



MARY: A WOMAN FOR ALL SEASONS

SESSION 1

## The Annunciation

by Christa von Zychlin

BIBLE STUDY

### Theme Verse

The Angel Gabriel to Mary, Luke 1:28,  
from *The Message*

“Good morning!  
You’re beautiful with God’s beauty.  
Beautiful inside and out!  
God be with you.”

### Opening

#### Hymn

“People Look East,” *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 248  
or *With One Voice* 626, verse 2

### Reading

Luke 1:26–38

### Prayer

Ever-living God,  
we thank you for this gathering around your word.  
We bless and praise you for creating us as women,  
and for anointing each season of our lives  
with your Holy and creative Spirit.  
Today as we begin our study of Mary,  
the mother of Jesus,  
we thank you for her youthful openness  
to the wonders of your will.  
Help us to be open to your word for our lives

that we may grow in love of you and of one another,  
and be of service  
to the world you love so much.  
In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

### Introduction to the Annunciation

**READ PSALM 121:1–2.** What are the two main characteristics  
of the LORD in these well-loved verses?

It makes perfect sense that the church commemorates the Annunciation (the day the angel Gabriel came to announce Jesus’ birth to Mary) on March 25. First of all, that’s exactly nine months before the celebration of the birth of Jesus. While the conception of God’s Son was a miracle, Mary’s pregnancy itself seems to have progressed according to the usual order of creation: She had a full nine months of literally growing with the Lord.

But I also like this date for the Annunciation not only for its arithmetic, but because where I’ve lived most of my life—in the northern part of the United States—the earth is usually still bare and frozen at the end of March. While in some years, the snowdrops are in white bloom, in most years there is no hope at all to be seen, other than (if you squint just so) some swelling buds on the maples or a yellowish cast to the willows.

So it might have seemed to the people of Mary’s time. Hope was bare and frozen for God’s people who lived on a hilly strip of land called Judea, lorded

over by the great power of the Roman Empire, whose locally appointed King Herod was corrupt and cruel. And yet, just like the buds in earliest spring, God's life forces were stirring. God's power was about to be made known in a teenager's courage to take on an audacious assignment.

Think back to the time you were just beginning to approach womanhood, at the age of 10 or 12 or so. Where were you living? What do you remember about your bedroom? What excited you about the idea of becoming a teenager? What, if anything, made you apprehensive? What was your relationship to God like at that age?

## Hopes and Dreams

**READ EXODUS 1:22–2:4.** Who watches to see what will happen to the baby Moses in the basket?

**READ NUMBERS 26:59.** What was the name of Moses' sister?

**READ EXODUS 15:20–21.** What title is Moses' and Aaron's sister given in these verses?

**READ LUKE 1:26–27.** What is the virgin's name?

*Mary* is a very ordinary name. According to a Google search I did recently, the name *Mary* (along with its variations such as *Marie* and *Miriam*) is still the single most popular name in the world.

Variations of *Mary* such as *Mariano* or the use of *Maria* as a middle name has been a popular choice for boys too, especially in Spanish-speaking cultures, but also in other places. One of the most famous German-language poets for example, has the name of Rainer Maria Rilke, and for years I was pleased that a female poet had such a high standing in German literature, only to find out that Rainer Maria is actually a man.

Do you or does anyone in your family have the name *Mary* or one of its variations as a first or middle name? How many *Marys* are there in the group gathered today? In your congregation?

*Mary* was an ordinary name in the days of Jesus. In fact, there are at least five different *Marys* in the New Testament. In the Old Testament, though, we hear about only one *Mary* or *Miriam*. She is the young girl who helped rescue her brother Moses from murder.

The name *Miriam*, and its shorter version, *Mary*, means bitter waters, from the Hebrew word *mar* which means bitterness, together with the word *yam* which means sea: *mara yam* = bitter sea.

The sea was a horribly bitter place for the Israelites enslaved in Egypt in the Old Testament, since it was into its waters that their hope—their baby sons—were thrown. In biblical times, as in many parts of the world today, the Jewish people had the custom of naming children after the circumstances of their birth.

In the early days of the New Testament, times were hard and people were poor in a way reminiscent of the long-ago days of slavery in Egypt. Life under King Herod could be very bitter. So it's no wonder that many families in New Testament times named their daughters *Mary*, "bitter waters." But maybe parents were also filled with a dream that their daughter, like *Miriam* in the ancient days of the Exodus, would be a girl brave enough to play a similar crucial role in the rescue, the salvation of her people.

Were you named after someone, and if so, what qualities did that person have that your parents may have hoped you would have too?

## A 700-Year-Old Prophecy

**READ ISAIAH 7:10-14.** What does the **LORD** tell Ahaz to do? When Ahaz refuses to do what the **LORD** asks, what does the **LORD** do anyway?

**READ MATTHEW 1:18-23.** What differences do you notice between the exact words of the Isaiah prophecy and the way the words are interpreted in Matthew 1:23?

More than 700 years before Mary's encounter with the Angel Gabriel, the prophet Isaiah presented a message to the royal house of David, involving a sign that King Ahaz never asked for and never wanted. King Ahaz wasn't quite honest when he protested, "I will not put the LORD to the test" (Isaiah 7:12b). He wasn't so worried about his spiritual relationship with the LORD, it appears, as much as he was intent on forging his own political alliances without interference from God or anybody else.

