



Advent Retreat

Holy Women, Full of Grace

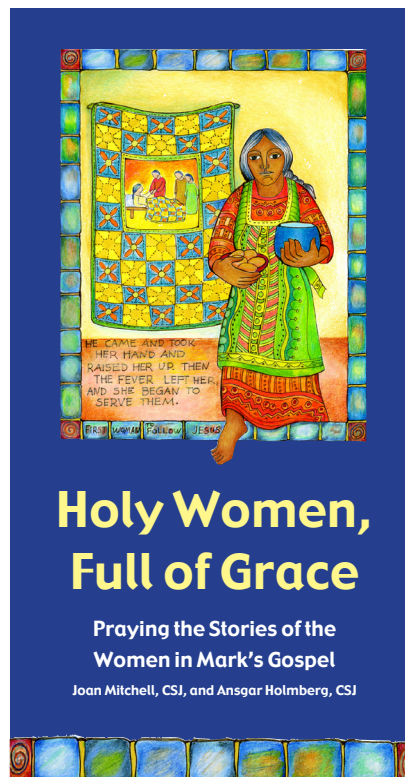
This Advent retreat invites you to sit with some of the women of the gospel. It will use pages from Sister Joan Mitchell's new book, *Holy Women, Full of Grace*, which is illustrated by Sister Ansgar Holmberg. The retreat brings only four of the holy women in this book to the forefront. Please go to goodgroundpress.com if you wish to purchase the book.

It is important to recognize that when you make this online retreat you become a member of a virtual community. Other women and men whom you probably do not know are doing the same thing. The very act of sharing something this intimate unites you. In praying with the lives of these gospel women you are also praying the lives of all women and girls.

Be alert to words or phrases in the readings or prayers that attract you and give you life. Stay also with the words that you resist. Both of these responses mirror something that is in you. What is the attraction or resistance telling you? What do you hear?

Then forget about yourself and lift your heart in prayer. You might want to create a mantra out of a part of the retreat that you can carry with you and repeat frequently during the day or week. It may become a refuge and a source of strength for you.

Blessings on your time here.



Part 1 Peter's Mother-in-Law

Peter's mother-in-law is Jesus' first woman disciple. Although we don't know her name, the early Christian communities remember her service to Jesus.

"As soon as Jesus left the synagogue, he entered the house of Simon and Andrew with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told Jesus about her at once. Jesus came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them."

Mark 1.29-31

The Greek verb *ēgeiren* means to *lift up*. The same verb describes God *raising up* Jesus to new life in his resurrection.

Peter's mother-in-law responds to Jesus lifting her up by beginning to serve him. The word in Greek is *diēkonei*, the word that later names the office of deacon. Jesus defines serving in the saying, "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and give his life a ransom for many" (Mark 10.45). Peter's mother-in-law gives her life to serving Jesus and the new community he is gathering.

The women who stand at a distance and witness Jesus' crucifixion have three characteristics that identify them as disciples. They *followed* and *served* Jesus and *came with* him from Galilee to Jerusalem (Mark 15.41). Peter's mother-in-law may be among these women.



The power of a name! At the sound of our name, we turn. Mrs. Peter's mother is not named in the gospel, but looking at the picture, you wonder if that even bothers her. What do you see her doing? We know from the passage in Mark that she got up from her sick bed to serve Jesus and his followers. But what else does the illustration tell about her? Tell all you see in the art and what it says about this woman.

As you sit with the reading and the picture and get to know this woman, give her a name, this woman who has been nameless for centuries. What do you name her? What name do you give yourself? Pray this prayer to conclude your time.

Pray for unknown women who serve. Those who built, and still build, our parishes, serve the funeral lunches, make homes for their families. Name them. Honor them. Whose willingness to serve do you imitate in your life?

**First woman to follow Jesus,
we know your famous son-in-law Simon Peter.
We wish we knew your name,
you whom Jesus took by the hand and lifted up.
May we find purpose as you did
in serving Jesus and his community of disciples.**

**Holy woman, full of grace as we are, pray for us.
Sustain us as faithful disciples who welcome all to our
tables.**



Part 2 Mary of Nazareth

By the time Mark's narrative reaches chapter three, people are saying Jesus is out of his mind, crazy enough for his family to intervene. But a new family is forming with faith as its bloodline.

When Jesus went home, the crowd came together again, so Jesus and his disciples could not even eat. When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, "He has gone out of his mind."

Mark 3.20-21

A crowd was sitting around Jesus, and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside asking for you." He replied, "Who are my

mother and my brothers?" And looking at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

Mark 3.31-35

Jesus doesn't invite his family inside where he is teaching nor does he exclude them from his new circle. He excludes no one who does the will of God.

Mark's gospel mentions Mary only this once, when her son begins upsetting people. How must she feel at this moment standing by, watching him teach, observing who is in the crowd?



Mary of Nazareth, mother of the son of God, has too long been enthroned on a lonely pedestal. Mary is truly our sister, as Elizabeth Johnson, CSJ, calls her, a totally human wife and mother. What do the story and art tell you about this village woman? Is she exasperated? Concerned? Anxious? Where are you in this story? Are you one of the family ready to help Mary drag her out-of-control son home? Or are you one whom Jesus names as his new family?

