

A full-page portrait of a woman with long, dark, wavy hair, looking directly at the camera with a calm expression. She is wearing a strapless, teal-colored tube top. Cradled in her arms is a newborn baby, who is also looking directly at the camera. The baby is unclothed. The background is a solid, deep black, which makes the woman and the baby stand out. The lighting is soft and focused on the subjects, creating a gentle glow on their skin. Two thin, horizontal white lines are positioned on either side of the word 'ADVENT', framing it.

ADVENT

A 20-Day Devotional
By Elle Griffin

DAY 1

I know I shouldn't have been walking alone at night, but the moon was full and the evening richly fragrant with the smell of wildflowers. I took the long way home, winding through the village and out into the hills. The sky was colored deep hues of purple as if painted like the murals of the city. It almost felt like a blanket, warm, heavy, and comfortable.

I knew there would be plenty to do once I got home. That my mother would be at the window calling my name. “Maryam!” She’d sing, waiting for my help. There would be dinner to prepare, and mouths to feed, but I couldn't shake this unfathomable feeling of peace. A feeling as though all was right in the world. So I allowed myself to settle into it. Just for a moment.

I laid down in the tall grasses and looked up into the stars above. With the moon so big and the sky so full it felt as if the heavens drew near to the earth. As if Yahweh wasn’t so far away after all. And so I said a silent prayer. “Lord,” I whispered to the wind, “thy will be done.”



DAY 2

I must have been staring at the stars for too long for after a moment or two they appeared to be blinking at me. I closed my eyes to allow the dizzy spell to pass, but when I opened them again there appeared a man before me.

I startled. I should not have been walking on the hills so late at night. And certainly not alone. I should have asked one of my brothers to accompany me. I should have asked my newly betrothed Yosef. For what could a thirteen year old girl do against the might of a Roman soldier?

And he certainly appeared as a soldier. His toga was as white as starlight and his golden armor gleamed from his breastplate. Not a speck of dust from the desert had settled upon him. He certainly wasn't a Galilean. But before I could move, he put a hand on my shoulder. "Do not be afraid Maryam," he said. "For you have found favor with Yahweh."

I trembled. How did he know my name? And what would a Roman Soldier know of Yahweh?

DAY 3

I looked up into the man's eyes. They were blue, and gentle. A tremor overtook me but before I could fall to the ground he put a hand out to steady me. He looked into my eyes, and smiled. "Maryam," he said gently, "Favored one. The lord is with you."

I became deeply afraid. This man was not a Roman soldier. That I was now sure of. But he spoke in the name of my Lord and that troubled me. Yahweh did not send messengers to his people. Only to the high priest in the temple. Or perhaps a prophet. A visit to a lowly Galilean girl could only mean one thing. I must be dying.

But the man continued, "Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be called the Son of the Most High. And the lord Yahweh will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

I had so many questions. But I could only stumble through one: "How can this be," I asked, "since I am not yet married?"

DAY 4

Hearing my doubts, the man smiled and drew nearer to me.

He reached out with his hands and put his palms to my cheeks as if he were about to tell me the most intimate of secrets.

“The Holy Spirit will come upon you,” he said, “and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God.”

He was beautiful. And I looked on him in awe. But his words seemed too much to comprehend, much less believe.

As if hearing my hesitation, he answered that as well. I know it seems hard to believe, he seemed to say, but allow me to prove it to you: “Behold, your relative Elisheba in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren.”

He paused, as if his next words were the most important ones: “For nothing,” he whispered “will be impossible with God.”

"Then behold," I answered bravely, "I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word."



DAY 5

Almost as soon as I returned home I felt as if I had hallucinated. Surely I had dozed off on the hill and it had all been a dream. But it had felt so real at the time. I could feel the man's hands on my face as he spoke. His words as gentle and beautiful as bells.

“For nothing,” he had said, “will be impossible with God.”

My mother called for help with dinner, but fearing I might have taken ill, I helped set the table then asked to be excused from the meal. She checked my forehead, my cheeks, and after deeming me fit, smiled at me and said, “We have news from your cousin. Elisheba of the Levites has become pregnant, and she is in her sixth month.”

DAY 6

For weeks the village had been bustling with the news. Elisheba, my cousin who had never before experienced the blood of women, had become pregnant. Stories told that shortly before, Elisheba's husband, the priest Zekharya had been chosen to enter the temple of the lord.

But he had been delayed on coming out and when he finally did so, he was rendered unable to speak. So it became known that he had seen a vision from Yahweh, and Elisheba had become pregnant shortly thereafter. It was a true blessing from our Lord.

But I could not tell them that I too was pregnant. That I too had received a blessing from Yahweh. For it had been more than a week since I should have received the blood of women, and I feared the words that would be said of me. Instead I placed my fingers on my belly, pondering all that was said, and knowing in my heart that I must visit my cousin.