Nevertheless, Isaiah gave King Ahaz the prophecy that God had commanded. At the time, these words were probably not considered so remarkable. Isaiah uses the word *alma* in this passage, a word which usually refers to a maiden, a young unmarried woman, which in ancient Middle Eastern context would have meant that she *was* a virgin. The original hearers probably thought that this *alma* was a virgin at the time the prophecy was given, but not at the time she conceived and gave birth. Most biblical scholars believe that the prophecy had a preliminary fulfillment soon afterward, in the conception and birth of King Hezekiah, one of the few righteous kings of the Davidic line.

King Ahaz thought his greatest legacy would be his great political and military maneuverings! Instead, his reign left the country in shambles. His son Hezekiah, however, brought new hope to the people of God.

**READ MATTHEW 1:1 AND 1:9.** Now that we've studied the context of the Isaiah prophecy, which names in this genealogy suddenly pop out at you?

When the Hebrew words of Isaiah's prophecy were translated into Greek two or three centuries before Mary's birth, the word *alma*, "young woman, maiden," was translated as *parthenos*, "virgin." Now Isaiah's ancient prophecy took on a new expectation, and it appears that in the years before the birth of Jesus, there was already a hope circulating among the Jewish people for a miraculous birth from a virgin.

What other phrases in Scripture can have one meaning when first heard, and then a deeper meaning many years later? Can you think of a spiritual truth that your parents or a pastor or Sunday school teacher taught you that you didn't quite understand then but that now makes more sense than ever?

## A Virgin, Expectant

**READ DEUTERONOMY 22:23–24.** Notice that a virgin who is engaged is referred to as a "wife" in verse 24.

**READ LUKE 1:34–35.** What does Mary's question to the angel reveal about her understanding of the facts of life?

**READ MATTHEW 1:18–20.** Why did Joseph plan to end his engagement to Mary?

Every year in confirmation class, amidst much giggling, I make sure that the seventh-grade boys and girls know what the word *virgin* means.

A virgin is, of course, someone who has never had sexual intercourse. It may also refer to youth, inexperience, or naiveté. Used for clay, *virgin* means it's not been fired yet. It's pliable, but not very durable. Used for olive oil, it means the oil from the first pressing of the olives, resulting in the most flavorful oil. When it's used for wool, it means the fiber has never been spun or woven, making fabric that is both finer and stronger than cloth from recycled wool.

To a young woman living in first-century Palestine, however, the word *virgin* involved a matter of life or death. Marriage then (as it is still practiced in many traditional societies in the world today) was a two-step process. The first step was the engagement, when the agreement was made between two families. Historically, this meant that the woman now belonged to her fiancé's household, even though she still lived in her parents' household. The second step was when the woman moved into her husband's home.

In Mary's day, the interval between engagement and moving day would be used by a family to make

sure that their daughter was informed about the facts of life, to prepare her for her new responsibilities as a wife and a mother, and for both parties to gather furnishings and livestock with which to start married life.

When and how did you learn the facts of life? How do Christian families today prepare their sons and daughters for future marriage and family life? Does the youth group or confirmation program at your church include discussions of marriage, family life, or sexuality?

In any case, whatever Mary's parents hoped for her, it surely wouldn't have been this, for her to become a pregnant teenager. It is even more unlikely that either they or her fiancé would have been prepared for her claim that she was still a virgin!

Mary herself obviously knows her basic biology, and she gets right to the point to ask her heavenly messenger just how this was all going to work out. The literal translation of the phrase "I am a virgin" in Luke 1:34b is "I do not know a man," which is, of course, a biblical phrase meaning, "I haven't had sex with a man." But beyond the question of biology we can guess that there were other questions in Mary's mind: How am I going to survive this? How will my parents, my future husband, my community react? Why me? Am I hallucinating this whole thing?

### A Prophet's Calling

**READ JEREMIAH 1:4-9.** Compare and contrast the young prophet Jeremiah's call with the young virgin Mary's call. How may Mary's youth actually have helped her to accept this shocking commission from God? Can you identify any young women (or young men) in your family or in your congregation who have a special way of communicating God's truth and grace?

With courage unbelievable, with strength and resoluteness, this not-yet-fired clay pot, this delicate oil, this fine

and strong young woman, a virgin, says her bold "yes" to God. Mary agrees to be a bearer of God's word, this time in a way that only a woman could possibly be.

The lyric poet I talked about earlier, Rainer Maria Rilke, put it this way:

If you had really wanted to be strong,  
You would not have come from a woman's womb.  
For messiahs are quarried from mountains  
Where the sturdy and strong comes from stone.

Instead of being sent to a high mountain summit, or to the marbled chambers of a king's palace, the angel of the Lord was sent to a little house in Nazareth, to a young woman named Mary.

And bitter waters became springs of fresh joy.

### Closing

Read Psalm 126 aloud together, and then pray this prayer for the Annunciation of Our Lord (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, p. 55, or *Lutheran Book of Worship*, p. 33):

Pour your grace into our hearts, O God,  
that we who have known the incarnation  
of your Son, Jesus Christ,  
announced by an angel,  
may by his cross and passion  
be brought to the glory of his resurrection;  
for he lives and reigns with you,  
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and forever. Amen. 🌸

**The Rev. Christa von Zychlin** has just celebrated her half-century birthday by running a marathon and then moving to Asia with her husband and youngest son, to serve with ELCA Global Mission in Hong Kong, China. Now serving the church on a fourth continent (having previously served in Ohio, Africa, Iowa, Germany, France, and Wisconsin), she invites you to share in her current adventures at <http://marathonangel.blogspot.com>

## SESSION 1

# The Annunciation

by Christa von Zychlin

## Prayerful Preparation

Welcome to this summer Bible study and thank you for your willingness to lead! Maybe you're one of those treasured experienced churchwomen who said, "Sure, I'll lead the summer study again." And everybody breathed a sigh of relief, knowing that the study of the biblical Mary would be in capable hands.

