



ELIZABETH AND MARY

by Diane Jacobson

OF MANY GENERATIONS:
MARY, ELIZABETH, AND LYDIA

BIBLE STUDY : SESSION 1

Theme verse

“Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to live in.” Isaiah 58:12

Prayer

God of hope, bring us together in recognition of new birth and new possibilities. Change our sorrow into joy. Invite us into the community you form through your son, our Lord, Jesus the Christ. Amen

Hymn

“Canticle of the Turning” (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 723)

Introduction

We are women “of many generations,” many ages, many places, and many experiences. We have a calling to come, learn, and serve together, as well as to rebuild, repair, and restore not only our own relationships, but also the world around us.

To do this we look to Scripture for stories that take us into this calling. We look for stories of women who come together, women who understand themselves to be part of a multi-generational community and who have known both challenge and joy.

In this session we will look at the remarkable meeting of two generations of women in Mary and Elizabeth. Then in the next session we will explore the song Mary sings in response both to Elizabeth’s greeting and to all that has happened to her. And in our final session

we will turn to the story of Lydia that also explores a gathering of women that raises up the foundation of many generations. (See “Healers and Restorers,” p. 22.)

Devotional Listening

Invite someone to read Luke 1:39–45, often referred to as “the visitation,” and ask one, two, or three of the following questions:

1. What word or phrase strikes you, and where does it take you?
2. What stories or memories does this passage stir in you?
3. What scares, confuses, or challenges you in this passage?
4. What delights you in this passage or fills you with hope?

Here we have Mary, a young girl from the north, who finds herself miraculously pregnant. She would be subject to suspicion and shame, given her unwed state.

And here we have her relative Elizabeth, many years older, also miraculously pregnant, wife of a priest. She had known shame for not being pregnant, for being without child at an advanced age. But now all that has changed. And here we have them meeting together, two women of two different generations. And in many ways their story itself is miraculous. No men are present. They alone are the literal bearers of the good news—to each other, to us, and to the whole world.

Let us first consider Elizabeth, Mary, and their remarkable relationship and encounter.

Elizabeth: The Older Generation

5. What gifts do you imagine that older generations bring to the table? Make a list.
6. Gathering up the responses from the devotional listening, ask one more question: What observations did the group make about Elizabeth?

Did you notice in verse 41 that Elizabeth is “filled with the Holy Spirit?” How do we hear this? What is it to be Spirit-filled? How would the readers of Luke have heard this?

Luke uses this phrase regularly throughout Acts (Acts 2:4; 4:8, 31; 7:55; 9:17; 13:9, 52). For Luke the filling of the spirit is an outpouring of the spirit of prophecy (see Micah 3:8 and Ezekiel 43:5). A person filled with the spirit speaks to others of the coming of the Messiah into the world and also acts in the light of this new reality. Luke only uses this designation in the first two chapters. He uses it to introduce us to those who first hear of the coming of Jesus as messiah (Luke 1:15, 41, 67, 80; 2:25–27).

So here is Elizabeth. She hears Mary’s greeting and her child (John the Baptist) leaps in her womb. Even as an unborn child, John has a word of prophecy for his mother and prepares the way. And in turn, his mother, Elizabeth, is “filled with the Holy Spirit” and speaks her own word of prophecy.

Did you notice that Elizabeth’s house is named as “the house of Zechariah?” Did you wonder who he is? To answer this question you need to put our story of the visitation in its literary context.

Exploring the Literary Context

READ LUKE 1:5–25.

In these verses you discover that Zechariah is a priest and that he and Elizabeth are from priestly lines and that both are “righteous,” according to the law (1:5–6).

The priests and their families were set apart and had a place of privilege. We learn this by reading the Book

of Leviticus and by studying the role of priesthood in the days of Jesus in any number of sources from that time. Given his status, Zechariah is the expected hero of this story. And sure enough, he receives an angelic visitation in the very manner of Abraham (see Genesis 18:1–15). Think about the similarity between these two stories. Like Abraham’s wife, Sarah, so also Zechariah’s wife, Elizabeth, is barren. Like Abraham, Zechariah has trouble believing that an elderly couple can have a child. But this time, the angel questions Zechariah’s doubt and issues a judgment of silence.

Think about this judgment and its effects. How do you feel when someone tells you that you cannot speak? What if that someone was an angelic visitor? How could you carry on in your role in life? Zechariah is temporarily unable to communicate to his people. But more significantly, he cannot do his job of praising God and leading his community to do the same.

Not so Elizabeth. She in fact takes over the job of praise in verse 25. She accepts her miraculous state without question and says: “This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.”

Elizabeth understands that her place in the community is changed and that her disgrace in not having a child is taken away. And most importantly, she proclaims this to be the Lord’s doing. She has taken over the work of praise. Actually as the one who sings praises, she is not only taking on the work of her husband, she is taking on the work of countless generations of women before her: Miriam and Deborah, Hannah and Judith. These women and more are singers of songs. This is a theme to which we will return.

What have we learned then about Elizabeth?

- She is filled with the Holy Spirit.
- She is from a priestly family, is married to a priest, and is righteous.
- She takes on the role as both a substitute priest and woman of declaring God’s praise.

Words of Blessings

With this in mind, let us return to our home passage and look once more at Elizabeth's response to Mary's greeting and to her own child's leaping.

With no hesitation at all, Elizabeth speaks a triple word of blessing. Elizabeth first blesses Mary—"Blessed are you among women" (Luke 1:42a).

What reasons do you think she has for such a blessing? Is she blessing Mary for coming for a visit? Such thoughts seem possible given verse 43.

There is a biblical tradition of blessing people. Two earlier such blessings are relevant here. Deborah in her song, proclaims "Most blessed of women be Jael" (Judges 5:24) because Jael has defeated the powerful leader of the enemy forces. And in (the Apocrypha book) Judith 13:18, Judith is similarly praised. Both women are declared blessed because, as biblical scholar Raymond Brown puts it in *The Birth of the Messiah*, "the physically weak (are) used to confound the strong."

When Elizabeth declares Mary blessed, Mary joins the ranks of her foremothers. The one who seems weak is most strong. Elizabeth sees this and invites us to see it as well.

Elizabeth next blesses the child in Mary's womb, Jesus—"and blessed is the fruit of your womb (1:42b)." In doing this, Elizabeth becomes the very first person in Luke's gospel to bless and praise the coming messiah. Hidden in the midst of this complex chapter, one can easily miss this momentous recognition and blessing.

