



a thrill of
HOPE

The Christmas Story
in Word and Art

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Presented by



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Christmas Greetings from Candler School of Theology

Welcome to this presentation of the Christmas story, *A Thrill of Hope*. World-renowned biblical scholars and an internationally known professor of preaching from Candler School of Theology offer their expertise in discussions of how the familiar Advent and Christmas texts from Matthew and Luke are brought to life in the art of John August Swanson. Swanson's art tells Bible stories in finely detailed, brilliantly colored paintings and original prints, the largest collection of which is displayed at Candler. Six of the pieces at Candler constitute a series known as "the Birth Narrative," and they are featured in this DVD.



Dean Jan Love

With the beauty and power of art and sacred text, and the insight of Candler's scholars, we hope this presentation acts as a new catalyst for you on your journey of faith. As the familiar song reminds us, Christ's birth is a "thrill of hope," a gift over which "the weary world rejoices." Rejoice with us as we offer a fresh, creative retelling of this good news!

Jan Love

Jan Love

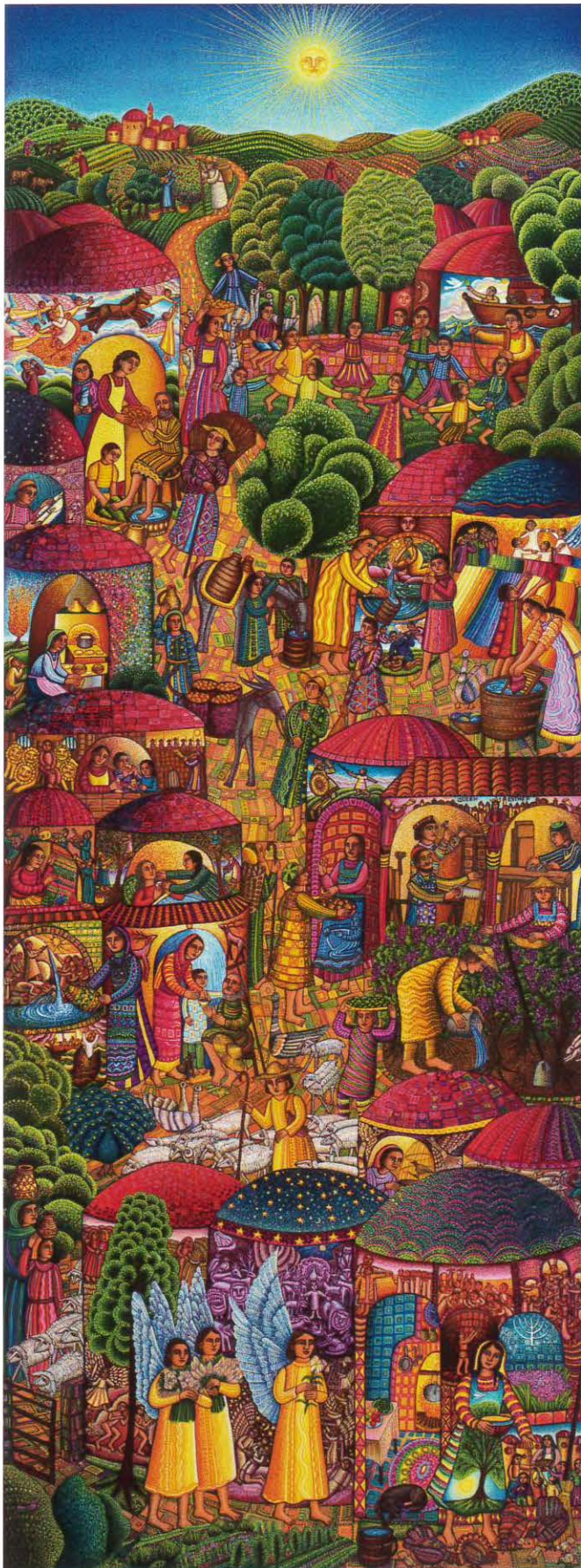
Dean and Professor of Christianity and World Politics

