

# FREE ADVENT RESOURCE

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## Imagination As Spiritual Practice

On the *Spirituality and Practice* website Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat define imagination as spiritual practice with these words:

In the spiritual life, imagination has two meanings. First, it is a human faculty—the part of us that traffics in images, symbols, myths, and stories. It is the capacity we all have for innovative thinking and creative expression. Second, the imagination is an inner reality, a boundless realm not defined by our senses or reason, that we know from our dreams and can enter via certain exercises while awake. The practice of imagination encourages us to use this faculty and enables us to explore the realm.

Begin by learning the language of imagination. Keep track of the images that come to you spontaneously in association with your feelings and thoughts. Draw pictures of what you encounter in your dreams. Contemplate art and see yourself as part of the picture. Read myths and tell stories. Remember, through the ages spiritual pilgrims have found that it is possible to step into the inner realm of imagination. There you can find fuel for your journey and gifts of wisdom.

We invite you to journey alongside the characters of Christmas this ADVENT and imagine what it might be like to break all the rules, make outrageous choices, throw caution to the wind one moment and run for your life at another. We invite you to follow stars and listen to your dreams. We invite you to entertain heavenly hosts and drop everything that seems important to visit a baby you don't even know. We invite you to venture into the glory-filled darkness of a long winter's night. We invite you to gestate, birth, adore, bring gifts to and protect the sacred Christ that longs to dwell among us, between us, and within us.

### Matthew 1: 18-25

*Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.*

### EXPLORE THE TEXT THROUGH ART:

Gaetano Gandalf was born in 1734 near Bologna, to a family of artists. He was an Italian painter of the late Baroque and early neoclassic period. Gandalf became a prominent artist and was active for nearly five decades in the late 17th Century. With an output of about 220 paintings plus etchings, terracotta sculptures and many drawings, he also had a national

reputation as one of the "greatest Italian artists of his century." He traveled to England, and became strongly influenced by Tiepolo.



*Joseph's Dream* by Gaetano Gandolfi, 1790 (Source: Wikimedia.org)

The artist's philosophy is summarized as he says, "All art should have a certain mystery and should make demands on the spectator."

Taking the artist's quotation into account, consider the following points as you contemplate the painting:

1. What are ways that you feel outside of the story as a spectator? In what sense do you feel you are part of the story? How does Gandalf draw you into the story?
2. Describe Joseph as he is depicted in this painting. Joseph seems what? Joseph looks what? What might be going through Joseph's mind, whether he is awake or in a dream state? What might be the issues that Joseph is sorting through?

In your own life recall a time when you were conflicted, unsure, troubled and looked to unlikely resources for help.

3. What might the angel be pointing to? What is the angel doing to get Joseph's attention?
4. Recall an instance in your own life when an "angel" tried to get your attention. How did this take place? What was your angel pointing out to you? What was the insight the angel was sharing?
5. In the world around you, in your office, your church, your family, your nation, who are the angels who are pointing you (or us) in other directions? Who (or what) is showing you new possibilities?
6. How has the artist created a sense of mystery in the painting? In your own life are there particular colors, postures, states of mind that you associate with "mystery"?

What are they? How do you define mystery?

EXCERPTED FROM *CHARACTERS OF CHRISTMAS*  
(available in our website store: adult resources)