



They rejoiced
with great joy

Lipa



Dear parents,

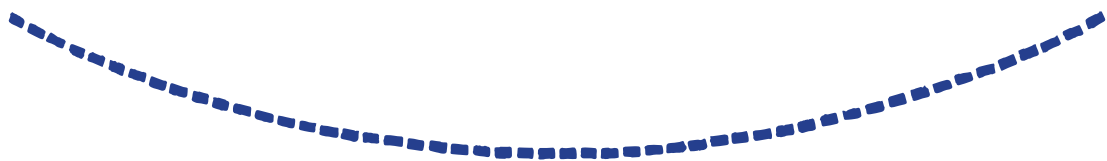
We wish to offer you an aid for marveling at the gift of Christmas together with your children. Use this little book freely and creatively. Permit us just a few words of advice.

First of all, immerse yourselves first in this story, reading it a few times. Only afterward will you be able to read it or tell it to your children with greater participation.

The images for coloring are not just there to help your children pass the time. Christmas tells us that the Word of God was made flesh and became visible. That is why images are so important in the education of our children. The image is a symbol, that is, a concrete place where we encounter the Mystery.

Pay attention to your children, to the questions they ask you and to what they intuit, for they are very sensitive to the symbolical language of faith.

In this way you and your children will enrich each other!





The story that I want to tell you is not just any story. It's the story of what God has in his heart. So let's sit here side by side and listen. Open your ears, but most especially open your heart, because only with our hearts can we understand the heart of God. But I think you're already doing this, so let's get started!

When He created the world and everything in it, God had a dream in his heart: He hoped to live with human beings and speak with them as a friend speaks to a friend. God saw that this was a beautiful dream, and so he said to the first man, "Let's do it together!" And God breathed this dream into man's heart.

At that time, the earth was a beautiful garden full of colors, plants and animals. God and human beings could take walks together, look into each other's eyes and dream out loud. In the cool of every evening, that's what they did. The garden smiled all around them.

But one day – a terrible day – God came down and the man and the woman weren't there. He looked for them, but he couldn't find them. He started asking the creatures in the garden: "Have you seen my heart's friend?" "No," they replied. He called all the animals together, but no one knew where those human beings had gone. He even asked the ox and the donkey, who were busy eating from the manger. But they answered, "We don't know where they've gone. We're just thinking about our breakfast."

There was a flock of sheep, but no shepherds. So God entered a cave to see if they were in there, but he didn't find anybody: just darkness. God marveled and thought, "I made the creation full of light, how come there's darkness now?"

That day God went home sad. For many days he sent messengers all over the world, with the command to find human beings and bring them back to God. But one after another, those messengers came back alone. No one brought the "good news."

One evening God couldn't rest. As night was falling, he glanced at the world one last time and he saw that it was full of suffering. He saw creatures wandering as if they were lost, and it hurt his heart. He said to himself, "What happened? Man used to speak to me as to a friend. Why has he run away and hidden himself? Am I so different from him that I scare him?" The stars were shining in the heavens, so beautifully that they seemed to want to console God. In that moment, God looked at one star that shone more brilliantly than all the others in that bright night sky. God's heart leaped and he exclaimed, "Our dream can't be lost! I know what I'll do!"

1. The angel Gabriel comes to Mary

Lk 1:26-38

The next day, like a bolt of lightening, the angel Gabriel left heaven for the earth. He was holding a white scroll in his hand: the scroll of God's Word, where the dream was written in golden letters.

Gabriel didn't choose a big city, and he didn't go talk to important people, like kings and queens. Instead, he went to a little, forgotten village in Galilee, to the house of a young woman who was engaged to a man named Joseph. The young woman's name was Mary.

When he entered her house, he said, "Rejoice, Mary, you are full of grace! The Lord is with you!" Mary was very surprised and troubled at these words. But the angel said to her, "Don't be afraid, Mary, for God has looked on you. This is his dream: you will be the mother of his Son, for the Lord has decided to pitch his tent among human beings. The Holy Spirit will descend like a dove, and you will give birth to a baby, whom you will name Jesus." So Mary said, "Here I am. You dream, O God, is also my dream."



The angel Gabriel greets Mary. He has one hand on his heart, and with his other hand he blesses Mary. From heaven God's dream unfolds like a scroll: God wants to live with human beings, to put up his tent among them. That's why the Holy Spirit descends on Mary like a dove. Mary embraces the scroll; she welcomes the Spirit and becomes the Mother of the Son of God. In her hand she holds a ball of yarn, for God has just asked her to "weave" the human flesh of his Son as if she were weaving a garment.



2. Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth

Lk 1:39-56

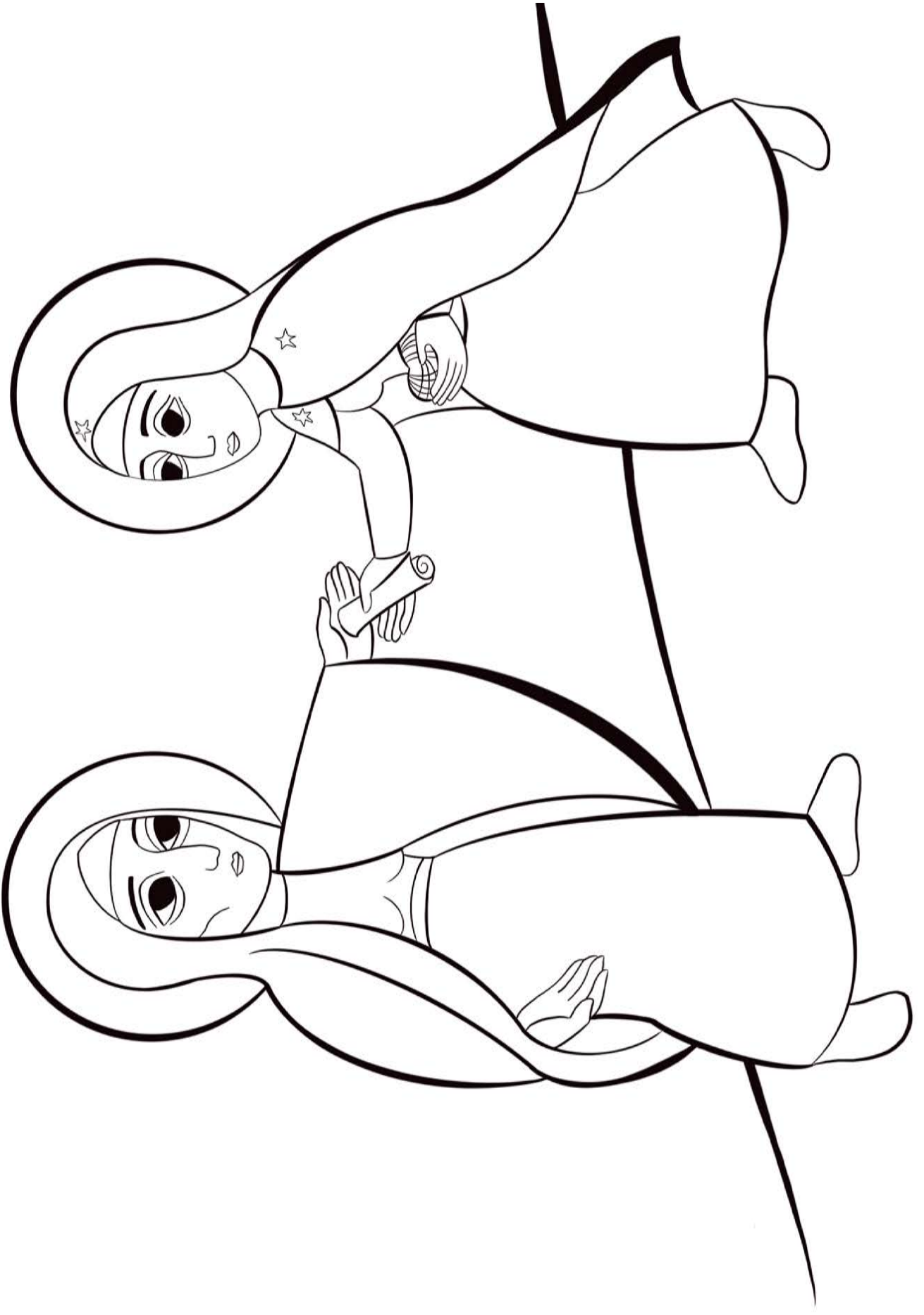
In those days Mary got up and hurried to the region of Judea. That's where her cousin Elizabeth lived. Elizabeth was old and couldn't have children, and yet mysteriously, she became pregnant. She carried a baby in her womb whose name was John. The angel Gabriel had told Mary about this baby and had said to her, "God's dream is a shared dream; it involves many men and women." Mary understood this message and left immediately to go see Elizabeth. She felt that if they were together, something beautiful would happen.

At that time, when people met each other, they didn't say, "Hi, how are you?" They said to each other, "Shalom!," which means, "Peace!" That's what Mary said when she entered Elizabeth's house. At that moment, Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed, "How is it that you, the Mother of my Lord, should come to me? As soon as I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed are you, who believed in the Lord's words and embraced His dream." Then Mary sang, "My soul magnifies the Lord and my heart is full of joy! God has looked on a creature as small as I am..."



Mary, visiting Elizabeth, carries the scroll that has God's dream written on it. Elizabeth, who is old, opens her mantle and receives that dream into her heart.

Filled with the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth speaks about Mary and the child Mary carries in her womb. God's dream grows. Slowly, Mary begins to understand...



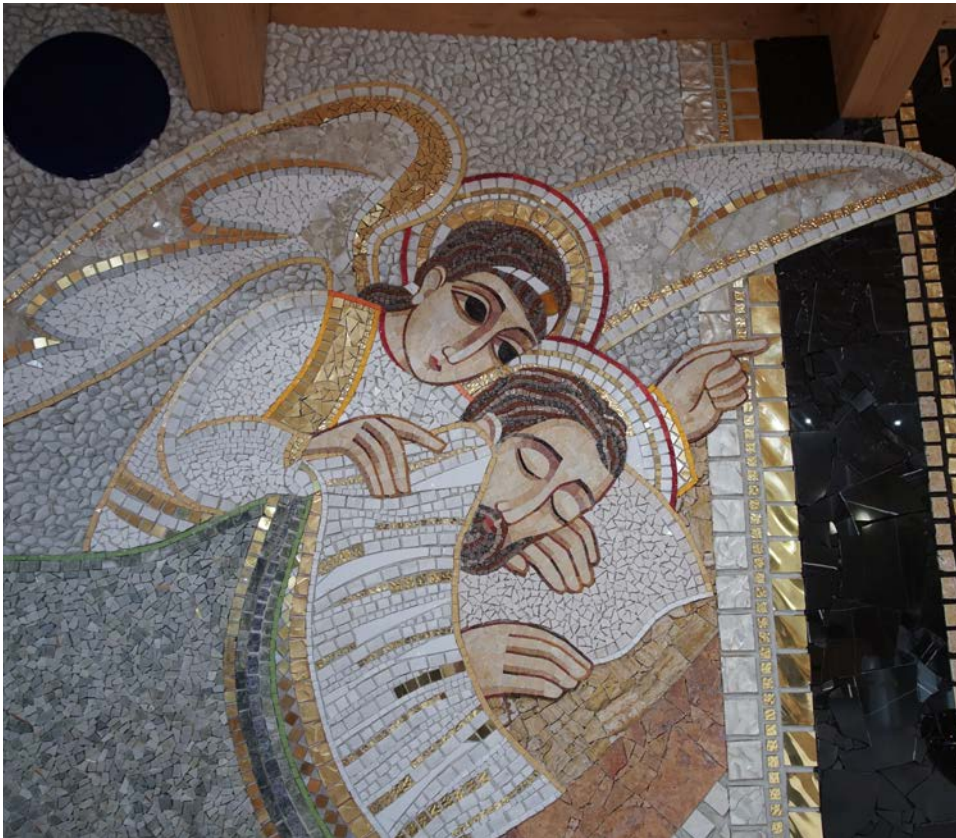
3. An angel speaks to Joseph in a dream

Mt 1:18-25

When Joseph saw that Mary, his fiancée, was expecting a child, he was very troubled. He said to himself, “My dream of marrying Mary has been smashed to pieces.” Joseph was a good man: he wanted to ask Mary to go away, but without hurting her, that is, without anything bad happening to her.