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1. A VISIT

Based on Luke 1:26–38

*Limited edition serigraph, hand printed, 1995,
38½ x 14½ inches*

FOR DISCUSSION

1. Notice how many details can be found in the artist's depiction of this story, how "busy" the picture is, and how difficult at first it may be to even find the scene described in Luke. Why do you think the artist has portrayed it this way?
2. In *A Visit* there are over twenty scenes of people doing ordinary work, like baking bread, and there are also over twenty scenes taken from other stories in the Bible. Identify as many of these as you can and discuss what you see the art conveying by this interweaving of everyday life and biblical events.
3. The art depicts Mary feeding chickens as she is visited by the angels. What do you think the artist is saying by this detail? What do you think about this portrayal of Mary?
4. The biblical passage indicates that when the angel Gabriel greeted Mary with the words, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you," that Mary "was much perplexed by his words..." (NRSV). Why do you think Mary's reaction was perplexity?
5. The artist has depicted a tree on the front of Mary's dress. Why do you think this is so?

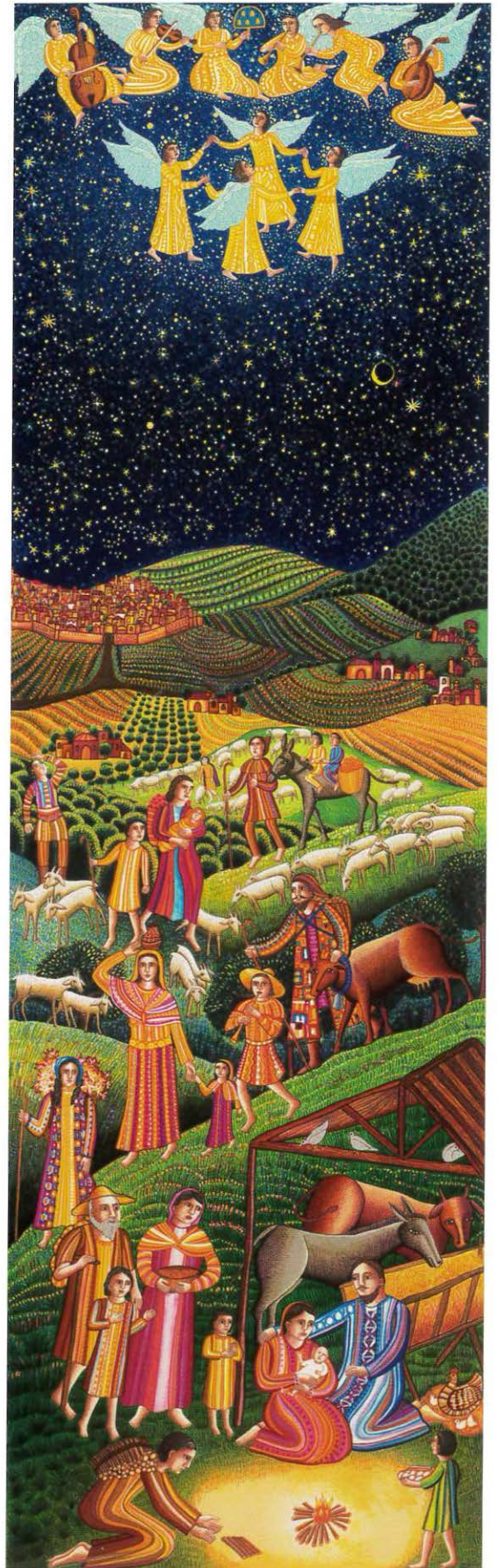
2. THE NATIVITY

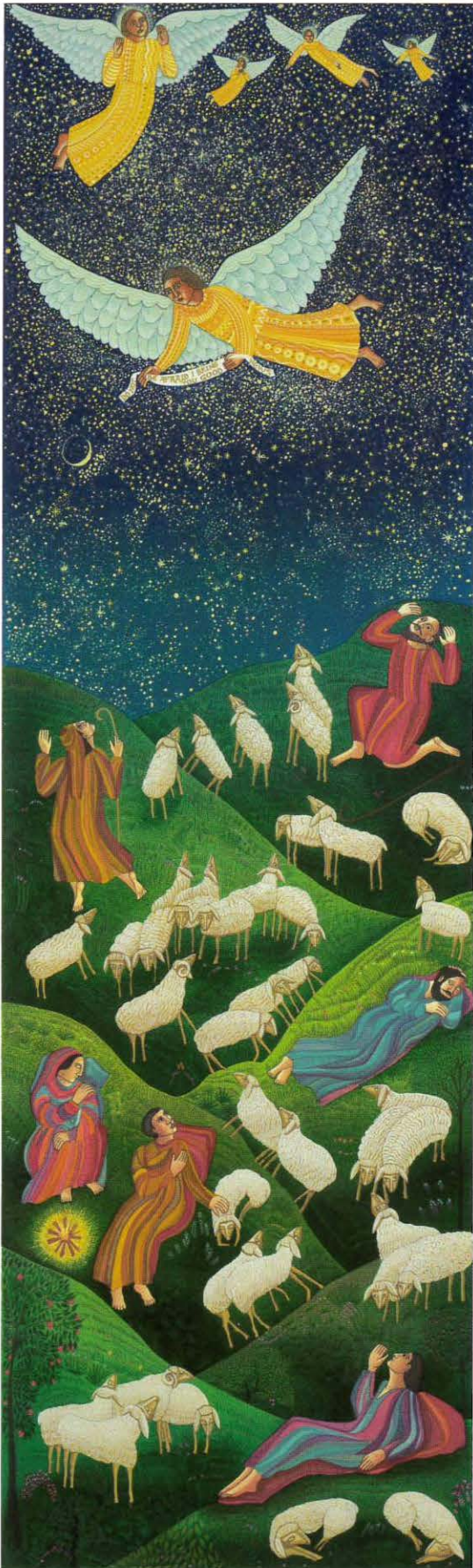
Based on Luke 2:1–7

Limited edition serigraph, hand printed, 1988,
38½ x 11¾ inches

FOR DISCUSSION

1. Notice in Swanson's *The Nativity* the parade of people and animals making their way to the manger. Describe each of these people and discuss why you think the artist may have placed them in this portrayal of the birth of Jesus.
2. At the top of the artwork there is a cluster of angels in the night sky. What are they doing? Why?
3. Luke tells us that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Why is it important to Luke to name Bethlehem as Jesus' birthplace?
4. In this biblical passage, Luke names two government officials: Emperor Augustus and Quirinius the Governor of Syria. Why do you think he adds these details to the story?
5. Notice the gifts people are bringing to the Christ child in Swanson's depiction of the scene. What do you think this says about our offerings to God?





3. THE SHEPHERDS

Based on Luke 2:8–20

*Limited edition serigraph, hand printed, 1985,
38³/₈ x 11⁵/₈ inches*

FOR DISCUSSION

1. Notice in the artwork the shepherds arrayed among the sheep. Describe what each of them is doing. What do you think this portrayal of the shepherds conveys?
2. In the biblical passage, the angel announces to the shepherds the birth of the Messiah, and then says, “This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger” (NRSV). What is a “sign”? What do you think the “sign” in this story means?
3. One of the most famous phrases in this story refers to Mary’s reaction to the events around her: “But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart” (NRSV). What do you think Mary treasured? What did she ponder in her heart?
4. In Swanson’s *The Shepherds*, the angel hovering over the shepherds is holding a banner. What does it say? Why do you think the artist chose to place these words on a banner?

