

Imagining Mary: Christmas paintings that open our eyes

I've been shopping for the perfect Christmas card, sifting through Nativity scenes framed in holly berries and bows.

None of the Marys feel right. The lips are taut. The face, unblemished. We see none of the bliss and bewilderment that must have surged after birthing the son of God. We see no emotion at all – serenity as vacancy, sainthood as sedation.

This year's traditional Christmas stamp issued by U.S. Postal Service, Raphael's "Madonna of the Candelabra," shows a stoic Mary casting her eyes away from her infant (see Page 11). Painted in the early 16th century, it was a product of the Italian High Renaissance, but it's hard to imagine the new mom letting a single moment pass without studying the Savior in her hands.

Eventually I found a card that compelled me, the store's last boxed set of its kind. First I noticed the baby, who looks as he should: like a baby. Brown fuzzy hair, apples for cheeks and a light in his eyes. Mary holds him close, kissing his right cheek.

The painting was inspired 11 years ago when Morgan Weistling, now a 47-year-old father in California, heard Steve Amerson's song "Mary, Did You Know?" on the radio. It was the Dolly Parton version.

One phrase stood out to him: "when you kiss your little baby you've kissed the face of God."

"Immediately I felt I was supposed to paint this," Morgan told me. "I had been praying and asking God, 'Give me an idea here.' "

Amerson's phrasing appealed to him. "This little child she bore was God in the flesh, and yet, she cuddled and kissed him just as all mothers do."

The painting poured out of Morgan in three days. He didn't feel the need to sketch

in charcoal on his canvas to begin, as he usually does; it was oil paint right away. He didn't go back to make any alterations. The first draft was the final.

Morgan's paintings are so realistic they look like pictures, and he uses people as models. His Mary was 16, a brunette named Katie who had a "sweet humbleness to her," Morgan said. "It wouldn't have worked with a blonde."

The baby was of Jewish descent, born to a woman with a crack addiction and recently placed in a foster home.

Morgan knew he needed to master Mary's kiss, rendering it tender, not "hokey." Her left hand, pressing the swaddled baby to her heart, also was crucial. Morgan had long admired the way Mary's marble hand grips Jesus' side in Michelangelo's Pietà.

Morgan's published image, titled "Kissing The Face Of God," sold out in two weeks. It remains his most popular painting - "my big gift from God," he said - and the only original he's kept, despite a standing offer of \$100,000.

Every year Morgan receives requests to reproduce the image. One year National Geographic used it for a corporate Christmas card.

The painting speaks to the brokenhearted, Morgan told me. "A lot of women who have lost a child really attach to 'Kissing The Face of God.' "

I'm grateful to the artists who help us see ourselves in the Blessed Mother, because she is for everyone. I once spoke to a victim of clergy abuse who had lost her Catholic faith but held on to Mary. I read about a woman whose conversion to Catholicism began in labor, when she called on Mary in urgent prayer: "Don't abandon me now."

This season we celebrate the mother who brings us to God with such capacity for love and grief and everything in between.

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