Or maybe you're going to lead a Bible study for the first time, and right about now, to take the words of Mary's cousin Elizabeth out of context, you're thinking, "And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?" (Luke 1:43)

In whichever season of leadership you find yourself, take a moment of quiet time in preparation for this first session. If you have some favorite music that speaks to you of hope or of youth, then play that to help you get centered. Light a candle, get out your Bible, and read through the main focus of the first session: Luke 1:26–38.

Now, re-read the last two verses of this passage, and allow the biblical words to anoint your prayer: *May God work through me to bring the word of life to each participant in this summer study. Amen.*

## Practical Preparation—In Advance

People feel more committed and involved when they are asked to help with specific tasks, so please don't take care of every item on this list by yourself.

**Logistics:** Determine the place(s), dates, and times for the summer study, taking particular care to plan the length of time to be dedicated to each of the three sessions. You might consider offering this summer study

as part of a one-day retreat, as described in the May issue of *LWT* and at [www.lutheranwomantoday.org](http://www.lutheranwomantoday.org).

**Publicity:** Write up an invitation for your church newsletter, bulletin, and e-mail announcements. Appoint someone to make an engaging announcement in church (or get creative and do a one-minute musical, drama, or video announcement!). Send out personal invitations or telephone calls to all the women of your congregation, and send invitations to other congregations in town too.

Make a special point of inviting college-age women and high-school girls. The study of this biblical woman in different stages of life will be richer for all if women in different stages of life participate. And make sure that every invitation reminds women to invite others.

**Refreshments:** Arrange for snacks that include healthful alternatives. If you can, recruit musicians for the devotional portion of each session. This might be a pianist or flutist, or simply someone with a sure voice to lead the singing.

Ask someone to bring in visuals. Art books from the library or an Internet search on "The Annunciation" will offer hundreds of images. This may be a opportunity to involve a high school or college student to give a 10-minute presentation for the group.

## Practical Preparation—Day of the Study

Do you have seats for everyone, leaving several chairs open for latecomers?

Enough copies of the Bible study session to go around? (You can download them for free from the

magazine's Web site: [www.lutheranwomantoday.org](http://www.lutheranwomantoday.org).)

Name tags and markers so that no one is embarrassed by not knowing someone's name?

Worship books, such as the *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* or *Lutheran Book of Worship*?

## Opening

If you begin on time, people will be more likely to arrive on time the following sessions. Warmly welcome each participant. Even if only one woman comes, let her know you're glad she's there!

Invite participants to read the theme verse together, followed by singing the suggested hymn or another hymn of your choice.

Read Luke 1:26–38. Consider making this a dramatic reading by marking different parts for Narrator, Angel, and Mary. Then pray.

## Notes on the Study

The boxed sections of Session 1 are meant to have short answers. The discussion questions are meant to promote insight and sharing. You will probably not have time to do everything. Move rapidly and systematically through the boxed sections in order to allow a little more time for the discussions. Feel free to skip several of the questions in order to get to the two or three that you feel deserve more exploration.

## Introduction to the Annunciation

Psalm 121:1–2. God is both Divine Creator (who made “heaven and earth”) and Intimate Helper (*my* helper).

**Question 2:** Give the group a minute to think, then ask each woman to *briefly* describe a specific furnishing in her preteen home, or one thing she looked forward to about becoming a teenager. You might set the pace with something like this: “When I was 12, my bedroom had orange shag carpeting, and I was looking forward to high school because I sure didn't like middle school!”

## Hopes and Dreams

We see Miriam as first a young girl watching over a baby, then as a woman who is called to be a prophet and sings a song of joy. The similarity to Mary extends beyond their shared name!

## A 700-Year-Old Prophecy

In the new *Book of Faith* initiative of the ELCA, study materials underscore the ways that Scripture interprets Scripture. Materials also offer insights into how the history and context of the times the Bible was written work together with the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit. The result is God's timeless word fresh for each generation. Go to [www.bookoffaith.org](http://www.bookoffaith.org) to learn more about this initiative and resources.

## A Virgin, Expectant

You may wish to read Deuteronomy 22:13–22 for a fascinating and vivid account of the historical and cultural value placed on virginity.

Some people are more comfortable talking about such matters than others. You can move quickly through this section; make sure that the discussion doesn't get sidetracked or monopolized.

## A Prophet's Calling

You might use newsprint or a whiteboard and markers to list the similarities and differences between Jeremiah and Mary. The list of similarities should include:

Both are young.

Both questioned God's choice.

Both are told, “Do not be afraid.”

God puts the Word inside both.

## Closing

Read the Psalm 126 together and ask someone to lead the prayer. Before the group breaks up, remind them of the time and place of the next session. 🌸



MARY: A WOMAN FOR ALL SEASONS

SESSION 2

## Kinships, Friendships and Holy Encounters

by Christa von Zychlin

BIBLE STUDY

### Theme Verse

Luke 1:39-40, *The Message*

“Mary didn’t waste a minute. She got up and traveled to a town in Judah in the hill country, straight to Zechariah’s house, and greeted Elizabeth.”

### Opening

#### Hymn

“Will You Let Me Be Your Servant,” *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 659, verse 4

### Reading

Luke 1:39–45

### Prayer

God of all the ages, we thank you  
for reaching out to us with your word.  
We bless and praise you  
for human kinships and friendships,  
especially those that span the generations.  
We thank you for long-abiding relationships  
as well as the brief holy encounters  
of our lives.  
As we continue our study of Mary,  
the mother of Jesus,

we thank you for her example to us  
as a woman who reaches out to others.

