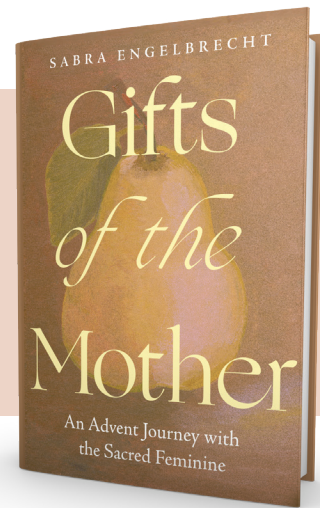


Gifts of the Mother

An Advent Journey with the Sacred Feminine

A Discussion Guide



INTRODUCTION AND PREPARATION WEEK

1. Author Sabra Engelbrecht suggests, “If the feminine side of God is not present with us, informing our spiritual lives and guiding our prayers, we not only lack the complete picture of who God is, we also miss out on the full breadth of the bounty of divine gifts available to us.” What was your understanding of God as a child? If you attended church or participated in any form of organized religion, what aspects of God’s character predominated? (See Table 1 on page 10.) In what ways does your religious upbringing continue to inform how you relate to God today?
2. Engelbrecht introduces the idea that “sacred time doesn’t belong to any particular institution, dedicated holiday, or place of worship.” Consider your own agency in shaping sacred time. What does sacred time mean to you? Share a specific example of sacred time that is personal to you. This could be a single moment in the past, a sacred cycle, or a regularly occurring event, tradition, or practice.
3. Part of the process of awakening to the Sacred Feminine is trying on new language. What name(s) for the Divine do you typically use? Do you always use the same salutation when opening your prayers (for example, “Dear Heavenly Father,” or “O Holy God”)? If so, how does your language reflect your present understanding of God? Are the names you use for God tied to a visual image? If so, how would you describe that image to others?

WEEK ONE: HOPE

1. In Week One, we consider creation as an inherently feminine act. How does the biblical creation story remain incomplete without an acknowledgment of the Sacred Feminine’s participation? Accepting that God is neither male nor female but contains both the masculine *and* the feminine, what does it mean to be made in the image of God? How does the existence of the Sacred Feminine shape or even change your identity as a child of God?
2. Engelbrecht suggests that “hope is and has always been a radical stance for people of faith, an act of resistance to cynicism, negativity, and despair.” How do you define hope? How does your faith inform what it means to have hope? Where do you currently find glimmers of hope in your life? Your community? The world?
3. The Christian doctrine of the Incarnation teaches that God took on human flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. At the same time, the author invites us to consider that the mystery of incarnation, “God’s creative act of combining matter and spirit, infusing all created things with Her divine DNA,” is as old as creation itself. Discuss incarnation, both as a theological doctrine and as the visible display of God’s creative work. How does your understanding of incarnation shape your view of human worth/worthiness? How might a broader theology of incarnation influence or change your understanding of, or beliefs about, salvation?

WEEK TWO: PEACE

1. Consider the idea that peace isn't the absence of disturbance; it's *freedom from* disturbance. What does it look like to find freedom in the midst of disturbance? Are there examples from history or from your personal experience when peace prevailed despite extreme disturbance or challenge? Is there a present fear or disturbance that threatens to hold you back from living as someone worthy of God's love and honor? What specific actions, attitudes, or practices might lead to a greater sense of peace in your own life?
2. Engelbrecht explains that the term *virgin* originally derived from the Greek word *παρθένος*, or *Parthenos*, and was used in ancient mythology to describe a Sacred Feminine archetype as a woman who was independent of male attachment and thus was autonomous, sovereign, and complete in herself. Contrast this definition of *virgin* with the modern use of the term. Discuss the impact of the label "virgin" on our image of Mary, considering both its modern use and the original understanding of the label. How might reclaiming the original meaning of *virgin* shape or change your view of Mary, particularly her assent to the angel Gabriel's message?
3. The Gospel of John laments that "the world was made through [H]er, but the world did not recognize [H]er" (John 1:14 DFB). Name some specific times and places in history when humanity has failed to recognize the Source of life and light. Can you name present-day examples as well? Now, think of a time when the Source of life and light was clearly visible, perhaps even in the midst of great disturbance. What was the situation? What did Her presence look or feel like? How did recognizing Her presence change your experience or understanding of the situation?