And then there is Elizabeth's final blessing, "And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord" (1:45).

Elizabeth returns once more to bless Mary. The blessing of the mother surrounds the blessing of the child. This final blessing is startling on at least two counts. First, Elizabeth knows that Mary had been spoken to and that she had believed. This adds to the picture that Elizabeth, filled with the Spirit, is a prophet.

Second, the Greek word used for this third blessing is different from the first two. This blessing is *makaria* (μακαρία) the very same word used in Jesus' beatitudes.

When we know this, something remarkable happens to our hearing. Not only is Mary declared blessed for believing the truth of what she is told by God, so are all who also believe. Elizabeth is blessing Mary to be certain, but she is also blessing herself and us. Blessed is anyone, us included, who believes in the future fulfillment of the promises of God. (See "Abundant Blessing," p. 14.)

7. Now look back at the list you first made about gifts women of an older generation bring. How does this compare to the list of gifts that Elizabeth brings?

Mary: The Younger Generation

Make a list of the gifts that women of the younger generation bring.

8. Take some time to consider your usual picture of Mary. Where does your picture of Mary come from, and what in your eyes, are her most important characteristics?

Most folks know something of Mary from Christmas pageants and carols. We often picture Mary sitting by a manger with shepherds and wise men and cows and sheep around and the infant Jesus sitting on her lap. We know the songs.

"Once in royal David's city stood a lowly cattle shed, Where a mother laid her baby in a manger for his bed. Mary was that mother mild, Jesus Christ, her little child." (*ELW* 269)

Here is a time-honored picture of Mary as virgin, mother mild. Compare this picture to the portrait painted in Luke.

Begin with our visitation passage. We know the most about Mary by what Elizabeth tells us in her blessing. That in itself is significant. We often know a

great deal about people by what others say about them.

What do you notice about Mary? We are told she goes out in haste. Sounds like the younger generation to me! And she brings greetings. Then she remains quiet, almost humble, by implication, before her elder. In our passage we are not told much more.

Exploring the Literary Context

Once again, we need to look at the verses that come before.

We find there a double annunciation, that is, a double birth announcement. Following the birth announcement of John to Zechariah, the angel Gabriel makes a parallel announcement to Mary about Jesus (Luke 1:26–38). Gabriel begins,

“Greetings (literally, *rejoice*) favored one! The Lord is with you.”

Gabriel’s greeting to Mary parallels Mary’s to Elizabeth. We learn that Mary is a virgin, engaged to a man called Joseph. We learn that while Elizabeth comes from a priestly line, Mary comes from the house of David. And just as Elizabeth takes on a priestly role, Mary takes on a royal role. She, a mother, rather than a father, receives the angelic announcement. She is told her son will be a king, given the throne of David. She is given the task of naming the child Jesus. More than this, she will be overpowered, the birth miraculous, and the child not only holy but the Son of God.

We learn that she is perplexed, that she ponders. We learn that she is given notice not only of her own pregnancy and birth but also that of Elizabeth.

And we learn of her response:

“Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Her acceptance matches the response of many a prophet, from Moses to Isaiah and Jeremiah and more.

And then hearing of the pregnancy of her older relative, unbidden she goes with haste to be at her side.

9. Does this picture of Mary match your expected picture of Mary? How do the gifts Mary brings compare with your list of the gifts that women of the younger generation bring?

Elizabeth and Mary: Intergenerational Relationship

We have looked at Elizabeth and Mary separately, but perhaps the most significant aspect of the visitation is the effect of their coming together.

Look at their relationship. What do you notice?



Seek

renewal of your mind
and heart through...



10. Step back a moment and think about one or two cross-generational relationships that have been important to you. What is significant about those relationships? As a group make a list of the marks of those intergenerational relationships.
11. Turn your attention once more to our story of the visitation in Luke. What are the important marks of their relationship?

At first glance their encounter is not remarkable at all. A younger woman visits her older kin to exchange stories about their pregnant condition. But the visit entails a journey on the part of the younger woman. She shows a commitment to the relationship. (See “Forging the Path,” p. 10.)

Exploring the Literary Context

In the context of the biblical story, we are most shocked that we sense no rivalry between these two women. Think of Sarah and Hagar (Genesis 16 and 21) or of Rachel and Leah (Genesis 29–30). Of particular importance to this scene is the story of Hannah and her rival wife, Peninnah (1 Samuel 1).

These stories lead us to expect jealousy among mothers about their pregnancy and their children. But here in Luke we find the opposite. We find mutual support, greeting and blessing. In their lack of rivalry these two women model community for us.

Take some extra time to look at the full story of Hannah in 1 Samuel 1 and consider the many connections with the first chapter of Luke.

- We have three women who miraculously conceive.
- We have two priests who do not understand: Eli and Zechariah.
- We have two children, Samuel and John, who are dedicated to be Nazirites and will never drink wine nor strong drink. This is to be their vocation.
- But mostly we have these three women who stand at the beginning of two crucial junctures

in divine history. Hannah stands at the beginning of the unfolding of the promised line. Her story introduces us to the sacred story of King David and his heirs and to the prophets, beginning with Samuel who prepares the way for David. Meanwhile Mary and Elizabeth stand at that other starting point, the birth of Jesus—king and more—preceded by his herald John who also prepares the way for the messiah king.

Our wonderful multi-generation of woman suddenly expands. These two women, Elizabeth and Mary, in their encounter with each other reach back into their history and join with their ancient foremother, Hannah.

12. What women from history, biblical or other, are important for your understanding of significant relationships?
13. Return once more to the story of the visitation and the marks of the intergenerational relationship.
14. We have noted that it is marked by both greeting and blessing. Are there special ways we greet one another? In what ways do we bless one another?

In the story of the visitation, emphasis is put on the older generation blessing the younger. Such blessing emphasizes the push of blessing into the future. We saw this earlier with reference to blessing those who believe God’s word will be fulfilled. So at the same time that the encounter reaches deep into the past, it also presses us ever more into a future filled with hope and promise.

Wrapping Up

This brings me to my last point about this encounter between the generations. Even though the encounter is between two individual women, it is not at all a private affair. Their encounter is very much about the future of the whole world. These two women, marked by physi-

cal embrace, loud exclamation, and prenatal leaping, call us to an incarnate future of God. These children they carry are the ones who will carry us forward. This is how God works, through incarnation, through real people and their real relationships. This is how Christ is born. This is how hope is born.