Help us to grow in our capacity  
for reaching out beyond ourselves.

Help us to become more open  
to receiving your friendship  
and blessing from others.

In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

### Introduction to Kinships and Friendships

**READ PROVERBS 17:17 AND 18:24.** What are the main characteristics of genuine friendship in these two verses? Which relationship does Proverbs rate higher, that of friends or that of relatives?

Just as I was studying these words from Proverbs, my sister gave me a call. My family and I were making a huge move—to Hong Kong—and Karin called to see how it was going. She’s already thinking of how to save up enough money and vacation days to come and visit us! Everywhere my family has lived, from the United States to Europe and Africa, my sister has been one of the first of our relatives (and when we lived in the Central African Republic, the only one of our relatives) to make the effort to come and visit us.

She is not a wealthy woman, but she’s my big sister. She has always loved me and been proud of me, and I’ve always looked up to her and respected her opinions. Not that our relationship is always smooth. Once

we traveled together for two weeks, which was about one week too long. We regressed to “big sister knows best and little sister stubbornly resists” routine. But my sister Karin loves me and consistently blesses me with the generosity of her love.

The youth director at our former church had a poster on her wall with a glossary of some of the short-hand people use in instant messaging and cell-phone text-messaging. Some of the more well known phrases include LOL (laugh out loud) and BBL (be back later) and of course, the sets-a-pastor’s-teeth-on-edge OMG (oh my god). But what really strikes me about this poster is how many of the phrases have to do with friendship:

BF = best friends

FF = friends forever

BFF = best friends forever

And two of my personal favorites: LYLAB and LYLAS = “love you like a brother” and “love you like a sister.”

The fact that people, especially young people, have so many expressions for their good friends strikes me as a really hopeful sign in our world. We human beings are designed for close friendships, the kinds of relationships that take us through thick and through thin. The biblical friendship between Mary and Elizabeth is an ancient example of a LYLAS and BFF kind of relationship.

Think about your friends in different stages of your life. Did you have a “best friend” as a child? As a teenager? Now? Is (was) your best friend one of your relatives?

## Mary’s Kinswoman, Elizabeth

**READ LUKE 1:5.** What do you learn about Elizabeth in verse 5?

Read Exodus 6:23. What is the name of the original high priest Aaron’s wife? (Elizabeth is a variation of that name)

**READ LUKE 1:6.** What more do you learn about Elizabeth in this

verse?

**READ LUKE 1:7.** What two additional things do you learn about Elizabeth here?

**READ LUKE 1:36–37.** What was the relationship between Mary and Elizabeth? What was the very specific sign to Mary of God’s overwhelming grace and power?

Traditionally Mary and Elizabeth have been thought of as cousins, but the original Greek word *syngenis* could just as well mean that Elizabeth was Mary’s aunt or even a more distant relative, separated by a generation. Mary’s exact genealogy is never made clear in the Gospels, which is perhaps the divine intention. Scripture has a way of subverting our expectations. The Savior was supposed to come from King David’s line, and he does, but only (as far as we know) through Mary’s faith and Joseph’s adoption, not through genetic destiny.

But for Elizabeth, matters are different. She was born and raised to be the mother of priests. She herself is described as a descendant of the priestly line of Aaron, and has married a priest. All her neighbors and relatives would have been waiting for her to have children. God’s word says, “Sons are indeed a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb a reward” (Psalm 127:3). Wasn’t there a promise for the men who walked in God’s ways, that “your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your children will be like olive shoots around your table” (Psalm 128:3)?

But the years have passed, and no child arrives. Mary, like the rest of the extended family, would have been well aware of Elizabeth’s sorrow, and the gossip that almost certainly accompanied it: Was it her fault? Was it his? Had they offended God or was their faith not strong enough?

Then the Angel Gabriel is sent with a message from God. It turns out that after all this time, God has a surprise in store for Mary’s middle-aged friend and relative.



If you are 50 or older, do you have any friends younger than 30? If you are under 50, do you have any friends older than 70? What gifts and challenges does your age difference bring?

## Mary Takes Off Running

**READ LUKE 1:24–25.** How long did Elizabeth “remain in seclusion”? What are some of the reasons she may have had for doing so?

**READ LUKE 1:39.** What is the adverb used?

**READ ISAIAH 52:7.** What is considered so beautiful? What “good news” was Mary bringing Elizabeth? What “good news” was Elizabeth bringing Mary?

**READ ROMANS 10:13–15.** How might both Mary and Elizabeth be considered the first preachers of the gospel (translated literally as “good news”)?

News didn’t travel very fast in those days, and on top of that it appears that Elizabeth was hiding her pregnancy. After all, in the days before pregnancy ultrasounds, how could she be sure, until she felt the baby move? For a first pregnancy, this “quickening” doesn’t usually happen until 18 to 22 weeks—about the beginning of the sixth month!

So Mary probably hadn’t heard that Elizabeth was pregnant until she got the news straight from the angel. When she did hear it, maybe she laughed, just as our biblical great-grandmother Sarah once laughed about a baby coming to an older woman. Mary may have laughed a teenage girl’s laugh, because she knew how babies came into the world.

And then she took off running.

The hill country where Elizabeth lived was at least a three-day trip for Mary, and off she went, without, it appears, a whole lot of planning or preparation, but with all the energy of a young woman on a mission.