Sit with the text and art. Imagine what Mary's days are like after Jesus began his public ministry. Tell her of the challenges of your days this Advent. Ask her help and thank her for welcoming us into her family. Pray this prayer to conclude.

Pray for mothers, especially those struggling with their children. Pray by name for those you know and open your heart to those alone. How can you help mothers in distress?

**Mary of Nazareth, you heard what people said,
words keeping Jesus in his place.**

You led your family to his door

to keep him safe and stand with him.

You are among those who do God's will,

who are mother, sister, and brother to Jesus.

Holy woman, full of grace as we are, pray for us.

May faith bind us to one another as family.



Part 3 The Woman with a Hemorrhage

The woman has little energy after 12 long years of hemorrhage. It keeps her from temple worship with her community. She has spent all she has on physicians. Her story calls the bleeding a scourge. The word echoes Jesus' bleeding from the soldiers' whips. The woman has heard about Jesus and seeks him out. She joins the crowd following Jesus to the house of Jairus, the leader of the synagogue, whose daughter is near death.

The woman came up behind Jesus in the crowd, and touched his cloak, for she said, "If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well." Immediately the hemorrhage stopped, and the woman felt in her body

that she was healed of her disease. Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, "Who touched my clothes?" His disciples said to him, "You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, "Who touched me?" Jesus looked all around to see who had done it.

The woman, knowing what happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made your well; go in peace and be healed of your disease."

Mark 5.25-34



How embarrassing and humiliating for this woman to be in public with an uncontrollable flow of blood. Her faith pushes her forward. She rises to the possibility of healing. When the flow stops and she feels new strength, she tells the "whole truth" of her encounter with Jesus. What vulnerability do you want to keep hidden? Am you too embarrassed or too proud to reach out for help? What is the "whole truth" about your own healing that you can proudly tell?

Sit with this woman. See yourself in her. How will you rise to hope as she did? Perhaps Jesus' mother and Peter's mother-in-law are in the crowd that witnessed this healing. They heard the woman's testimony and rejoiced with her. Ask them to rejoice with you. Pray this prayer to conclude.

Pray for women who, when they recover from illness or addiction, can tell the whole truth about what happened to them. Be a listening heart. Tell others the whole truth of strength you have found within you in times of illness and struggle.

Woman whose lifeblood poured out for 12 years,
who grew worse with treatment
that cost all the money you had,
you never stopped seeking to be whole.
Your faith, your reaching out healed you.
You stepped beyond fear and trembling
to speak and testify to the new life within you.

Holy woman, full of grace as we are, pray for us.
Daughter, full of faith and vigor,
preacher of the whole truth within you.
You inspire us to tell
when we have touched the holy
and the holy has touched us.



Part 4 Holy Earth's Birth Pangs

Jesus looks to the future in the chapter before his passion begins. Today we experience the wars and horrors that Jesus describes in that future. But he advises us not to fear. Jesus leaves an unfinished world and calls us to build among us a community of love.

Our cosmic history stretches back 13.8 billion years to the bang so powerful our cosmos is still expanding. Gravity has pulled the original gases into stars that burst in supernovas that cooked metals such as the iron that colors our blood. We humans are made of stardust that formed galaxies like the Milky Way and stars like our sun. Indeed the stars hold promise. Our inanimate planet comes to life in bacteria deep in ocean vents and

amphibians move from sea to land and air. Evolution is our story; a community of love is ours to create.

When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.

Mark 13.7-8



Holy woman full of grace Beatrice Bruteau, philosopher, mathematician, author, mystic, said that we see Mary as the God Bearer, the one who brought Christ into the world. Why not think of the whole universe as the God Bearer, she asks, the one who brings forth not only Jesus but also us.

The art pictures the Universe personified, giving birth to all creation. All of us come out of the same womb. How might this realization influence how I regard the “other”? How do I treat those who share the womb of God with me? What do I do to protect and nourish planet Earth who continually gives birth to me?

Christmas is drawing near. When you put out your manger scene this year, or visit the manger at your church, imagine the Christ child coming into our whole Earth, with its plants, animals, seas and prairies, cities and farms. Imagine the whole universe—stars, galaxies, deep holes—welcoming God who made us all and is now among us in a human body. Keep this image alive as you prepare to celebrate Christmas with family and friends, pine trees and pets. Praise God for every beautiful bit of creation you see today. Pray this prayer to conclude your time today and your retreat.

What reasons do we have not to fear? To what do you want to give birth? What is your most strenuous labor of love? Use the image to reflect on how the whole cosmos gives birth to Jesus.

**Mothering Earth,
we live in the vast pregnancy
that is God's creation and our cosmic home.
Consciousness is our gift to the universe.**

**May we make no mistake.
Our struggles are the birth pangs
of an unfinished world becoming
the community of love
to which Jesus calls us to give birth.
May faith, not fear, motivate our labor.**