So Joseph didn’t know what to do. He thought and thought all day long, but he couldn’t find a solution. That evening he went to bed exhausted and fell asleep.

While he slept, the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, don’t be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the baby she is carrying in her womb is a work of the Holy Spirit.” When he heard these words, Joseph got up and, full of joy, took Mary into his home.



The scroll where God's dream was written, which Mary received, is now whispered into Joseph's ear. The angel tells him not to be afraid.

With his finger, the angel shows Joseph that he has to look far, because God's dream is really big!



4. The birth of Jesus

Lk 2:1-20

A few months passed. At that time, the Emperor Augustus, the Roman Cesar, or king who ruled the whole earth, wanted to have a census. Proud men are always competing to see who is the best, the strongest or most powerful. That's why kings measure the size of their empire and count their people, so they know how many subjects they have who can fight in a war.

By orders of the Emperor Augustus, everyone had to go to his hometown to be counted in the Emperor's census. Joseph and Mary, too, gathered their few belongings together and made the long journey to Bethlehem. It was almost time for the baby to be born. History is in God's hands, however, and even though it seems that proud and powerful men are deciding everything, in the silence, God is making His dream become reality. Many centuries earlier, the prophet Micah, moved by the Holy Spirit, predicted this. The prophet gave a voice to God's heart and said, "And you, Bethlehem, you seem to be the smallest of all the cities, but you're not really so small and unimportant, for from you will come a child who will be the Shepherd of my people."

Not very many people know how to see God's work. Even among the poor, there are those with closed hearts. Joseph and Mary knocked at many doors, but nobody wanted to give them a place to stay.



Mary and Joseph found only a dark cave to welcome them.

Mary, who has just placed the baby in the manger, holds him and points to him, as if to tell us, "It's him you need to look at!"

Joseph, seated next to his wife and the Child, holds a staff that has sprouted. Many centuries earlier, the prophet Isaiah had announced the birth of this Child, saying, "A shoot shall sprout from the trunk of Jesse" (Is 11:1).

Joseph looks thoughtful, for he knows that he cannot understand the mystery of this birth. It's as if he were asking himself, "Who will this child be?"