Often we think of urgent messages as bad news. Have you ever just “had to” see a friend or a relative in order to share some

good news? Have you ever called someone in the middle of the night to tell them something wonderful? What’s the farthest you have ever traveled to visit a friend?

## Of Priests and Prophets

**READ LUKE 1:41–45.** At what moment does Elizabeth’s child move? What happened to Elizabeth? Who is blessing whom in this passage?

**READ LUKE 1:50.** (this is part of Mary’s famous song, known as the Magnificat). How long do God’s mercies endure?

Read Luke 1:56. How long does Mary stay with Elizabeth?

What a “quickening” there was for Elizabeth and her unborn child! It turns out that contrary to all expectations, her child won’t be a priest like his father and grandfathers, whose role was to preside at religious ceremonies, doing things in the proper order. No, Elizabeth’s child, John the Baptist, would grow up to become a prophet, like his mother. Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, speaks startling words of truth to Mary. This is the work of a prophet! But Elizabeth also blesses Mary, and this is the work of a priest. Mary, for her part, sings a song of happiness and worship, exulting in a God whose mercies transcend the generations.

If you are a mother, aunt, or godmother, who was the first person you told of the pending birth or adoption? For those who have given birth, did you notice times when your unborn child responded to the voice of particular friends or relatives?

## Holy Encounters

We now fast-forward past the well-known stories of the birth of Jesus, past Mary’s encounter with innkeepers, shepherds, and Magi, and we move on to examine the meeting of Mary and Joseph with the older folks at the Temple in Jerusalem.

**READ LUKE 2:25–26.** Why might we guess that Simeon was an older man?

**READ LUKE 2:27–35.** How is Simeon guided? Whom does Simeon specifically bless?

**READ LUKE 2:36–38.** What is Anna's title in verse 36? How many generations is she removed from Mary? Women in biblical times were often known more for their roles as mothers and wives than anything else. What is Anna's main biblical claim to fame?

For me, it happened when our family was traveling between continents in our overseas missionary days. We were at Chartres Cathedral in France. I had long heard about Chartres and always wanted to visit, and I was finally there. Only I had the company of a five-year-old and a three-year-old, plus an infant in a carrier on my back. I'm not sure where my husband had wandered off. There I was struggling with the kids and trying to take in what I thought might be my only chance to see that incredibly beautiful place.

I was annoyed at my kids, who were *not* interested in looking at architecture, but wanted to play tag along the clattery stone floor of the echo-y cathedral. I was so embarrassed that I tried not to catch the eyes of the other tourists. I was sure they must be glaring at me.

And then an old Italian grandpa in a large tourist group, a man with big bushy eyebrows and a sweet smile, turned to me and said in broken English, "Mama—is a holy work. You Mama." Then he pointed to a sculpture of the Madonna, Mother Mary with

Jesus. Smiling, he pointed back to me and repeated, "Good Mama—is a holy work." And with those words, I was transformed from a frustrated harried mom to a woman blessed with the same calling as Mary, the mother of our Lord.

What older folks—grandmothers, godmothers, aunts, uncles, or grandpas—have blessed you in your life? How and when have you had the chance to bless someone in a different season of life than yourself?

### Closing

Read the Magnificat, Luke 1:46–55, together. Then pray in your own words or use this prayer appointed for the commemoration of the Visit of Mary to Elizabeth (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 56 or *Lutheran Book of Worship* 33):

Mighty God, by whose grace Elizabeth rejoiced with Mary

and greeted her as the mother of the Lord:

look with favor on your lowly servants

that, with Mary, we may magnify your holy name

and rejoice to acclaim her Son

as our Savior, who lives and reigns with you

and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen. 🌸

**The Rev. Christa von Zychlin** moved to Asia with her husband and youngest son, to serve with ELCA Global Mission in Hong Kong, China. She invites you to share in her current adventures at <http://marathonangel.blogspot.com>

## SESSION 2

# Kinships, Friendships and Holy Encounters

by Christa von Zychlin

## Prayerful Preparation

Welcome back to a second session on a season in the life of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Once again, the best preparation you can do as leader is to take a few moments for quiet prayer and devotional reading of this session's central Bible text: Luke 1:39-45.

An excellent resource is the description of the *lectio divina* on page 48 of *Opening Up the Book of Faith: Lutheran Insights for Bible Study* (Augsburg Fortress, 2008). If you can't find a copy of this book in your church library, you might be able to borrow it from your pastor. You can also read about this method of Bible study at [www.boldcafe.org/0307/hottopic2.html](http://www.boldcafe.org/0307/hottopic2.html). You may want to use this method of Bible study with your small group at some point.

Next, pray for each of your small group members, or each small group leader, if you are the leader of leaders. Visualize their faces, and pray for them by name.

Re-read Luke 1:45, and allow the biblical words to anoint your prayer: *May God work through the relationships and sharing of our small group(s) to bring the word of life to each other and to our church community. Amen.*

## Practical Preparation

Do you need to make any changes in the room or furnishings you are using? Would it be helpful to appoint a time-keeper?

Do you have people in charge of refreshments, music, and visual aids? This time the Google image search is under the heading The Visitation. Look for interpretations by artists as diverse as Rembrandt, Afri-

can American artist Romare Bearden, Chinese artist He Chi, and others.

Make sure announcements about your study are still being made at church and in the community. Reminder phone calls are routine for the dentist and hairdresser. Should we be any less persistent in getting people together to share God's word?

## Opening

Once again, welcome all participants and express your thankfulness for their presence.

Invite participants to read the theme verses together, then sing the suggested hymn, if you have copies of *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. This will be a new hymn for many, but could easily become a favorite with good accompaniment and a bit of repetition.

