isaiah's prophecy (1:3): An ox knows its owner, and an ass its master's manger, but Israel does not know. My people have not understood.

Mary the mother lies just in front of the cave, her gaze turned away; like any human mother after giving birth, she is resting. Renaissance art and Christmas cards usually place her kneeling beside the crib robed, in most unrealistic fashion, in fine clothes. In these icons, both her central position just outside the dark cave and her somewhat larger size stress the true humanity of this child and Mary's central role in binding the human and divine together.