Looking Back

15. Does this encounter between Mary and Elizabeth give birth to hope in you? In what ways?

Alyce McKenzie, in a wonderful blog called “Edgy Exegesis” (<http://tinyurl.com/n5z94vz>) says about this meeting between Mary and Elizabeth that it is “a scene in which no men are present,” “a scene in which rivalry between women is missing,” “a scene in which women are blessed,” and “a scene in which women are agents of liberation.” Did any of these aspects of this scene strike you in particular or would your group create another list?

16. Which aspect of this cross-cultural encounter between Mary and Elizabeth intersect with your lists of the marks of the intergenerational relationships in your past?
17. What would you like to pass on to future generations?

You might end your session by blessing one another, remembering a particular insight each of you shared.

Looking Forward

We are only halfway through the intergenerational encounter between Mary and Elizabeth. We have explored Elizabeth’s reactions, but we have yet to explore Mary’s. Mary sings a song. We know it as the *Magnificat*. It is a song for the ages that helps us to further explore and deepen our summer theme. In preparation, you might choose a version of the *Magnificat* to sing regularly until you meet again. 🌿

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LEADER GUIDE : SESSION 1

Feel free to begin with the prayer offered or one of your own choosing. Sing (or read) the hymn if you have time.

We begin with devotional reading and questions to help the group start with its own observations, questions, and insights. In the Book of Faith initiative, we have invited folks to consider four sorts of questions to

bring to a biblical story: devotional questions, historical questions, literary questions, and theological questions. I will refer to these different sorts of questions throughout the summer studies. You can learn more about these different ways of reading Scripture on the Book of Faith website: www.bookoffaith.org/biblemethods. See “Some Helpful Ways to Read the Bible” on the site.

Elizabeth: The Older Generation

Have paper and pencils ready so each participant can make a list of gifts that women of the older generation bring to the table.

You might remind the group that the author of the gospel (who we call Luke) also wrote the Book of Acts. They are a two-volume set. You could ask one person to read Luke 1:5–25. If you want a bit more drama, use Alyce McKenzie’s version online (see page 31), which dramatizes the reading.

Also note that both literary and historical questions rise to the surface. We want to know historically about priests, and we want to explore the literary context. In exploring the literary context, notice how the biblical circle keeps broadening. To help us understand Luke 1:39–45, we look at the earlier verses in Luke 1. To help us understand these verses, we look at Genesis, Leviticus, Isaiah, and more. Scripture is a web of cross-references, which is both a challenge and a joy.

Ask participants to make a list of what they discover about both Zechariah and Elizabeth in 1:5–25.

If you want to learn more about the priesthood, you might look at enterthebible.org and type in “priest.” This site is often very helpful for answering historical and other sorts of questions.

Note that the discussion of blessing takes us into the realm of historical, literary, and theological questions. If you want to learn more about blessing, you might look at enterthebible.org and type “blessing” in the search line. This site is often very helpful for answering historical and other sorts of questions.

Mary: The Younger Generation

Often our picture of Mary is greatly influenced by the religious tradition in which we were raised. You might want to ask the group if anyone was raised in a non-Lutheran tradition and consider what images of Mary they bring to the discussion.

Elizabeth and Mary: Intergenerational Relationship

The final question in this section brings us into the realm of theological questions. Here some background from Luther can be helpful. For Luther, the core of biblical truth is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. What is important and central and true about Scripture is whatever shows forth Christ. Luther says of Scripture: “Here you will find the swaddling clothes and the manger in which Christ lies.” (*Luther’s Works*, vol. 35: “Prefaces to the Old Testament,” p. 236.) For Luther, this means that at its core, the Bible points us, drives us, leads us to Jesus Christ. It is for this reason that it is often helpful to ask of any passage, “Does this passage give birth to hope in you? In what ways?” This is another way of asking a question about law and gospel. In so far as a passage makes demands on us and shows us our sin, we hear it as law. In so far as it proclaims the good news, we hear it as gospel. Most often we hear both law and gospel as we explore biblical passages together.

Looking Back

Finding a way to summarize what has been learned is often crucial to any learning event. As we share, we remember. And we often learn once again by listening to how others have received questions and insights.

Looking Forward

Several versions of Mary’s songs are in people’s memory banks. In the *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* you can find a number of hymns with either versions of or allusions to the *Magnificat* including 882, 573, 723, 251, 265 (especially verse 3), and 424 (see verse 2). 🌿

See resources to enhance this Bible study on the Gather website at www.gathermagazine.org.



MARY'S SONG: THE MAGNIFICAT

by Diane Jacobson

OF MANY GENERATIONS:
MARY, ELIZABETH, AND LYDIA

BIBLE STUDY : SESSION 2

Theme verse

“Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.” Isaiah 58:12.

1. Invite someone to read Luke 1:46–50 and ask one, two, or three of the following questions:

What do you notice?

What challenges you?

What gives you hope?

What is God up to?

2. When you finish discussing your opening questions, take out your pens and papers and make a gift list inspired by Mary's song.

What gifts does this song give to you?

What gifts would you like to pass on to the next generation?

Introduction

As we'll see in this session, much in our theme verse is reflected in Mary's song.

Digging In

Begin with prayer, a song, hymn, and a devotional reading of Luke 1:46–50.

God of all generations, bless us as we gather to study and sing. Ground us in the past and make us instruments of your Word into the future. This we ask in the name of Christ. Amen.

You might also choose one of the musical versions of Mary's *Magnificat* you have been singing the past month and sing it together.

Hymn

“My Soul Proclaims Your Greatness” (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 251)

Questions to Ponder

Remembering the Literary Context

Often when we hear the *Magnificat*, we think that Mary is responding directly to the announcement by the Angel Gabriel. But as you recall from last month, Mary sings her song in response to Elizabeth's unexpected greeting and blessing. Her song in many ways matches Elizabeth's song. They are singing to us inter-generationally by singing to each other.

When Mary and Elizabeth sing, they join three significant women in the Bible who teach us to sing in response to both victory and blessing. Miriam, Deborah, and Hannah all sing such songs, giving God the glory. In singing songs, these women become our teacher, our theologians, our guides. The poet, the singer, is the soul of the people.

In session one, we spent some time exploring the connections between the first chapter of Luke and the story of Hannah in 1 Samuel 1–2. These connections culminate in the songs that Mary and Hannah sing. Luke invites us to imagine that Mary, when faced with

Elizabeth's remarkable recognition, found no better words of response than the words of Hannah, that distant ancestress of the faith. It is as though Mary dug deep down into the tradition and lit upon that other story of unexpected and miraculous birth and joined herself to Hannah forever through the intertwining of their songs. Hers is a deep understanding of both sacred word and the ever broadening depth of intergenerational understanding.