Ask two women to do a dramatic reading of Luke 1:39-45, one as the narrator and the second reading the words of Elizabeth. Then pray.

## Notes on the Study

Move rapidly and systematically through the short readings and answers of the boxed sections, and make sure you have selected the two or three discussion questions that you most want to talk about. Then feel free to skip the rest.

## Introduction to Kinships and Friendships

Have fun thinking about a best buddy that you have, or have had in life, but don't spend too much time here. You may want to lead by modeling a short answer to this first discussion question.

## Mary's Kinswoman, Elizabeth

One of the things we learn right away about Elizabeth is that she and her husband were both “righteous” (Luke 1:6) You may listen for comments reflecting that even today, childlessness is sometimes seen as a curse or as a fault, or as evidence of even a lack of faith. This is clearly not the case with the biblical Elizabeth and Zechariah.

This may also be an opportunity to remind people that “Scripture interprets Scripture.” In other words, the Psalm passages, while meaningful in underscoring that children are a blessing from God, are balanced by the number of “righteous” and faithful women in Scripture who either have no children at all or bear an only child late in life.

You might spend some time sharing about friendships that span the generations. I know that I’ve become more conscious and intentional in appreciating these relationships since preparing this study on Mary and Elizabeth.

## Mary Takes off Running

I love the spontaneity with which Mary gets up to go and see Elizabeth. It’s a pleasure to think of times when

news is just too good to hold in, or times when a phone call just isn’t enough.

## Of Priests and Prophets

Note that in the excitement of the baby jumping, something else happens to Elizabeth—she is filled with the Holy Spirit. This is the mark of God’s prophets.

## Holy Encounters

Musicians and liturgists in the group will be familiar with the *Nunc Dimittus*, the song of Simeon, which forms part of the Night Prayer or Compline service in many traditions, including our own. Several versions of it can be found in Lutheran books of worship. If you have a copy of *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* handy, see 440 for a version with words and music by Martin Luther.

## Closing

Read together the beautiful words of the Magnificat (Luke 1:46–55), which Mary sang while she was with Elizabeth. Then close with shared prayer, respectfully ending your study close to the promised time.



MARY: A WOMAN FOR ALL SEASONS

SESSION 3

## Mary among the Disciples

by Christa von Zychlin

BIBLE STUDY

### Theme Verse

John 19:26–27a *The Message*

When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, “Woman, here is your son.” Then he said to the disciple, “Here is your mother.”

### Opening

Hymn

“Each Winter as the Year Grows Older,” *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 252, *With One Voice* 626, verse 3

### A Litany of Readings

Luke 1:30–32

Luke 2:19

Luke 2:34–35

John 19:16b–18

John 19:25b–27

John 19:30

### Prayer

God of our past and of our future,  
we thank you for fulfilling your promises to us  
in unexpected ways.

We bless and praise you  
even amidst the hardships of our lives.

Help us to hold fast when things look darkest,  
and use the sorrows we live through  
to temper us for compassion, insight, and service to  
others.

As we continue our study of Mary, the mother of  
Jesus,  
we thank you for her example to us  
as a woman of leadership and prayer.  
In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

### Introduction to Mary, a Seasoned Woman

Read the following verses from Proverbs 31, part of a poem about a woman of strength. What are some of the characteristics of the capable woman?

**PROVERBS 31:17.** Her physique—frail or fit?

**PROVERBS 31:20.** Her outreach—tight-fisted or generous?

**PROVERBS 31:22.** Her outfits—cheap or quality?

**PROVERBS 31:25.** Her outlook—worried or welcoming?

**PROVERBS 31:26.** Her leadership—silently demure or competently clear?

**READ PROVERBS 31:1.** Whose voice may we be overhearing throughout this last chapter of the book of Proverbs?

Although the second half of Proverbs 31 is often subtitled “A Good Wife,” I think that’s misleading, since the word “wife” in the opening line (verse 10) can just as legitimately be translated as “woman.” If you tally it up, only a small percentage of this poem (4 out of 22 verses) is specifically about the role of a wife. A major-

ity of the verses speak of a woman's varied roles as a manufacturer (verses 13, 22, and 24), manager (verses 15 and 18), purchaser of real estate (verse 16), farmer (verse 16), philanthropist (verse 20), teacher and coach (verse 26), as well as mother (verse 28).

In the last few years some conventional wisdom has emerged concerning a woman's many roles in life: "You can have it all, you just can't have it all at once." At first glance, the woman described in Proverbs 31 can be pretty intimidating—maybe a little like that popular, beautiful, straight-A student people loved to hate in junior high school. After all, the woman seems to be a homemaker, entrepreneur, supportive wife, volunteer, and well-loved mom all at the same time.

After some study, however, we might imagine that Proverbs reflects the thoughts of an older woman looking back at the many facets of her own life over a series of decades. Possibly she is also thinking about the rich, complex kind of life she would wish for the younger women in her life—her nieces, daughters, or daughters-in-law. Not all at once, but over the seasons of a lifetime, many women do have the privilege—and the challenge—of living out an astonishing variety of roles.

Just as nature's seasons influence and overlap each other, so too do the seasons of a woman's life often overlap, sometimes leading to unexpected events. In the Midwest, where I lived for the past dozen years, we have pretty distinct seasons, but sometimes the seasons are wonderfully mixed up.

One January, for example, I saw a bush blooming bright yellow in the snow of northern Wisconsin! I had to do some research to find out it was witch hazel, a shrub that will, under certain circumstances, bloom in deep winter. Another year my neighbor's apple tree put out blossoms in late fall, so that this one tree had lovely pink blossoms and fully ripe apples at the same time. I often think of another long-ago neighbor who found herself pregnant just about the time she was sending

her youngest off to college. She had a girl and named her Autumn Joy.