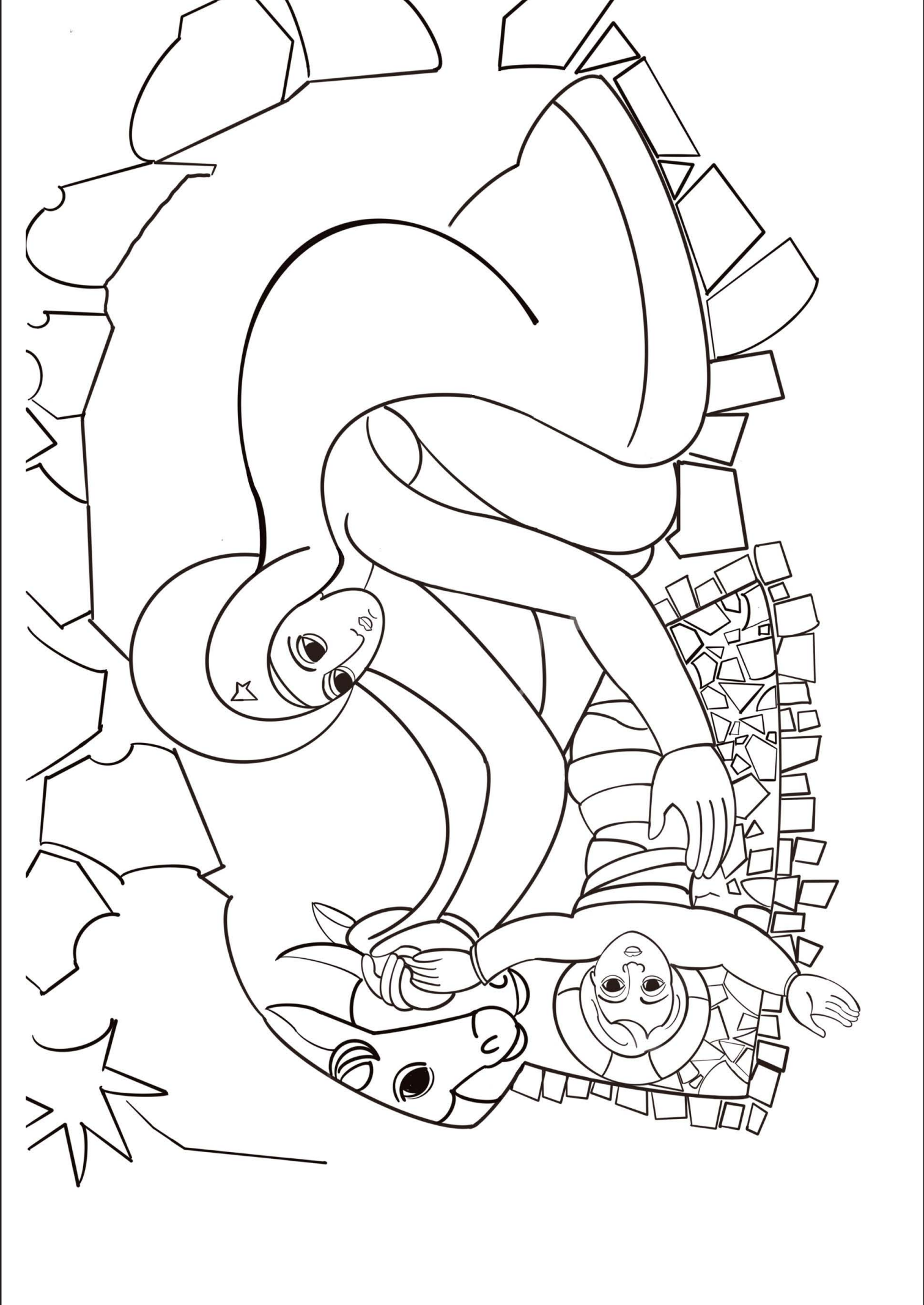


Near Bethlehem there was a cave. It was so dark that people never went near it. And if, coming back from a journey, they saw it from afar, they preferred to pass by on the other side. We know that all people are afraid of the dark, even if not everyone admits it. Only those who are small, who are with the Lord, can face that darkness. Joseph and Mary enter it fearlessly. That night, the darkest cave of all shone from within, for the Son of God was born in it. Mary gave birth to him, wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in the manger.



The cave is a black hole carved into a mountain. It's scary to enter! But the Son of God wanted to be born right there, as if to say to us, "Where there's the greatest darkness, I bring the Light; where there is sin, I bring salvation; where there is death, I bring Life."

Mary places him with so much care into that blackness. Jesus has his arms open, as if he were already on the cross. It almost seems as if he already has the wound in his side, like when the soldier opened Jesus' side with a spear after he died. We can already see that he came to give his life.



There were in that region shepherds, who stayed awake at night keeping watch over their sheep. The life of those desert shepherds wasn't easy. During the day, they traveled far looking for a little bit of grass for their sheep. At night, when everyone else was asleep, they stayed awake. They had to guard the sheep against wolves. Those shepherds were rough men, probably a little dirty, certainly uneducated. Some people even called them "cursed," or "men without God." That's what they thought they were, too.

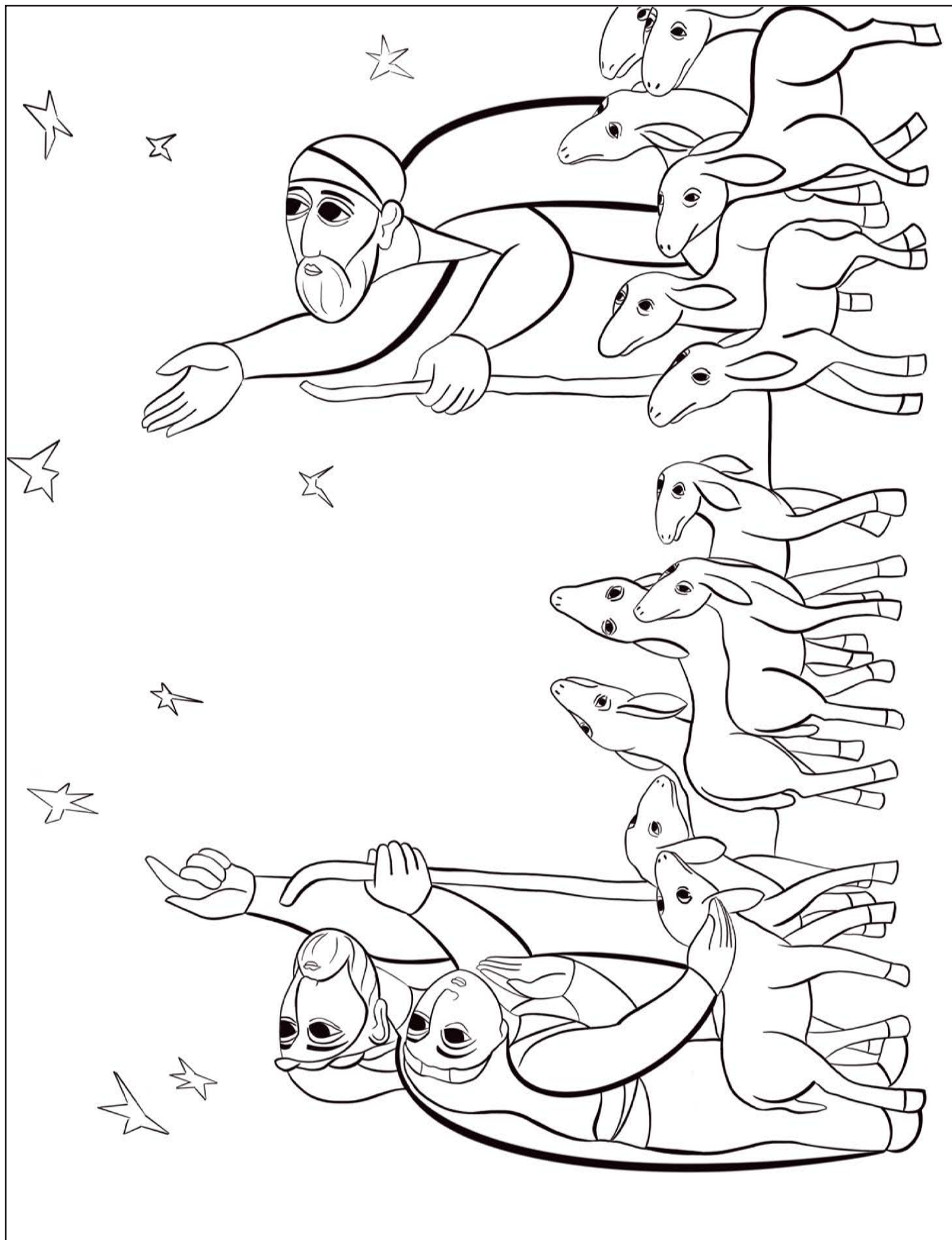
That's why people were so surprised when God chose precisely them. An angel of the Lord appeared to them and covered them with a divine light. The shepherds were frightened, but the angel said, "Don't be afraid! With great joy, I announce to you God's dream! Today, in the little city of Bethlehem, the Savior is born! This is the sign: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger." And a multitude of angels appeared, praising God and singing, "Glory to God in the heavens and peace on earth to all those whom the Lord loves."

