

# America

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## THE PREGNANCY OF MARY

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This time of year, the Mother of God is very pregnant. The skin around her belly stretches to hold the weight of her child. She feels him squirm and settle as no one else ever will. He presses against her organs. She gets short of breath and has trouble finding a comfortable position at night for sleep. She wonders if she can stretch any more than this to contain her son and all he will become, yet each day she does.

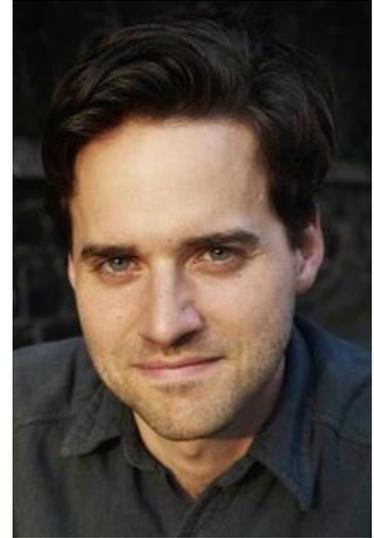
As [Advent near](#) [4]s, Christians wait for the child to come. We count the days and prepare for celebrations. In our preparation, though, we can neglect the gestation. Nativity scenes center on a bloodless and unattached child in the manger. We skip straight from Ordinary Time to anticipation to infancy, neglecting to dwell on the precious journey of the figure Christians for centuries have venerated as Maria Gravida—Mary, Mother-to-Be.

What did Mary feel in pregnancy, labor and birth? Did she have pain? Some mothers do more than others, and the canonical Gospels are sparse with details.

Many of the church fathers, [from Augustine to Aquinas](#) [5], held that Mary, free of sin, was surely spared the pain of childbirth. The apocryphal Protoevangelium of James depicts Joseph seeing Mary, nearing active labor, apparently suffering and then suddenly laughing. “I see two people with mine eyes,” she explains, “the one weeping and mourning, the other laughing and rejoicing.” When she wants to be taken off her donkey, she says, “that which is in me presses to come forth.” She then sends Joseph to find a midwife in Bethlehem, and when he returns with one, Mary gives birth in a burst of bright light.

[The Qura](#) [6]n—which refers to Mary more than the New Testament itself does—describes her leaning against a date tree in agony during labor, to the point of preferring that she were dead. But she has the aid of an angelic doula; a voice from the ground announces that God has run a stream beneath her and instructs her to shake the tree so its ripe dates will fall. “Eat and drink, and be at peace,” says the voice, and we hear no more about the pain after that. (In 2011, clinical researchers in Jordan reported a correlation between eating dates during pregnancy and higher mean cervical dilation.)

The image of Mary imprinted on Juan Diego Cuauhtlatotzin’s cloak at Guadalupe in 1531 wears the attire of an Aztec woman in pregnancy. The stars on her veil and the crescent under her feet have made it common to identify her with [the woman in the sky of Revelation](#) [7], who “wailed aloud in pain as she labored to give birth.” As the woman flees with her newborn son, a child “destined to rule all the nations,” Michael and his angels fight the dragon, Satan, who wants to devour the boy.



Another common interpretation of that passage identifies the woman in the sky with the church—ever in labor to manifest her savior. Pope Benedict XVI [has insisted](#) [8] that there need not be any contradiction in accepting that she stands for this and for Mary, both. She represents a Hebrew girl 2,000 years ago no less than she represents us, now—especially at this time of year, when we can accompany that girl in her strange, miraculous pregnancy.

[The pregnancy of Mary, this year.](#) [9] coincides with pangs of violence in the land where she gave birth. Bethlehem overlooks the Palestinian sprawl of East Jerusalem and the manicured Israeli settlements scattered throughout it. Just to the north, along an apartheid wall covered with militant graffiti, the Aida refugee camp has stood for 65 years and counting. Just as there was no room for Mary in an inn, Palestinian women have given birth—or have tried—while stopped at the region’s ubiquitous checkpoints on the way to a hospital.

Closer to home, the United States remains one of the few countries in the world that does not guarantee paid maternity leave. God may have dispatched legions to defend the woman in the sky and her child, but too few American mothers have even the protection of time. We often treat pregnancy and birth as a [kind of disorder, resulting in a Caesarian section rate of more than 3](#) [10]0 percent—twice the national rate that the World Health Organization recommends.

Perhaps we need to meditate more on the active work of Advent, not just the waiting. We can walk with the Mother of God through her pregnancy and labor, then meet her child while he is still covered in blood and tied to her with an umbilical cord. We can be her, her midwives, her doulas.

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[9] <http://www.irinnews.org/report/61867/opt-pregnant-palestinians-give-birth-at-israeli-checkpoints>

[10] [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/04/14/c-section-rate-recommendation\\_n\\_7058954.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/04/14/c-section-rate-recommendation_n_7058954.html)

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