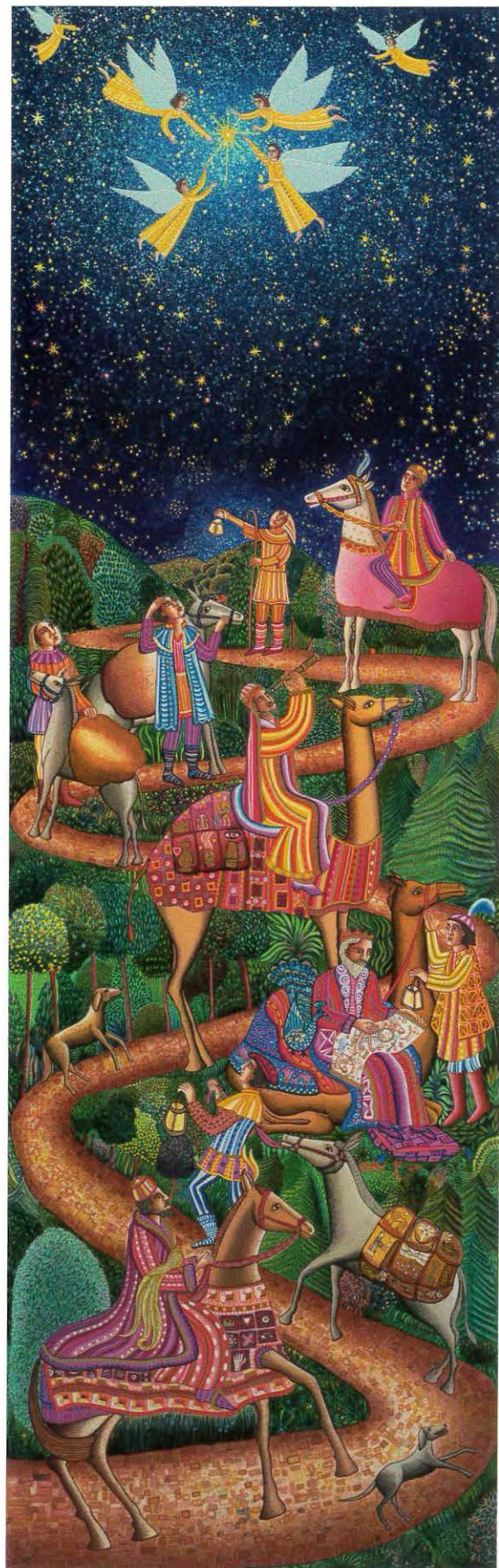
4. EPIPHANY

Based on Matthew 2:1–12

*Limited edition serigraph, hand printed, 1988,
38 1/8 x 12 1/8 inches*

FOR DISCUSSION

1. Notice the winding road in the artwork. When you compare this winding road shape to two of the previous pieces—*The Nativity* and *The Shepherds*—do you see a similar pattern? What do you think the artist is trying to convey by this?
2. The artwork depicts three wise men, but there are also several other characters. What are they doing? Why do you think the artist has placed them in this story?
3. The biblical passage states that the arrival of the wise men from the East asking about the newborn king of the Jews causes Herod and all of Jerusalem to become frightened. Why do you think this arrival frightened Herod? Why did it frighten the whole city?