As soon as the angels returned into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "What should we do? Let's go to Bethlehem and look for the sign that God gave us!"

So at that hour of the night, without losing any time and without doubting the angels' word, the shepherds went and found Mary and Joseph in the cave. Between them, lying in the manger, was a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths. The shepherds saw it and, full of wonder, recognized the sign the God had given them.



What are the shepherds looking at? They're looking at heaven, which had come so near. Even now, we look up to listen to the proclamation of salvation: the Son of God has become a baby! Those whom people had looked down upon are chosen by God, wrapped in the red that is the color of his life.



The cave was starting to fill up with people from around those parts. Though to speak the truth, a few of them came from farther away. Some brought packets of new wool, some brought eggs, others a warm loaf of bread. As they were making space for each other, they noticed that there was a special atmosphere in that cave. It felt like being at home, like when people return from a long and hard journey and finally can see each other again. One man whispered something into his wife's ear; the others understood only that he was asking her for forgiveness. In the silence of the cave the clear voice of a child was heard: "Mama, how can such a small cave contain so many people? And why is there still room for more?"

The animals, too, were behaving differently. The guard dog, who usually was always barking, lay down next to the manger very, very quietly. A mouse that had sniffed the scent of a large piece of cheese stopped, for he understood that the gift was not for him. The sheep and the lambs were listening, trying not to miss even the smallest cry of the newborn child.

But the ones who felt the difference the most were the ox and the donkey. They had wonder written all over their faces. They were already there, by the manger, when Mary and Joseph entered. The ox and the donkey hadn't even noticed the couple, for as always, they only paid attention only to what there was to eat in the manger. But look! Right in front of their noses the Child appeared. Suddenly, the chain around their necks dissolved, and a warm, salty tear rolled down their cheeks. A tender shiver along their backs, joined to a profound sense of liberation, caught them by surprise. They felt as if they had been set free from some ancient slavery, as if they had found what they had always been looking for. And they muttered as they chewed their hay, "Now we know where God is, and we know where man is, too."

In the light of the cave, the most beautiful and discreet presence was the Child's mother. Everything that happened and everything that was said, she kept in her heart full of silence. What others saw as contradictions, she was able to keep together without any problem, carrying them with great love: the manger and the Son of God, the shepherds and the angels, the darkness and the light.



The ox and the donkey are animals that are tied up. They only think of putting their noses in the manger to eat. Sinful man is like that too: it's as if he were a prisoner who keeps returning to his sin because he thinks, "That's how I'll stay alive."

The Son of God was born in a manger; he entered our sin. And he says to us, "If you believe in me, you will be free."



5. The visit of the Magi

Mt 2:1-12

That's how Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea. At that time, some magi, that is, wise men from the East, came to Jerusalem. Why did they come? Why did they make such a long and dangerous journey? Dear friend, I don't know how to explain this to you. When you look at the sky at night, can you see that not all the stars shine in the same way? All I can tell you is that the magi realized that one star shone with a different light from the others. So they set off on their journey.

There are two kinds of people in this world: those who think they know everything, but who don't move a finger; and those who don't know very much, but who are willing to set out on a journey. The magi were like the latter, whereas in Jerusalem there were other so-called "wise men." "What? Don't you know that the new king is supposed to be born in Bethlehem of Judea?" they asked the magi arrogantly. They knew where he was, but they didn't go to look for him. The magi, who didn't know where he was, finally found him.

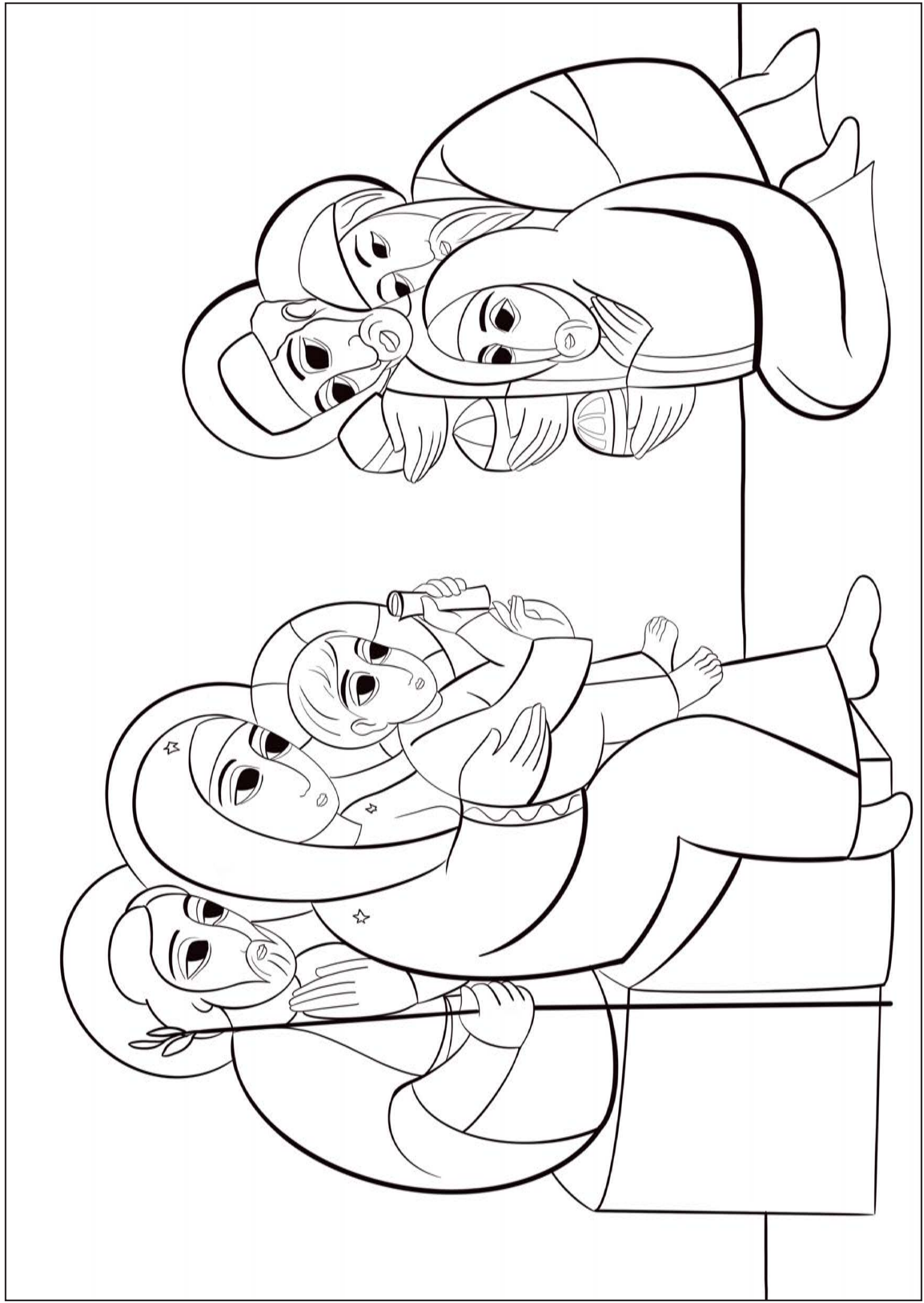
The star led them. Its friendly light caressed their tired faces and lit up their steps on the journey. In their hearts, it whispered the words of a dream. When they saw the star, the magi felt an enormous joy.