DAY 7

The next morning, I kissed my mother on the cheek and set out for the hill country to a small town called Judah where my cousin Elisheba lived with her husband Zekharya. I was to attend to Elisheba in the last months of her pregnancy, but I hoped also that she'd have the answers to my many questions.

Immediately upon my arrival she ran to me and held me in her arms. "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!" She said as she pulled back to look at me, tears brimming her eyes. "Why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leapt for joy."

She put my hand to her belly and I felt the child stirring within her. Then she put her hand to my own belly, a knowing look in her eyes, and said, "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord."



DAY 8

I marveled at the words Elisheba spoke to me. For she knew. She knew that the Lord had come to me. That he had conceived in me a child. And I heaved a sigh of relief to know there was someone in the world who believed. Who did not think me a ruined woman, but beheld me as she would a precious jewel.

The relief of it floored me. And so I prayed. A prayer of joy. A prayer of hope. A prayer my ancestor Hannah had prayed to her God when she too had been found pregnant against all odds. When she too had rejoiced. When she too had received the blessings of Yahweh.

“My soul magnifies the lord,” I whispered, “and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.” I paused and raised my voice, "For behold, from now on, all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name."

DAY 9

Being with Elisheba proved nourishing, for she was filled with the Holy Spirit. She believed so adamantly and praised so constantly. Even when the labor pains gripped her thighs and she screamed out into the night, she praised Yahweh, and all that he had done for her. For the miracle that would soon be born to her.

She leaned up against me, her hair drenched in sweat, and I stroked her forehead with a cool cloth as I hummed a low hymn. She was weary, her muscles fatigued, but she whispered the words under her breath. The song languishing on her lips as she spoke psalms of praise into the night air.

When the night grew all the darker and the pain ever deeper, I gathered myself between her legs, and caught her gaze with mine. This was it. The moment she had been waiting all her life for. The one she had once believed would never come for her, yet was somehow always meant for her.

With a ferocity I'd not yet seen within her, Elisheba drew in a strengthening breath, then poured her life and soul into the body of another. A son who came pouring into my waiting arms. I pulled him from her womb and wrapped him in cloth before placing the young child on his mother's breast.

"John," She whispered. "His name will be John."

DAY 10

I opened the door to my home and was surprised to see that my parents sat with Yosef, my betrothed, at our kitchen table. He was eighteen years of age, an apprentice to his father the woodworker, and he had been brought up under the law of Moses.

He was chosen by my family to become my husband, and truth be told, I had adored the thought. He was tall and darkly beautiful. His skin olive and his hair dark. But I saw the look of shock flicker across his face as he took me in, and I knew what it meant.

I had just spent three days traveling with a caravan and knew I was covered in the dust of the desert. But I also knew better than to think it was my state of disarray that startled him so. No, I watched as he stared at my belly, now round with child after three months spent away with my cousin.

DAY 11

None of them bothered to speak to me. Not my mother nor my father. Not my betrothed. Instead they spoke with one another fiercely in the tongue of our ancestors.

Yosef gestured at my belly as he spoke to my parents in anger. How could I have been left unattended to travel with a caravan? He asked. How could I have been without chaperone for three months time?

I could tell he was hurt and I saw the betrayal in his eyes as he walked toward me. The great sadness he felt at what he had to do. But his mind was made up and he took my hands within his as he looked on my face.

We were not to be married, he said, we could not be. But he would not let it be known in the village. He would not tell of the reason for our annulment. He would divorce me quietly. Without a word.

And with that, he was gone. And so too was my hope.



DAY 12

The next evening I wandered through the village and up into the hills. To the place where it had all begun. The moon was dark this night, and the stars twinkled, and so I laid myself in the tall grasses so as to better see them. And to remember all of the blessings that had been bestowed on me.

I put one hand to my heart, and the other to my belly, and managed a small thank you to Yahweh as a tear streamed down my face. How could one being feel so much emotion at once, I wondered? For I felt so in love with the child within me, so blessed to have been touched by Yahweh. And yet I felt so alone.

But before I could succumb to my sadness, and my tears spill out in earnest, I heard a man speak my name. “Maryam” he said, his voice as rich and beautiful as the night sky. I sat up in the grasses and turned to face the one who spoke to me. Only this time it was not my angel. This time, it was Yosef.

DAY 13

I wiped the tear from my face as he knelt before me. He was beautiful, his eyes shimmering with tears and moonlight as he gathered my hands within his. He looked downward, a tear pouring from his lashes as he wrestled with his doubt.

“Maryam,” he whispered. “I had a dream.” He looked to my eyes then, his ferocity returning to them. “A man came to me in my sleep and said, ‘Yosef, son of David, do not fear to take Maryam as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.’”

I put my hands to his face seeing in it the same wonder and uncertainty I had experienced when the man first came to me on this very hill. ‘Is it true?’ Yosef now asked of me as he placed his hands on my belly. “Every word,” I replied as tears of relief poured down my cheeks.