WEEK THREE: JOY

1. Discuss the contrast between the context of Mary's life—her place in the world as a young, poor, single woman—and her sacred purpose as a chosen vessel of divinity. Which face of Mary—human or holy—has your faith or religious upbringing emphasized more? Which are you more drawn to? Consider the possibility that Mary, as a vessel of divinity, serves as a holy mirror, reflecting for us an image of what it means to be human. Does this understanding of Mary change how you understand your own personhood?
2. A principal aim of the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises is "indifference," the letting go of disordered attachments that get in the way of spiritual freedom. Discuss the way(s) fear can become a disordered attachment. Share an example from your own life when fear kept you from living as your truest self.
3. Consider the Elizabeths in your life, past or present. Share a personal example of a relationship that helped you see yourself more clearly. What, specifically, did the relationship help you see? What other gifts did you receive as a result of this relationship?

WEEK FOUR: LOVE

1. Liminal space is a transitional place or state of mind, an in-between space where the old has been left behind but the new has not yet fully arrived. Read Isaiah 9:2-7a (CEB). Discuss Mary's life as a liminal space. Share some examples of present-day liminal spaces, places that hold both the *here* and the *not yet* of Isaiah's prophecy. Consider liminal spaces that exist in various contexts: cultural, religious, political, and your personal life.
2. Labor and birth can be an unpleasant, painful, and messy business, but at the same time, there is nothing more powerful than bringing a new life into the world. The primal act of birthing stands in stark contrast to the quaint, peaceful, sterilized images we see on Christmas cards and sing about in Christmas hymns. What do we miss when we skip over the human realities of Mary's labor and birthing of Jesus? What aspects of divine feminine power are on display in Mary's—and every woman's—birthing story?

3. Describe your relationship to your physical body. Do you feel in tune with your body or disconnected from it? Read the lyrics of Brian Wren's hymn "Good Is the Flesh," found on page 146. What does the phrase "Good is the flesh" bring up for you? How comfortable are you with the idea of pleasure as being good and of God? What does it mean for God to dwell in your flesh? How does the image of God dwelling within your body change how you relate to God?

WEEK FIVE: CHRIST

1. The incarnation, the embodiment of the Divine, is central to the Christmas story. Engelbrecht states that "it is precisely our own divinity that the Triune God so desperately wanted us to see that They chose a poor, engaged-to-be-married woman to birth the ultimate image bearer, Jesus, the full reflection of the Sacred Masculine and the Sacred Feminine." Flip back to Table 1 in the Introduction and review the masculine and feminine characteristics of God. Discuss these qualities as displayed in the life of Jesus. How did Jesus's life reflect aspects of a Divine Feminine image? How are these Divine Feminine attributes visible in your own life?
2. The Christian doctrine of embodiment is the idea that humans are fundamentally ensouled bodies meant to glorify God through their physical lives by reflecting the Divine Image in the material world. Discuss the Christian aim to "be like Christ" and the Christian declaration that "Christ lives in me" through the lens of Embodiment. What divine attributes listed in the table on page 10 are clearly reflected through your unique personality? What attributes do you desire to cultivate on a deeper level? Within the context of your life—the time and place in which you live—what opportunities do you have to reflect the Divine Image in the material world?
3. At its heart, the Christmas story is a creation story. Mary opened her heart, yielded her body, and dedicated her life to the creative process. Over the last several weeks with Mary, you have been invited into a creative cycle of your own. Is there something new in your life wanting to be born? Take a moment to reflect on the life-cycle phases of conception, gestation, labor, and birth. Where are you within the creative cycle, and what do you need in order to move into the next phase? Who in your life can you call on to serve as a midwife, supporting you on your creative journey?