Finally the star stopped. It shone as if it were calling the magi, preparing them for a special encounter. They saw the cave, but that's not why they stopped. They entered, saw the mother with the Child, bowed down and worshipped him. Their eyes were full of light, their mouths filled with the mystery. They opened their coffers and offered him gold, incense and myrrh: gold for the true King, incense for the Son of God, and myrrh for the One who came to give his life.

That's all the magi did. Then, without saying a word, they returned to their lands.



The magi have different faces because they come from different cultures. Right here, in front of Jesus, they meet and are united in a single gesture of adoration. They bow down to the earth in the attitude of those who make themselves small in order to acknowledge someone great. A kind of exchange takes place: while the magi offer gold, incense and myrrh, they receive a much greater gift. Mary presents to them the baby dressed in clothes white as light. He blesses them and hands them the scroll where God the Father's dream is written down.



6. The flight into Egypt

Mt 2:13-23

King Herod, who made everybody call him “Herod the Great,” heard about the birth of this baby and was scared to death. You will say, “But how can a king be afraid of a baby? That’s impossible!” But I tell you, that’s just how it was. Whoever is jealous and worried about preserving his power is always afraid, and in his mind he imagines a lot of stupid things. He sees danger everywhere and thinks that everyone he encounters is an enemy, somebody who wants to take away everything from him.

How foolish you are, Herod! Why are you afraid of this baby? He didn’t come to take away your throne, but to give you the Kingdom of God! He came for God’s dream! But you forgot this dream and now in your heart you’re coming up with evil plans and you’re looking for a way to kill him. Stop thinking such stupid thoughts!

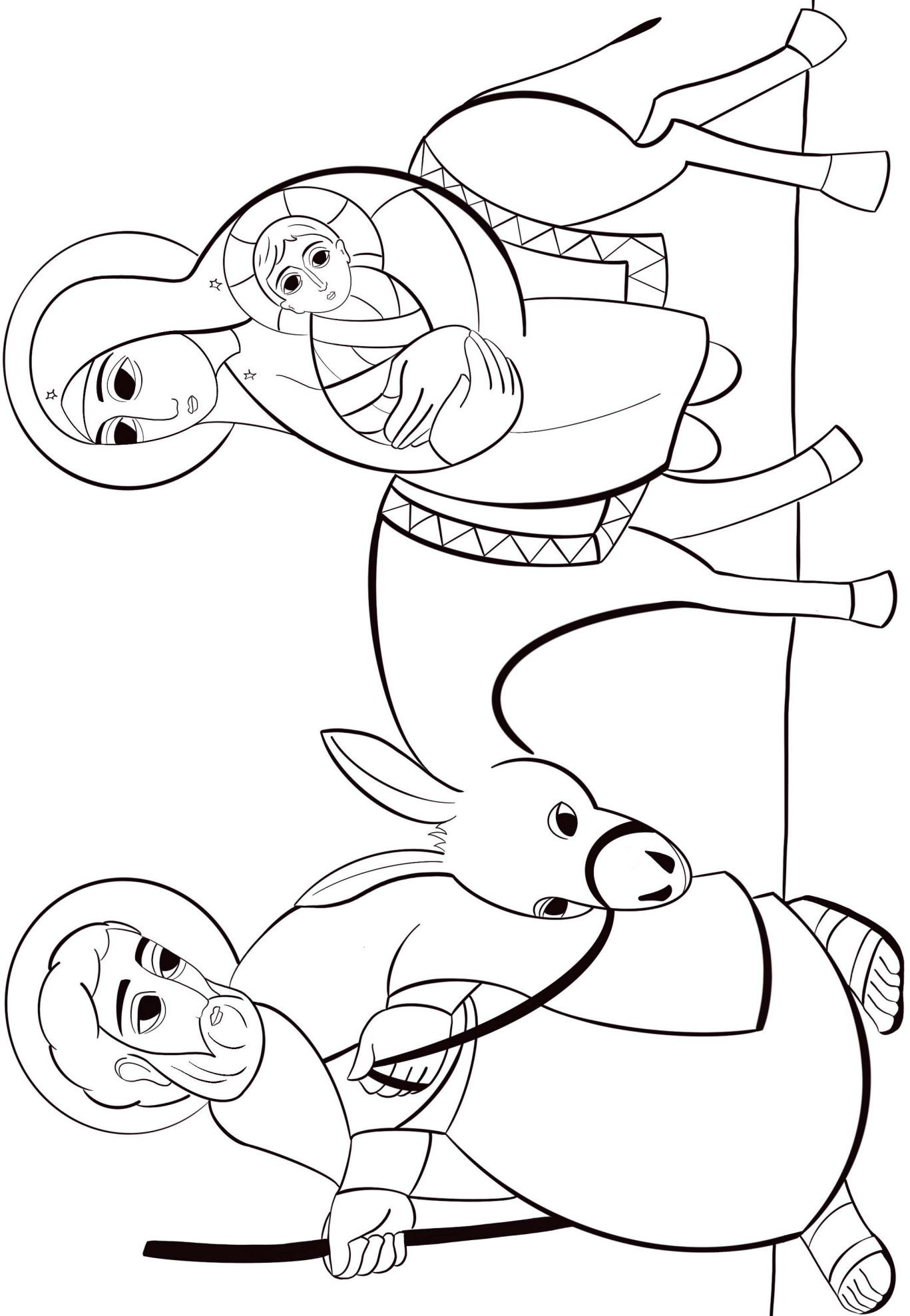
Unfortunately, Herod doesn’t stop. In fact, he follows those thoughts all the way to the end. He says to himself, “Just to make sure I kill that baby, I’ll command my soldiers to kill all the babies in my kingdom!”