If you think of your own life as a series of seasons, what major seasons have you experienced? What particular events marked the end of one season and the beginning of another?

## Mary, a Widowed Woman

**READ MATTHEW 2:21 AND LUKE 2:4-5.** Who is the most active person in these two passages?

**READ MATTHEW 13:54-56.** Can you tell from this passage whether Jesus' earthly father Joseph is living or dead?

It appears that only a short period of Mary's life was spent as a married woman. Although Joseph is mentioned in all four Gospels, he is active only in the first two chapters of Matthew and Luke. The last time we see Joseph is during the trip to the Temple in Jerusalem when Jesus is about 12 years old (Luke 2:41-51). After that, Joseph is mentioned in all four Gospels only in the context of speculation as to who Jesus really is (only a carpenter's son). Other than that, we never hear about Jesus' earthly father again. This has led many to suggest that Mary is a widow by the time we see her near the end of the Gospel of John, and in our final glimpse of her in the book of Acts.

In these last two biblical passages involving Mary, we know she is at least in her late 40s. She is well past girlhood and adolescence. The intense mothering season is over. Her son is a man in his 30s. Yet Mary's life and significance are far from over. We will see her take on new roles. She becomes a mother again, but in a new way—by adoption, not by birth. She will again receive the Holy Spirit, but this time not as a mystified young girl, but as a mature woman, possibly one of the only people who knew exactly what was going on in that upper room.

She had met this Holy Spirit before, in another sea-

son of her life. This time the Spirit comes as a familiar power, and we can imagine her again saying “yes” to God. But before all that can happen, Mary has a terrible journey.

### Mary, a Woman of Sorrows

**READ JOHN 19:23-25A.** How many soldiers appear to be at the cross, according to verse 23?

**READ JOHN 19:25B.** How many women were near the cross?

**READ JOHN 19:31-37.** Think back to the prophecy of Simeon in Luke 2:34-35. Even though these verses come from two different Gospels, how is the one a fulfillment of the other?

Four soldiers, gambling for a condemned man’s clothes. Four women, keeping vigil over a condemned man’s groanings. The contrast is clear. The men are busy in their role as functionaries of the government. They worry about tearing up a perfectly good piece of clothing, but not about crucifying a perfectly innocent man. The other men, the disciples, have long since fled. It’s reasonable that they did—they could get killed for hanging around.

The women seem to be made of sterner stuff than Jesus’ male companions. Or maybe it was less dangerous, in this rare instance, to be a woman than to be a man.

Mary is surrounded by her friends and kinswomen. Her older cousin Elizabeth had died years ago. But in place of Elizabeth, it seems that Mary has a sister who has turned up just when Mary needs her most. And Mary Magdalene is there too. And then there is the mysterious other Mary, the wife of Clopas. Anything we say about her is sheer speculation—except to say that all three of Mary’s companions knew the importance of being there for Mary as she faced the toughest day of her life. They didn’t let her stand all alone, at the foot of the cross.

We do not know if Mary stayed to the bitter end,

watching the soldiers pierce Jesus’ side to make sure he was dead. The many works of art that depict the *Pietà* (Italian for “pity”) are not based on a Gospel text. There is no biblical record of Mary holding her dead son. But if she was able to get to his broken body, you know she did. Some women are given that kind of strength. They keep watch. They touch and they cradle and they rock their loved one right through the ordeal and into eternity.

Take a moment to think about a time when you were the one to accompany someone else during a crucible in life, as Mary’s sister and friends stood by her. Have you been through a crucible in your own life? Who has kept watch with you?

### Mary, Part of a New Creation

**READ JOHN 19:26-27.** How is the disciple described in verse 26?

**READ JOHN 3:6.** How might these words apply to the beloved disciple’s relationship with Mary?

At the crucifixion, we have the four soldiers, seemingly oblivious to the horror of the hour, and we have the four women, deeply attached to the man on the cross. And then there is this “beloved disciple” who defies the danger that scared off the other disciples and stays near Jesus.

Who is this beloved disciple? Traditionally he is thought to be the evangelist John, too modest to attach his own name to such a prominent place in the Gospel account. Maybe another reason this disciple is not named, however, is so that disciples in every generation can see themselves at the foot of the cross beside Mary and can understand themselves to be beloved disciples of Jesus. In that light, the words of Martin Luther’s 1522 Christmas sermon become even more meaningful:

“This is the great joy, of which the angel [of the Lord (Luke 2:9-12)] speaks, this is the consolation

and the superabundant goodness of God, that man (if he has this faith) may boast of such treasure as that Mary is his real mother, Christ his brother, and God his father. For these things are, all of them, true and they come to pass, provided we believe them” (*Luther’s Works*, vol. 52, p. 15).

Do you have any “sons” or “daughters” in your life who are not your flesh and blood children? What is special about such a relationship that crosses generational and family lines? What are some ways in which generations are brought together in your church community?

## Mary among the Apostles

**READ ACTS 1:12-14.** What is the context? Who are all these people who are named?

**READ GALATIANS 4:19.** Whose specific physical experience is being used as a spiritual metaphor for all Christians?

The seasons have passed for Mary. At least 33 years have gone by since the angel first visited her—almost two generations. Using our imaginations, we might see how the lines of her face have deepened, the twinkle of her eyes taken on a richer sparkle, the kindness of her expression grown more mature. Under ordinary circumstances, Mary would be a grandmother by now. But Mary seems unencumbered by family responsibilities. While mothering is highly valued throughout the Bible and grandchildren are always seen as a gift from God, in the New Testament women are freed from the cultural expectation to find their value only in mothering and grandmothership.