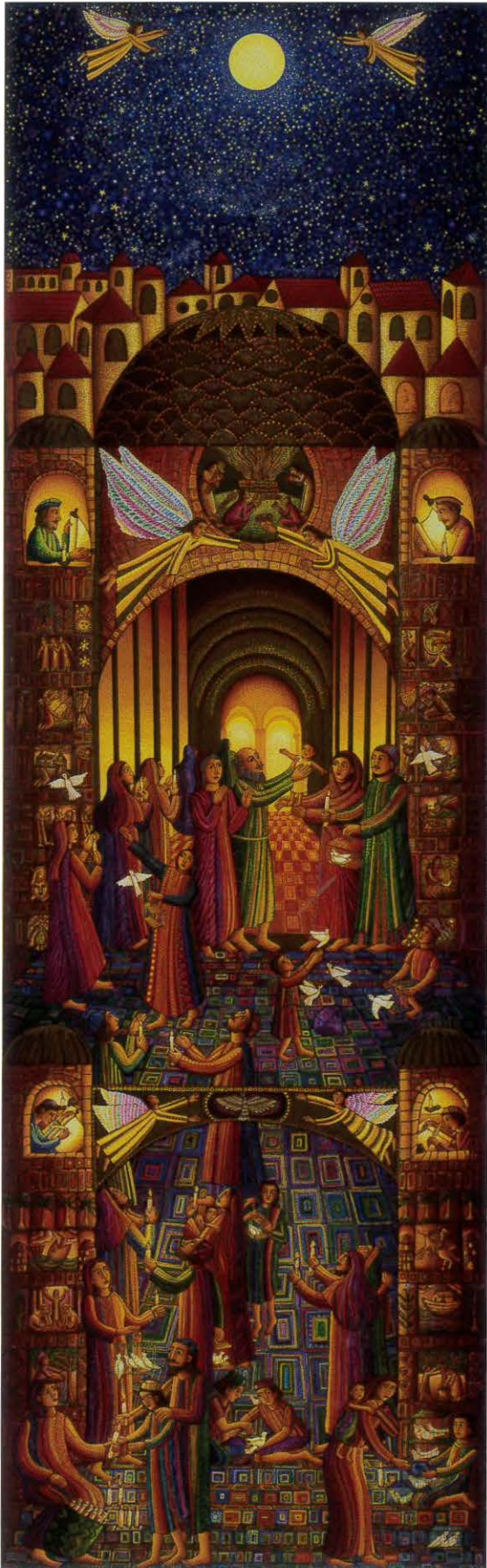
5. PRESENTATION IN THE TEMPLE

Based on Luke 2:21–40

*Limited edition serigraph, hand printed, 2004,
38½ x 12 inches*

FOR DISCUSSION

1. In *Presentation in the Temple*, Swanson depicts Mary and Joseph going to the temple with an offering of two doves. Read Leviticus 12:1–8 as background, and discuss the significance of the offering of doves.
2. Notice in the artwork that in each of the lighted windows of the temple, there is a scholar at work on a scroll. What do you think the artist is conveying with this detail?
3. In the biblical passage we are introduced to Simeon and Anna. List all of the characteristics you can find in the passage about each of these characters. Do you see similar people in our society today? Discuss the possible meanings in both Simeon's and Anna's responses to Jesus.
4. Find all of the angels in *Presentation*. The word "angel" means "messenger." What message do you think each angel is sending?
5. Notice the miniature illustrations in the towers of the temple, depicting stories from the Old Testament. How many stories can you identify? Why do you think the artist included these references to other biblical stories?



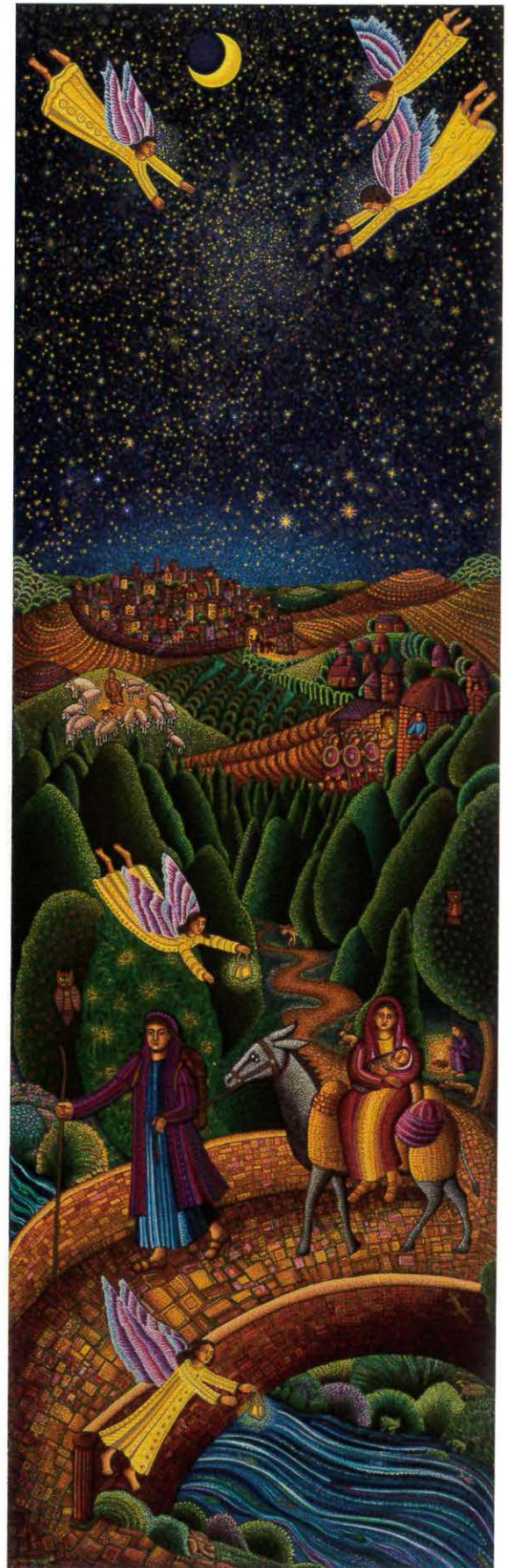
6. FLIGHT INTO EGYPT

Based on Matthew 2:13–15

*Limited edition serigraph, hand printed, 2002,
38½ x 12½ inches*

FOR DISCUSSION

1. The biblical passage tells the story of Joseph, Mary, and the child Jesus fleeing to Egypt. Many biblical scholars say that this passage connects Jesus to Moses. Do you think this is so? If so, what do you think Matthew wishes to convey by this connection?
2. Once again the artist has placed angels in the portrayal of a biblical story. What are the angels doing? What do you think the artist means to say by including these angels?
3. One commentator, viewing this picture of the holy family fleeing their homeland and going to a different country, observed that this picture evokes the plight of migrants and refugees today. Do you agree?





a thrill of HOPE

This 50-minute DVD presents the familiar story of Christmas as told in the Gospels of Luke and Matthew. Each passage of scripture is illustrated and interpreted by the beautiful artwork of John August Swanson and commentary from members of the faculty at Candler School of Theology.