Questions to Ponder

3. Invite the group to read Hannah's song in 1 Samuel 2:1–10.

What are the similarities and differences between the Hannah's song and the *Magnificat*?

What song from your past would you sing in response to a friend naming you as having a special calling?

How Shall We Sing a Biblical Song?

Before we dig into the details of Mary's song, let us consider one of the important ways that biblical poetry creates meaning. Rather than depending on rhymes as we tend to do in English, all biblical poetry is structured around the rhythm of the parallel line. Almost all lines have two parts, A and B. One scholar describes the rhythm as "A and what's more B." Sometimes the two parts echo one another. This is what we usually think of as parallel thoughts. And sometimes part B completes or extends the thoughts of part A. As we go through each verse in Mary's song, ask yourselves how the rhythm of each line works.

Sing the Song: Begin with Praise

Turn your attention to the opening three verses of Mary's song in Luke 1:46–56.

My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

For he has looked with favor on the lowliness of
his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me

blessed;

For the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.

The song begins with exultant praise, a pure outpouring of praise coming from soul and spirit. We feel the praise in the echoing rhythm of the first verse. It is no small matter that Mary responds to God's gifts with praise and that she, like Hannah before her, begins with very personal praise for what God has done for her, "the Mighty One has done great things for me." This is Mary's first lesson in discipleship. We are called to name the manifestations of grace in our lives and to give God the glory. Often we moderns tend to fall into the trap of thinking that the blessings in our lives are our own doing. We turn to God when we want things, but we can forget to praise God for doing great things in our lives. (See "Fullness of Joy," p. 22.)

Wisdom from Luther

Luther makes a great deal of this way of beginning in his exposition of Mary's song. He says that Mary "teaches us a two-fold lesson. First, everyone of us should pay attention to what God does for [us] rather than to all the works He does for others...(and) she [Mary] teaches us that everyone should strive to be foremost in praising God by showing forth the works He has done to him..." (pp. 318–319)

(All Wisdom from Luther quotations are taken from Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 21: "Sermon on the Mount" and the "Magnificat.")

Questions to Ponder

4. In what way have you praised God lately for what has occurred in your life? How does praising God shape you as a disciple?

Divine Strength, Human Lowliness

One further emphasis of the opening verses of Mary's song stands out. The strength and favor of God "the Mighty One" comes in human lowliness, in human weakness. People in Scripture are so often called when they are young, weak, or broken like Hannah. One thinks of Jeremiah, David, Moses, and scores of other biblical leaders who are oddly strongest at their weakest point. Mary's line is thus most striking—he has "looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant." Think together about what this means and how it foreshadows the life and death of Mary's son. God's greatest strength will ultimately be made manifest on a cross. Mary's song of praise is not only personal, it is profoundly deep.

This insight is sealed by the completion of the parallel line, "Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed." Mary says this in the context of being blessed by Elizabeth.

She adds to her own blessing by saying that what will elicit blessing from future generations is not only that she carries the Messiah and believes in his promised future as Elizabeth proclaimed, but also that the Lord has favored her lowliness. Mary's standing as the one who represents the lowly is the very reality that elicits her ties to many, indeed to all generations.

Wisdom from Luther

This, therefore is what Mary means: "God has regarded me, a poor, despised, and lowly maiden, though He might have found a rich, renowned, noble, and mighty queen... (thus) I must acknowledge it all to be pure grace and goodness and not at all my merit or worthiness." (p. 314)

Question to Ponder

5. Over the years many women in the church have thought themselves

to be insignificant, not worth attending to. How might Mary's words address and even reorient this perception?

Sing the Song: To and For the World

Mary's song begins with her personal experience of grace, but it does not stay there. Her song moves out from her own experience into the community, to describe the particular ways of God in the world. One might say that she moves from personal call to proclamation of God's mission to and for the world. Mary begins the middle of her song by proclaiming:

His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.

Which is to say that Mary begins her proclamation of God's public work by singing of God's never-ending mercy. God ever looks on the world with compassion.

Wisdom from Luther

Luther says "She begins with the highest and greatest thing." (332)

God's mercy is extended to those who fear him. We are sometimes put off by the word *fear*, but the idea is central to both biblical and Lutheran notions of our relation to God. To fear God is to love God, to stand in awe of God, to obey God, and to know God's power as well as God's grace. The grace of the first half of the verse is literally extended "from generation to generation." For Mary, grace is the foundation of all generations. (See "You Are Accepted," p. 26.)

And in Mary's song, grace is made manifest in a most astonishing fashion, for her song now moves to praise the Lord's capacity for profound reversal:

He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their

thrones,

and lifted up the lowly;
He has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.

Mary's song has social punch. The world is not what it seems. God's passion for justice has and will mark the world. Mary has seen the reality of God's favor operative in her own life. But God's work is much bigger than her own experience. Mary understands God to have promised that all reality is or shall be marked with the same capacity for divine intervention and reversal. She does not know yet how this will come about, but the strength of her faith is such that she trusts in God's promise for more than herself.

Wisdom from Luther

Luther speaks of six works of God about which Mary sings:

1. Mercy (332);
2. Breaking spiritual pride (339);
3. Putting down the mighty (343);
4. Exalting the lowly (345);
5. Filling the hungry with good things (345); and
6. Sending the rich away empty. (345)

Questions to Ponder

6. Look again at our theme verse, Isaiah 58:12. How do the middle verses of Mary's song give content to the notion of being a "repairer of the breach?"
7. You might make a list of the reversals you see in Mary's song and compare them to Luther's list. What reversals might you add if you were singing this song?

Questions to Ponder

8. How do you suppose that a prince might respond to Mary's proclamation

of reversal? How do we who have so many privileges respond?

Wisdom from Luther

Ironically, Luther dedicated his essay on the *Magnificat* "to his Serene Highness, Prince John Frederick, Duke of Saxony..., my Gracious Lord and Patron" (297)

Sing the Song: Remembering the Promise Made to Past Generations

Look now at the last verses that Mary sings.

God has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
Abraham and to his descendants forever.

Mary points us back to God's ancient promise and asks that we engage in the profound theological activity of remembering. Remembering is the very activity that forms us in the faith from generation to generation. Think about this! When we remember, we tell stories from our past that are central to understanding not only who we have been but also who we are and who we wish to become. We are literally re-membering, forming ourselves as a community. (See "Thorns of Bitterness," p. 12.)