But that night the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said to him, “Get up, take your wife and the Child and flee to Egypt, for Herod is coming.” Joseph got up, took his wife and the Child, and fled to Egypt. They stayed there until the danger was past, until God called his Son out of Egypt.



Joseph leads Mary and the baby into Egypt, keeping them safe from Herod’s fury. In order to understand what path they have to take, Joseph doesn’t look ahead at the road. Rather, he turns to Jesus, for it’s he who shows the way. In fact, he IS the way.

Mary holds Jesus in a gentle embrace. She takes such good care of him. She doesn’t want to lose him, for that baby is the greatest treasure: He is salvation of all of mankind.



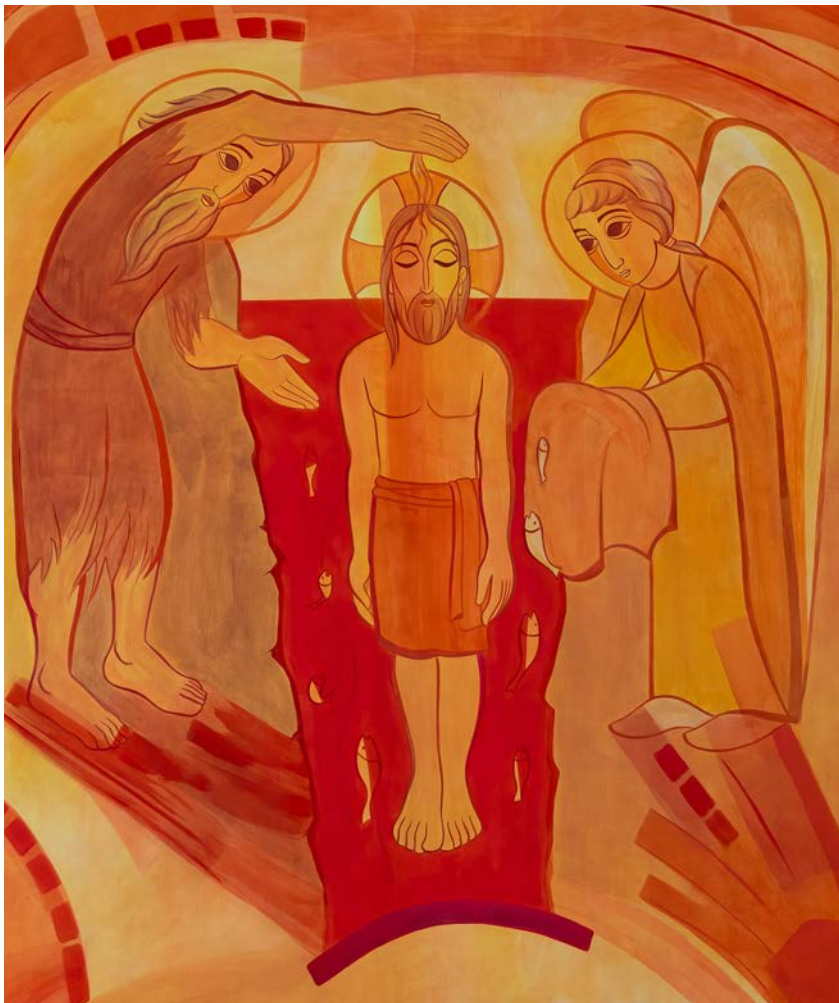
7. Jesus' baptism in the Jordan

Mk 1:9-11

"Son," or "my child." That might be the most beautiful word there is! How many times did God the Father say that to Jesus? When Jesus was a baby, but also when he was an adult. Jesus always remained God's Son. When he was already grown, Jesus entered into the waters of the river Jordan to receive baptism from John. The heavens opened then, the Holy Spirit descended as a dove and a voice was heard: "You are my Son, whom I love, in whom is all my joy."