Mary’s worth comes from something that precedes her motherhood—God’s calling and divine favor. Nor

is Mary’s worth in any way dependent upon her living to see her children’s children. She is clearly a woman saved by the triumph of the new life achieved by the Savior Jesus. She is a leader among the apostles and other followers of Jesus, who draw near to God in prayer. She is a servant of the Almighty, expectant again with the presence of the Holy Spirit.

How do you feel about joining Martin Luther and the beloved disciple in calling Mary “mother”? In what way might we think of her as the mother of the church? Thinking about Mary’s experiences and using St. Paul’s words from his letter to the Galatians, what does it mean to grow spiritually by having “Christ formed in you”?

## Closing

Read Psalm 100 aloud together, and then pray in your own words, or use the prayer appointed for the commemoration of Mary, Mother of Our Lord, August 15 (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* p. 57, or *Lutheran Book of Worship*, p. 34):

Almighty God,  
in choosing the virgin Mary  
to be the mother of your Son,  
you made known your gracious regard for the poor,  
the lowly, and the despised.  
Grant us grace to receive your word in humility,  
and so be made one with your Son, Jesus Christ  
our Savior and Lord,  
who lives and reigns with you  
and the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and forever. Amen. 

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## SESSION 3

# Mary among the Disciples

by Christa von Zychlin

## Prayerful Preparation

At the Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist in Milwaukee, a bronze sculpture of Mary depicts a slightly different Mary than the one we usually see. This Mary has lines under her eyes. Her figure is slightly fuller than that of a teenager. She is beautiful in a more weathered way than we typically think of Mary, the mother of Jesus.

In taking a few moments to become centered and prayerful in preparation for leading this final summer session, perhaps you can call to mind two or three older women who have been role models for you over the years.

Read over the theme verses for this session (John 19:26-27a) and lift up a short prayer for yourself and the members of your group: *Thank you Lord for choosing me as your beloved disciple. Let me be a mature instrument of your love for others, especially those who will be participating in the Bible study. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

## Practical Preparation

Consider preparing a simple feedback form for participants to use at the conclusion of this last session. Keep the survey short and anonymous, using questions such as:

- What I liked best about this study
- What I liked least
- One thing I learned
- One suggestion for improving the next study

Have you asked others for help in providing music, refreshments, and visual aids? Be sure to thank them

publicly. The visual images for this session, both that of Mary by the cross with the “beloved disciple” and that of Mary at prayer with the disciples in the upper room are a bit more difficult to find, but they are out there and will enrich your session if someone brings them in.

## Opening

Welcome people warmly and read the theme verse together and sing a hymn. The suggested hymn is an Advent hymn, and sings beautifully of the change of seasons in creation as well as in our own lives.

Before the litany of readings, invite participants to pay attention to the way in which words spoken to Mary at the beginning of the Gospel of Luke take on a new meaning at the foot of the cross in the Gospel of John. Place a cross in the center of your gathering and have up to six different women read the passages, one after another, with a pause—maybe 30 seconds—after each reading. Then, without comment, go right into the prayer.

## Notes on the Study

Have a little fun sorting through these characteristics of a capable woman! Tradition attributes the book of Proverbs to King Solomon, but it may be a compilation from several sources. These words may possibly convey the voice of a royal mother echoing down through the centuries.

Major seasons of one’s life may be marked by schools attended or moves from one home to another; jobs, friends, marriage, divorce, births, and deaths all

signify beginnings and endings in our lives.

For further discussion: People often have seasons in their church relationships and spiritual lives as well. What are some seasons you've experienced as a church member? Think of a time when you felt most active and involved or a period when you didn't worship regularly. Remember a time when your church or Bible study group really struggled or a time when it was especially vibrant and strong.

### **Mary, a Widowed Woman**

We don't know when Joseph died, but tradition has it that Mary was a widow. How might this be a comfort for widows today?

### **Mary, a Woman of Sorrows**

Some scholars dispute the idea that there were four women at the cross, suggesting that there were only three because Mary of Clopas *is* Mary's sister. As popular a name as Mary was in first-century Palestine, however, it's hard to imagine a family naming *two* of their daughters Mary.

For the discussion question on crucibles you may wish to consult a dictionary or encyclopedia in order to refresh your understanding of this word.

### **Mary, Part of a New Creation**

John is often depicted as the youngest of the disciples—that is why he has no beard in most Christian art, including Da Vinci's Last Supper. As a young man, he

may not have been seen as a threat to authorities and therefore it may have been less dangerous for him to remain near Jesus than it would have been for an older disciple.

Some ways in which generations are brought together in your church community may include music programs, service projects, worship, mentoring programs, and Sunday school. Especially lift up areas in which people of different generations work or relate side by side, rather than only those where older people teach or supervise younger ones.

### **Mary among the Apostles**

In the Galatians text, Apostle Paul is giving us a metaphor of spiritual growth that only Mary ever experienced in the flesh: having Christ formed in her. How does that work as a metaphor for both men and women?

Some participants may be uncomfortable with the idea that Mary is a spiritual mother for Lutherans, whereas others may find this an extremely helpful image. That's all right—God gives us many different ways of experiencing divine love and guidance, including through our relationships with one another.

### **Closing**

End with a joyful reading of Psalm 100, and ask one of the participants to close with the words of the suggested prayer.