Remembering the Literary Context

To get the full impact of this remembering to which Mary calls us, look once again at the ending of the companion song that Hannah sang.

In 1 Samuel 2:10, Hannah points us forward:
The LORD will judge the ends of the earth;
he will give strength to his king,
and exalt the power of his anointed, his messiah.

In many ways, this ending of Hannah's song is its most remarkable feature. Hannah ends with a promise

that God will give strength and power to his king, his “messiah.” In Hebrew the word “messiah” means, the “anointed one.” Think about this! Hannah, just as Mary will do in the distant future, has just sung about the bows of the mighty being broken and the poor being raised from the dust. Hannah has proclaimed that one does not prevail by might, and then she sings of the Lord exalting the power of his king. How can one both break the mighty and exalt the king? The tradition continually struggles with this paradox. When we read Hannah’s song as Christians, this promise points us to a messianic king whose crown is a crown of thorns and whose throne is a cross. So the end of Hannah’s song points us forward.

And then, a thousand years after Hannah, Mary asks us to remember this very promise. Mary looks back to God’s promises to her people and sings of God’s relationship to Israel in remarkable ways. She names the past as touched and owned by God. She names Israel as God’s servant, or more precisely in the Greek, as God’s child.

Mary invites us to remember that God always remembers past promises. God remembers by reason of God’s own divine and everlasting mercy. This is the very same mercy shown “from generation to generation.” Precisely because God is merciful, God’s promise to Israel is steadfast and eternal.

That is, this promise is dependent solely on God’s essential character--God’s tendency towards mercy. So

Wisdom from Luther

For God has not helped Israel on account of their merits, but on account of His own promise.” (352)

in recalling the promise of the past, Mary also points us forward to the fulfillment of God’s promise in Christ.

Questions to Ponder

9. **Mary asks us to remember. What stories do you tell when you are asked to remember God’s promise and God’s mercy? Do you tell personal stories? Do you tell stories from your congregation or community? Do you tell biblical stories? Turn to your neighbor and tell one such story.**

Sing the Song from Generation to Generation

It’s time to bring our thoughts together. In her song Mary truly becomes our teacher, theologian, and guide. Her song bestows on us a profound lesson in discipleship. From Mary we learn to begin with praise. From Mary we learn to see power in weakness. From Mary we learn to see our own lives within the larger picture of God’s work in the world. From Mary we learn to begin with God’s grace. From Mary we learn of God’s passion for justice. From Mary we learn to see all things in the light of God’s promise. And from Mary we learn how to gather these things together and sing them from generation to generation.

Wisdom from Luther

Luther says of Mary’s song that in it “The tender mother of Christ...teaches us, with her words and by the example of her experience, how to know, love, and praise God.” (301)

He speaks of a threefold purpose of Mary’s song “for the strengthening of our faith, for the comforting of all those of low degree, and for the terrifying of all the mighty ones of earth.”

He says “We are to let the hymn serve this threefold purpose; for she sang it not for herself alone but for us all, to sing it after her.” (306)

Questions to Ponder

10. **Take out your initial gift lists of what Mary’s song gives to you and the gifts you would like to pass on. What would you add now to your lists? What most stands out for you?**

Broadening the Context: Mary's Journey in Luke

In her song, Mary has pointed us to a number of aspects of discipleship. But a final step in exploring Mary's song is broadening the context once more. Mary becomes our teacher not only in what she sings but also in how she acts.

In his fuller portrait of Mary throughout his gospel, Luke helps us to understand that gradually, through pondering in her heart, Mary comes to accept the inevitable and unrelenting direction of her son's mission. She ponders Gabriel's greeting when she first hears the news of the son she is carrying (1:29). She ponders as well the angelic words reported to her by the shepherds at the manger (2:19).

And later, when the 12-year-old Jesus makes his own way to the temple to sit among the teachers, Mary also responds to her son's words that he must be in his "Father's house" by treasuring them in her heart (2:51).

And even before that time, at the dedication of her son in the temple, Mary is met by Simeon who seals his blessing with these haunting words,

This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul also. (Luke 2:34–35)

In time Mary sheds her role as mother, gives up her own claim on her child's future, and becomes his disciple. Pope Paul IV, like many before and since, called Mary "the first and most perfect of Christ's disciples."

Mary comes to see her own son as the one whom she, as others, must follow. On the cross, her son becomes her savior, and there she must accept the piercing of the sword in her soul. The very same "soul" that magnifies the Lord at the beginning of her song, rejoicing in the gift of her child, must willingly give that child into a dark future for the sake of the world that God loves.

Finally we picture Mary, not as Luke leaves her, but as John has her, standing at the foot of the cross (John 19:25).

Questions to Ponder

11. **Mary's song is completed when the whole story of her life as a disciple surrounds it. What final lessons might you add to your gift list, given the fullness of Mary's life?**

To wrap up this session, take up Mary's song and read it or sing it one more time.

Looking Forward

In our final summer session we will turn from Elizabeth and Mary to another gathering of women in the New Testament led by Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. Spend some time in the next weeks reading and living with Acts 16:11–15. Put it in the context of all of Acts 16. And just for fun, find some favorite purple object or piece of clothing to live with for the month and wear it or bring it to the next session. 🌸

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MARY'S SONG: THE MAGNIFICAT

by Diane Jacobson

OF MANY GENERATIONS:
MARY, ELIZABETH, AND LYDIA

LEADER GUIDE : SESSION 2

Digging In

As we did last month, we begin with devotional questions. You might want to look again at the suggestions made then concerning the four sorts of questions we can bring to a biblical passage.

Questions to Ponder

One way to invite the group to read Hannah's song and compare it to Mary's is to read them together as a litany. In the online helps you will find a handout entitled Hannah's Song and Mary's Song: A Litany.

Remembering the Literary Context and How Shall We Sing a Biblical Song?

Our literary reading of Mary's song invites us to consider two questions: What is the literary context, and how do we read biblical poetry. Many folks have written about how biblical poetry works. The scholar who described the rhythm as "A and what's more B" is James Kugel in *The Idea of Biblical Poetry*, (New Haven: Yale, 1981). A fine accessible summary of parallelism as "echoing" or "extending" can be found in Rolf and Karl Jacobson's *Invitation to the Psalms: A Reader's Guide for Discovery and Engagement*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013).