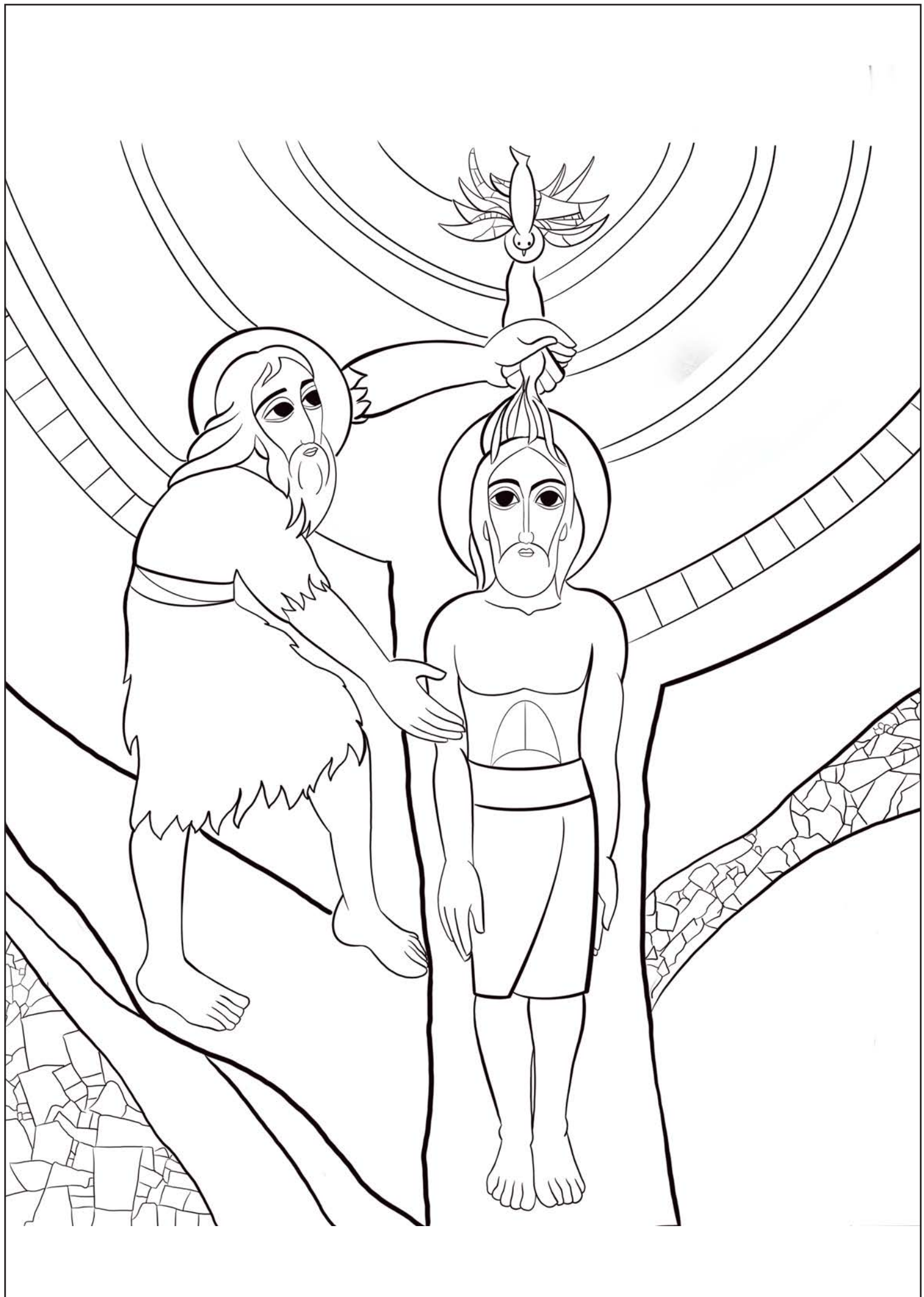
So to say "Son" is also to say "joy." That's why Christmas is a feast that we celebrate with joy: for the Son of God became man so that all men and women might become sons and daughters of God. Because we human beings ran away and got the idea into our heads of being afraid of God, the Son of God surprised us by becoming a child. And because we thought that our sin was too big ever to be forgiven, the Son of God surprised us by associating with us sinners and forgiving all our sins. And because we men and women were left with one more thing, the fear of death, the Son of God surprised us by giving his life for us. He entered into death and said: "That's enough! You don't have to be afraid any more! I am in you and you are in me, we are the children of the Father."

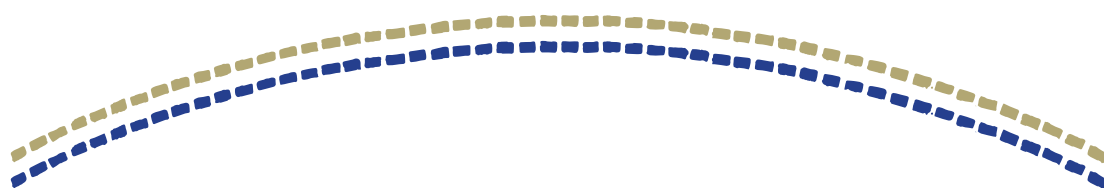
The story is really longer than this, but for now that's enough. It's enough for us to know that we are children of God and to live in joy. You'll ask me, "But God's dream?" But that's precisely God's dream! Little by little, you, too, will understand, for we are all inside this dream. Merry Christmas!



Christ's baptism is an epiphany, that is, a manifestation of who the Son of God is. The Son is the One who enters into the water of the river Jordan and descends lower than anyone else, so that nobody else will feel that he has the lowest place.

Jesus has his eyes closed and is dressed like he will be dressed on the cross. He looks dead, but he gives life to all: the river, which had absorbed all of humanity's evil, is now filled with the red that is the color of God's life.





Images

The Annunciation, Painting on wood (2021)

The Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth, Chapel of the Pontifical Roman Seminary, Rome, Italy (2020)

The Angel Appearing to Joseph: Chapel of the Pontifical Roman Seminary (2020)

The Nativity (I): Church of Sts. Julian and Germain, Sant Julià de Lòria (2019)

The Nativity (II): Chapel of the Holy Family, Knights of Columbus Supreme Office, New Haven, Connecticut (2005)

The Shepherds: Chapel of the Pontifical Roman Seminary (2020)

The Nativity (III): Church of St. Basil, Rome, Italy (2020)

The Magi: Church of the Friars Minor of Sts. Peter and Paul, Mostar, Bosnia-Herzegovina (2019)

The Flight into Egypt: Montserrat College, Barcelona, Spain (2019)

The Baptism of Christ: Church of St. Basil, Rome, Italy (2020)



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