“Then Maryam,” he asked hesitantly, “Will you be my wife?”



DAY 14

On the eve of the full moon, I married Yosef. I had spent the day bathing in warm waters and fragrant oils. My dark hair was combed through and left to cascade over my body in waves. My eyes were darkened with kohl and my body was adorned with precious silks and fabrics given to me by my neighbors.

Tonight was the fulfillment of our ketubbah, the contract that had been set by our parents almost a year before when I had come of age and become a woman. But it would also be our first night as married couple, and so I stood at the precipice of my home, anxiously awaiting my betrothed to join me.

He walked toward me and kissed my cheek tenderly before we dismissed our attendants and he took me inside. The bed had been laid with silks and flowers, and he laid me down ever so gently as he placed his hands to my belly.

“Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,” He quoted, “and they shall call his name Immanuel, which means God with us.” He kissed my belly reverently, then gently my lips. How blessed was I to have a man so steadfast in the Lord, and to have him as my husband from this night forward.

DAY 15

The village was bustling. A decree had been issued from Caesar Augustus that all should return to the place of their birth to be registered under the census. And so it was that children were bundled onto donkeys, and parents packed the caravans, to head out into the desert toward the city of their births.

I walked into our small home, my belly now nearing nine months with child. Yosef was working on the last detail of one of his projects. A wooden cradle he had built himself for the arrival of our child. He looked up, and when he noticed me admiring him, his eyes lit up and he walked toward me.

Placing his hands on my belly he kissed my lips, then gathered the rest of our things onto the donkey, and placed the cradle atop it. Finally Yosef helped me onto a donkey and we made our way out into the night, destined as we were for the city of David.

DAY 16

As we neared Bethlehem I drew in a breath. The birth pains were beginning. Yosef looked at me, his face stern as I bowed over the donkey in pain. There was only one inn in the village and we were still five miles away. Yosef made quick work, hastening the donkey as I worked to steady my breathing.

The miles were long and the donkey kicked up dust from the desert with every step as we made our way towards the inn. My pains seemed to be escalating quickly but with each movement of the child within me, I remembered Elisheba, and the blessings she had prayed over the birth of her child.

I looked down at my belly and struggled through my breaths to remember all that had happened. For my husband and I had not yet been married, and I had become a woman pregnant with child. And my husband and I had both seen an angel, that had foretold of our path. The one we now walked towards so quickly.

I looked up to the sky, my eyes blurring with the humidity of the warm evening air, and there I saw a star, far brighter than the one I had seen only nine months before, and then I knew. It was time.

DAY 17

Tears brimmed my eyes when we arrived at the inn. Though it was late, crowds drew near to the innkeeper, begging for a place to sleep. It was clear from the masses that the census had long since filled the inn. For there were now hundreds traveling as we were to Bethlehem.

Yosef would not give up. He kissed me tenderly then pushed his way through the crowds to the innkeeper. He gestured toward me and the innkeeper and his wife looked on us with pity. Once again, I steadied my breath. But the child within me was ready to be born. And there was nothing I could do to prevent it.

Suddenly I felt the warm waters of my womb pour down my legs, and I was forced to dismount my donkey. Yosef and the innkeeper's wife rushed to my side as I bowed over in pain. "Come," the innkeeper's wife said gently, "I can give you a space in the manger."

DAY 18

The stable was quiet and hidden away from the crowds. We thanked the innkeeper's wife graciously then Yosef made ready for the birth. He stacked bales of hay around us, making sure the ground was clean beneath us, then he stood behind me and steadied my body. His hands gripping mine for support.

Yosef had never attended a birth, the men of our village usually would not. But I had attended several births by now, and knew that Yahweh had prepared me for this moment. Just as I had delivered Elisheba's child, I would deliver my own. And so I leaned on Yosef, drawing on his support, and then pushed with every ounce of strength I could muster.

And into that still, dark night, as I cried out in pain and in praise, a child was born into my hands. And we called his name Yeshua.



DAY 19

Yosef tore his clothing and wetted it from a nearby trough. I held the baby to my breast and looked on his beautiful face.

His eyes were closed, his hands wrinkled, and his body curled close to mine as Yosef washed us with the waters and wrapped us in clean cloth.

We took what was left of Yosef's cloak and wrapped it around the child. Then Yosef took the child from my arms and settled him in his cradle. The gift Yosef had made and traveled with all this way. Yosef then took me in his arms, and my eyes fluttered sleepily as we looked on our newborn child.

DAY 20

Not an hour after the birth, a small group of shepherds arrived to the stable. We thought they meant to secure their sheep for the night, but instead they gathered around us and looked on the sleeping babe. “A man came to us in the fields,” the eldest said, a boy of twelve or thirteen.

“Behold', he told us, 'I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.'”

The boys gathered around the child, looking on him with love and devotion, and I treasured the moment. For truly a miracle had occurred this day. I could only wonder at who my son would one day become.