In the online helps you will find a handout entitled "Two Poetically Balanced Looks at the NRSV of Mary's Song" that will help you read Mary's Song as poetry.

Sing the Song: Begin with Praise

As you work your way through Mary's song, you might want to make room for actual singing. You could regularly pause and ask the gathered women what song

each part reminds them of. Or you could bring some songs to sing. Somehow we think differently when we sing together. And such activity serves as a continual reminder that Mary's Song is just that!

Wisdom from Luther

We began this session asking devotional and literary questions. Throughout this session we will encounter wisdom from Luther's essay on the *Magnificat*. Luther invites us into thinking theologically about Mary's Song. And what we encounter through Luther's readings are some very central convictions about how God works in our lives. Two of the central ideas we will encounter are these:

Luther begins with a theology of grace. As Luther reads the Bible, he becomes convinced that God comes first to us. We do not have to work or earn our way to God, in fact we cannot come to God by doing anything. Salvation is an unearned gift of grace from God for Jesus' sake.

Luther also speaks of a central theology of the cross. For Luther, understanding that God works through the cross for our salvation is the key to understanding who God is and how God works with us and for us. Luther believes that Scripture, taken as a whole, points us to a God who works through suffering rather than through glory. God is revealed most truly to us through suffering in the world in ways that lead us inevitably to the cross of Jesus.

Remembering and Broadening the Literary Context

One could look in much greater detail at the similarities between the stories of Hannah and Mary. Both stories stand at the beginning of the birth of prophets and

kings. They are a thousand years apart. A great date to remember is that David was king in 1000 B.C. When you look at the story of Hannah, you see in her an irrepressible desire for a son. And then she gives birth to Samuel. And what does she do? She brings her son Samuel to the house of the Lord and there she gives him into the Lord's service.

She says:

“For this child I prayed, and the LORD has granted me the petition

that I made to him. Therefore I have lent him to the LORD; as long as he lives, he is given to the LORD.”
(1 Samuel 1:27-28)

Hannah's response is stunning. She recognizes a truth about her calling. Much as she wanted this child, much as she felt incomplete without him, her wish was not, finally, for her own self-fulfillment. She wished for this child so that her child might fulfill his own divine calling. She was acutely aware that all children finally belong more to God than they do to us. In this way she is also a foremother of Mary in her own journey of giving her son back to God.

Perhaps this is yet another way that Hannah and Mary serve as models for us in the church. Are we, like our foremothers, able to see our callings as directed outward, away from ourselves, in service to God and to God's people?



LYDIA

by Diane Jacobson

OF MANY GENERATIONS:
MARY, ELIZABETH, AND LYDIA

BIBLE STUDY : SESSION 3

Theme verse

Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to live in. Isaiah 58:12

Introduction

Our final story takes us to a different book with its own story of raising up the foundations of many generations. In Acts 16:11–15 we meet both Lydia and the group of women with whom she gathers down by the river as well as Paul and his companion who encounter them there.

Digging In

Once again we gather as a company of women committed, as we have been saying as a Book of Faith church, to opening Scripture together and joining the conversation. This session's opening prayer reflects this commitment.

God of Grace, this day we come to the study of your word.

May we come prayerfully asking that the Holy Spirit might guide our study and that Christ might be among us.

May we come humbly, asking for the gift of faith and ever mindful of our own capacity for sin and self-deceit.

May we come mindfully, bringing to our study the

gifts of reason, the tools of scholarship, and the insights of others.

May we come attentively, reading Scripture carefully and closely.

May we come expectantly, listening for the voice of God working through the text to inspire, shape, and enliven us individually and as a community of faith, letting our own stories interact with the stories of the Bible.

May we be deeply enriched by our conversations as we engage and are engaged by the Bible again and again. And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with us all as we walk together with the Spirit on the journey to which God is calling us.

This we ask in the name of Christ. Amen.

Hymn

“Shall We Gather by the River?” (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 423)

Questions to Ponder

1. Our first slightly altered set of questions center around reading the text in Acts devotionally.
 - What word or phrase strikes you, and where does it take you?
 - What images or stories or memories come to mind?
 - What confuses or challenges you?
 - What touched your heart with hope or fear?
2. As you think about the two major characters in our story, Lydia and Paul, consider what gifts they give each other. Make a list of gifts you have given or received that are like the gifts they give to each other.

Exploring the Historical Context

As we read the story about Paul and Lydia, certain details invite us to an awareness that the action is happening at a particular time and place in history. We might well be asking what insights from history would be helpful to know in order to hear, read, study, or understand our passage more accurately.

Historical Exercise

Rather than simply reading about the historical context, let's begin by thinking about what we would like to know. To help us do this, here is a fun exercise. Take out your pencil and your Bible and turn to Acts 16:11–15. Pretend you are in charge of telling a scholar where you would like him or her to put notes in an upcoming study Bible. Now put an asterisk wherever you would want a note. Compare notes and see if you wanted to know the same or different things. Why do you want to know these things?

Here are some questions you might have asked with some answers or some directions about where to find better answers.

Q. Where is Philippi and what kind of city was it?

Did you put an asterisk at verse 12 which indicates that our story takes place in “Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony?” If you look at a map you discover that Philippi was a port city at the northern tip of the Aegean Sea in Macedonia. Perhaps your study note would tell you other interesting facts. Philippi was a very cosmopolitan colonized Roman town. The 15,000 residents included lots of foreigners and many Romans because it was one of the trade centers of the time.

One scholar broke down the population as one-third Roman, two-thirds locals and immigrants. Of those, 3 percent were upper class, 20 percent slaves, and 20 percent poor. Within the city walls were many places of worship—temples to a great variety of gods.

The shops were full of luxury items for the wealthy.

Q. What about Thyatira?

You probably noticed that Lydia was not from Philippi. She came from the south, about 50 kilometers (31 miles) east of the Aegean Sea (modern Turkey), from the trade city called Thyatira.

Thyatira was a Greek influenced Asian city that had also been a Roman colony for 150 years. Like Philippi, Thyatira was urban, a prosperous city of trade and industry. It was the center of the purple dye industry, and the region as a whole was called Lydia.

Purple cloth was a very valuable material in the ancient world. The rich and famous would have worn togas trimmed with purple. Isn't it interesting that Lydia deals in purple cloth?

Just for fun: Purple Pause

Pause at this point and share the purple objects or clothing folks brought with them. What does the color purple mean to each person present and why? Share your stories.