The DVD is divided into sections, or “chapters,” each one featuring a passage of scripture, commentary by the scholars, and a Swanson work of art based on that passage. Each chapter is approximately eight minutes long.

CHAPTER	SCRIPTURE	ART
1 (<i>with intro</i>)	Luke 1:26–38	<i>A Visit</i>
2	Luke 2:1–7	<i>The Nativity</i>
3	Luke 2:8–20	<i>The Shepherds</i>
4	Matt. 2:1–12	<i>Epiphany</i>
5	Luke 2:21–40	<i>Presentation in the Temple</i>
6	Matt. 2:13–15	<i>Flight into Egypt</i>

IDEAS FOR VIEWING THIS CHRISTMAS DVD

Here are some ways that you can use this DVD in your congregation or group:

1. It can be enjoyed by viewing it in its entirety. The length of the DVD makes it ideal for use in church school classes or as a special Christmas program.
2. It can be viewed chapter by chapter. By using the “menu” button on your DVD, you can select individual chapters for viewing. Perhaps one or two chapters could be shown each Sunday in Advent during church school classes or in worship.
3. It can be used as a study resource. The remaining pages of this booklet feature reproductions of the John August Swanson artwork shown in the DVD, along with thought-provoking questions to spark fresh insights into the familiar biblical passages depicted in the art.

FACULTY PRESENTERS

The producers would like to extend special thanks to the Candler faculty members who offer their commentary in this DVD:

Dr. Michael Joseph Brown
Associate Professor of New Testament and Christian Origins

Dr. Thomas G. Long
Bandy Professor of Preaching

Dr. Luke Timothy Johnson
R.W. Woodruff Professor of New Testament and Christian Origins

Dr. Carol A. Newsom
C.H. Candler Professor of Old Testament

Dr. Steven J. Kraftchick
Assoc. Professor in the Practice of New Testament Interpretation

Dr. Gail R. O’Day
A.H. Shatford Professor of Preaching and New Testament

About the Artist



Los Angeles artist **John August Swanson** is noted for his finely detailed, brilliantly colored paintings and original prints. His works are found in the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, London's Tate Gallery, the Vatican Museums' Collection of Modern Religious Art, and other prestigious venues. The largest collection of Swanson's work—fifty pieces—is displayed at Emory University's Candler School of Theology in Atlanta.

The son of a Mexican mother and a Swedish father, Swanson is influenced by the folk art traditions of those two countries. He also is interested in the way Byzantine and medieval works of art, such as mosaics and stained glass windows, communicated the stories of the Old and New Testaments to people of different times and places. Many of his works are visual narratives consisting of numerous panels, each panel showing a scene from the story.

Swanson describes his art as “my most social act.” All of his works combine a richness of detail that conveys the diversity of the human experience with an emotional simplicity that evokes the transcendent unity of the human spirit. Optimistic but rarely sentimental, they offer a fresh perspective that prompts viewers to reexamine their perspectives of familiar scenes and stories.

Most of Swanson's works are serigraphs, which are made with a screen of fabric stretched tightly across a rectangular frame. Designs are created in stencil form on the screen, allowing ink to be moved through to the paper below. A separate screen must be made for each of the colors printed on the serigraph. Swanson's serigraphs are unusually complex, not only in their detail but also in the number of stencils used. *A Visit* (page 3), for example, required 61 stencils.

About Candler School of Theology



Candler School of Theology at Emory University is among the world's premier university-based theological schools. An intellectually vital, internationally distinguished, and intentionally diverse community, Candler is committed to its mission of educating faithful and creative leaders for the church's ministries in the world. Candler is dedicated to expanding knowledge of religion and theology, deepening spiritual life, strengthening the public witness of churches, and building upon the breadth of Christian traditions, particularly the Wesleyan heritage, for the positive transformation of church and world. It is one of thirteen United Methodist Church seminaries, and its enrollment includes more than five hundred students from more than fifty denominations.