Q. What do we know about status of women and foreigners in Philippi during the time of Paul?

Some historical questions cannot be answered by looking at a map. We might want to know more about social realities in the distant past. The status of women and foreigners in the Roman Empire in a trade town are two of those social realities about which we know much and speculate more.

Roman women were normally under the authority of a man—her father, husband, or brother. So Lydia seems unusual. Perhaps she was divorced or widowed. Perhaps she was a freed slave. We know there were lots of women in clothes production. So how can we begin to imagine her life? (See, “Especially the Ordinary,” p. 18.)

And what was thought about foreigners? What was

the attitude toward non-Roman immigrants? In the story after Lydia, Paul and his friends were thought of as trouble-making Jews disturbing the city and interrupting business (Acts 16:20–22).

Questions to Ponder

3. Consider the places where you live. How are they like or unlike the ancient cities of Philippi or Thyatira? What are the various attitudes toward women and foreigners? How do the differences and similarities affect your reading of the story?

Exploring the Literary Context, Setting, and Characters

As we discovered in our first two sessions, we understand a story more fully when we see it in its place in the larger story. You might want to tell one another what you know about the Book of Acts. Our story takes place on the second of Paul's missionary journeys found in Acts 15:40-18:23. The story about Paul's encounter with Lydia is matched right afterward with a story about his encounter with a possessed slave girl and his eventual imprisonment with Silas (Acts 16:16-40) which ends with the only other reference to Lydia:

After leaving the prison they went to Lydia's home; and when they had seen and encouraged the brothers and sisters there, they departed. We will return to this reference later.

A wonderful way to explore any biblical story is to consider what we are told about when and where things happen. What settings are we asked to imagine?

Literary Exercises

Take out your pencil and your copy of Acts 16:11-15 once again. Beginning with verse 13, underline any indications of time and place.

The one time indication in the story is in verse 13 where we are told that all the action takes place on the Sabbath. What happens when you hear this? Perhaps a number of things. We now listen with an ear to a

Jewish setting. We know that sabbath is a day set apart, a day of prayer and worship rather than work. We imagine that Paul who is a Jew is looking for a place to worship because he always keeps the sabbath. So where do you imagine he would look for such a place?

Perhaps other ideas about sabbath from various parts of the Bible also ring in our ears. Sabbath invites us to think about equality—everyone from land and animals to rulers and servants ceases from work. Sabbath throughout Scripture invites us to consider God's tendency toward mercy and healing. Sabbath helps to form community identity.

Question to Ponder

4. How does sabbath function in your life and the life of your community? How and where do you look for a place of worship when you are traveling?

Back to our exercise

What were the indications of place that you marked? Three particular places stand out. First, in verse 13, Paul with his companions Silas and Timothy begin by going through the gate. Second, they go down to the river "where we supposed there was a place of prayer." And third, in verse 15, they are invited by Lydia to her home. Each of these three places is worthy of consideration and conversation.

The Gate

5. Picture a city gate. What is its purpose? Does it protect and defend? Does it keep out or keep in? Does it invite? Is it a meeting place?

Closed gates keep some people out and some people in. Inside the gate is the city, civilization, and safety. Think of the image of gated communities.

For Paul and his friends, the gate is open. They begin by walking through the gate.

When you step through an open gate, a new world

of possibilities appears. Going outside the gate involves risk. But it also opens us up to the future and new possibilities. When the gate is open, our eyes see, our ears hear, and our mouths speak.

The River

6. **What goes on at a river? We are told that the women are gathered there. We know without being told that generations of women have gathered by rivers. We picture them washing clothes, forming community, passing on wisdom from mother to daughter and older residents to newcomers, "raising up the foundations of many generations."**

Have you ever noticed that all through Scripture women are found by the water? Women gather at wells like Rebekah (Genesis 24) and Zipporah (Exodus 2) and the Samaritan woman (John 4). Women are found by rivers like Moses' mother and Pharaoh's daughter (Exodus 2). And women like Miriam sing victory songs by the sea (Exodus 15). When Miriam dies (Numbers 20), the water dries up! So we are not surprised when Paul finds women gathered by the river.

Think about the river in our story. The women are gathered outside the safety of the city gate. Though we can only imagine why they are there, Paul supposed this gathering place to be a place of prayer. That is, Paul supposed God was already there. Here was a mission field where people were already praying, where they were already gathered in community, where they already knew something of God.

What happens next at the river? The river becomes the place of gospel proclamation and conversation. The words are spoken and heard and discussed. The conversation between Paul and Lydia blossoms and bears fruit beside this river. New seeds are planted, and they are watered beside this river. The place of gathering and prayer is transformed by God's word.

And then the river becomes the place of baptism. This place outside the gate now becomes the fountain

of faith and community. The outside waters become the source of life. Water is transformed by the Spirit to effect the rebirth of Lydia and her household.

They die with Christ to be raised to new life, and Paul and Timothy and Lydia and her household are joined together in a new community: rich and poor, male and female, Jew and Gentile. Insiders become outsiders, and outsiders become insiders. All become one in this baptism into Christ.

But we have yet one more place.

The Home

The home is the final place of our story. In verse 15, Lydia invites Paul and his companions to stay at her home. Now here is a place that generations of women know intimately. Think about the home. The home is where we establish families and nurture children. The home is the place of hospitality and fellowship to which people are invited. Is the home also a place where we provide rest for the weary, clothes for the naked, and food for the hungry?

We are reminded of all of the first gatherings in the early church. They all took place in homes. The home was the place of fellowship—the fellowship of the gathered and the fellowship of the table. The home is where they fed each other in body and in soul, and where, in turn, they were fed by Christ. And we know that Lydia's home becomes such a place because after Paul and Silas leave prison, they went to Lydia's home where they knew they would find their brothers and sisters, their fellow Christians, gathered there (Acts 16:40).

Exercise and Questions to Ponder

7. **Divide into small groups. Think of each of these three places: the gate, the river, and the home. Talk about these places in your life. Tell stories. Think of where these places are found in the Bible, and why are they important. What is their symbolic value? Tell stories.**

8. Think about these places in your congregations and communities. Tell stories. How does thinking about these places help to deepen your reading of the story of Lydia and Paul?

Exploring the Characters

We are not yet done with literary questions. All biblical stories, all stories really, center on people. In our story, we are invited to consider Paul and Lydia. So let's do just that.

Paul

9. Think about what Paul does and says. What are his main characteristics?

Paul begins by venturing outside the gate, outside the city. He doesn't go alone. He has Timothy and Silas with him. He actually speaks with women; many men would probably not bother with that. He doesn't worry about the taboos of men not speaking with women. He doesn't go to the elite leaders of the city.

Paul was thinking only of what he was called to do. He was called to share the gospel of Jesus Christ. What better place to go than to those women gathered to pray, ripe for the message. Paul proclaims the gospel. We don't know if he preached or had a conversation. We do not even have his words. What we know is that though Paul speaks to Lydia, the Lord opens her heart. The Lord is the subject of the action, calling both the one who is speaking and the one who is listening. Paul became God's instrument of proclamation.

Paul begins by going outside the gate, but he ends inside the home. Going to Lydia's home was perhaps as great a risk as leaving the gate in the first place. She was a woman unattached to a man, and she was a foreigner. Paul's openness to receive Lydia's invitation and her willingness to extend it creates this new community.

Lydia

10. And what of Lydia? Think about what she does and says. What are her main characteristics?

Lydia is complicated. As a woman and a foreigner, she stands outside the center of power, outside the gates. She is associated with her work—a dealer in purple cloth.

Some have speculated that Lydia might have been a dye worker, her hands stained with purple dye. That's possible. But she seems to own her own home. So most likely she was a wealthy business woman, and, given her independence, quite possibly a widow. As a wealthy trader and head of a household, she would have had power and substance. So Lydia was both an outsider and an insider.

What else do we know of Lydia? We know she gathered with the women at the river. She was part of a community. We learn that she was a worshiper of God. Quite possibly she was one of the many Gentiles already attracted to Judaism. And we learn that Lydia hears. She has her heart opened by God through Paul. And then she is baptized. These things we learn create a picture that is remarkably powerful. A wealthy independent woman who is faithful, open, willing to be changed, and eager to hear what God is calling her to do.

After her baptism, Lydia has voice. She is the only one whose words we hear in the story: "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home."

Having had her heart opened, having been baptized, Lydia finds it insufficient only to receive. She had been given a gift, and so she offers a gift in return: hospitality.

Lydia, like Paul, is open to risk. She lets herself be formed by the transforming reality of God's saving word. And in the end, she asks to be judged not by her status nor by her wealth nor by her gender, but only by her faithfulness to the Lord. Such faithfulness and hospitality leads in turn to the transforming of all future generations. Her home in Philippi becomes the heart of the Philippian church to whom Paul later writes:

“I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now” (Philippians 1:3–4).

Questions to Ponder

11. **Imagine yourselves as Paul or Lydia. How do they feel? What might they be thinking? In what ways are you like or unlike either one? Who are the Pauls and Lydias in your life? Return to your gift list. Would you expand or change the gifts Paul and Lydia give to one another? And what of your own gifts?**

Wrapping Up

Re-read our theme verse for this summer study—Isaiah 58:12.

We have looked together at two stories of encoun-

ter that have served to raise up the foundations of countless generations. Their encounters with each other becomes an invitation to all of us. How shall we become those who raise up the foundations of many generations? What breaches shall we repair, what streets restore together?

12. **Looking back at the stories and songs of Mary and Elizabeth and the story of Lydia and Paul, what three things stand out that might encourage us to follow their examples? Gather your thoughts together and form them into one final blessing and prayer. 🌿**

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Leader Guide

Of Many Generations: Mary, Elizabeth, and Lydia

Session 3 Lydia

Digging In

Feel free to begin with the prayer offered in the magazine or one of your own choosing.

For this session we will move very intentionally through three of the four ways of asking questions commended by the Book of Faith Initiative. Note again that you can learn more about these different ways of reading Scripture at: www.bookoffaith.org/biblemethods.html

Make certain everyone has a copy of the passage, paper for making a wish list, and a pen or pencil. A good handout can be found online at gathermagazine.org, click on 2014 summer study. You can begin the devotional reading with verse 11 or 13.

Exploring the Historical Context

You might remind the group that the author of the Gospel of Luke (the beginning of which we have been looking at in our first two sessions) also wrote the Book of Acts. You can find many good books introducing you to Acts. For our passage, a particularly good source, which stands behind a good deal in this session, is Richard S. Ascough's book, *Lydia: Paul's Cosmopolitan Hostess* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2009). Ascough speaks a great deal about the culture of the first century Roman Empire. He talks about it being a collectivist culture rather than an individualist like ours. It was also a culture in which folks worried a great deal about their honor and not being shamed.

Philippi and Thyatira

You can find helpful maps in various places. You can look at enterthebible.org or at Wikipedia where you can find fuller descriptions and pictures.

Purple Pause

Some folks might be influenced by books, others by traditions. Some might think of purple as the color of royalty or the color worn by bishops. On the other hand, for many of us in the church purple is the color of Lent. The color purple reminds us that our king is a suffering king. Royalty in the church wears a crown of thorns.

The Status of Women

Ascough has a good deal to say about the status of women in the Roman Empire. They were definitely not liberated! Interestingly, Emperor Augustus passed a law that inadvertently made it possible for some women to have more money and independence. Hence Lydia's status.

Exploring the Literary Context, Setting, and Characters

The exercises, observations, and questions that are explored in this section come from reading our story as literature and paying close attention to how the text is written. When we look at details, characters, and themes, and when we compare and contrast these with our own understanding and experience of life, we often discover new meanings. Online at gathermagazine.org you will find an additional handout "Tips for Reading Biblical Narrative" that can offer some background on this kind of reading.

Context

When you read Acts, you notice that Luke describes three missionary journeys taken by Paul. Our story

takes place during the second missionary journey. You can find out more about these journeys by exploring sites on the web such as Maps of Pauls missionary journeys at <http://tinyurl.com/jet9o>.

A fun additional activity to do if you have time is to compare the story of Paul's encounter with Lydia with a story about his encounter with a possessed slave-girl that follows in Acts 16:16-24. What details draw these two stories together? What is the effect of reading them as a matched set?

Settings Exercise

When people are underlining places, they might also note the mention in verse 14 of "the city of Thyatira." This is indeed a place, but not a place where the action of our story happens.

Paul and Lydia

There are many exciting ways to capture the various characters in a story. You can notice who has name, voice, and action. These are most often the central characters. You can notice what they say and what is said about them and by whom. Pay attention to how you know things. Sometimes folks have a good time and learn a good deal by acting out a scene, or better yet, having several groups act it out and then comparing what was emphasized. Have fun with these characters!

Wrapping Up

A fine way to end is to note at least one insight from each participant and to offer personal prayers and blessings.