

Mic. 5:2–5a
Luke 1:46b–55
Heb. 10:5–10
Luke 1:39–45,
(46–55)

Rejoicing in God

Goal for the Session *Children will celebrate the joyful news of Jesus' coming shared by Mary and Elizabeth and rejoice with them.*

■ P R E P A R I N G F O R T H E S E S S I O N

Focus on Luke 1:39–45 (46–55)

WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” Stephen A. Cooper

In the encounter of Mary and Elizabeth, Elizabeth becomes the first human witness to the good news the angel brought Mary in the annunciation (1:26–38). Both women are pregnant with significance, for between them they bear the messenger and the message. Through narrative, speech, and song of praise the characters in this lection prophetically proclaim the gospel: God is working salvation for us in Jesus. The meeting between these two women is about the confirmation of hope, the fulfillment of a promise. The rest of the gospel makes explicit the means and nature of that fulfillment through Jesus' teachings, parables, healings, death, and resurrection.

WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” Robert Redman

The Magnificat rounds off this celebration of God's goodness by recalling God's covenant faithfulness to Israel (v. 55). The covenant of God with God's people is the golden thread that binds together the Old Testament and the New Testament, the old Israel and the new Israel: “I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people” (Lev. 26:12). The best hope of the Christian in every age finds its voice in Mary's song, and it has rested securely on this: God is good, and God keeps promises.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” Michael S. Bennett

The development of hope within community takes time. How many Marys and Elizabeths (or Zechariahs and Josephs) might there be sitting in the pews, awaiting an opportunity to connect more deeply with the people around them? How many long to connect their small story with the larger stories of God? How might our churches encourage the cycle of recognition and response that widens the reach of the Holy Spirit? Much can be learned from sitting quietly with our brothers and sisters as the world pushes us relentlessly toward a louder, larger, and ever more expensive December 25.

NOW WHAT is God's word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,” Charles L. Campbell

Mary's song, her Magnificat, gives voice to this subversive incarnation that she and Elizabeth embody. Indeed, the fact that Mary sings the Magnificat is itself odd and subversive. This young, unwed, pregnant woman—a thoroughly marginal person in her culture—proclaims one of the most important prophetic words in Scripture. The image is extraordinary, even comical: young, pregnant Mary gives voice to a song for the ages, a song that invites us beyond our realistic expectations and our numb imaginations. She herself seems amazed at what has happened, as her opening words indicate. And the rest of her song announces the larger implications of the upside-down world God has inaugurated.

FOCUS SCRIPTURE

**Luke 1:39–45
(46–55)**

Focus on Your Teaching

By now, the airwaves and mall sound systems inundate us with carols seeking to loose our pocket strings for the duly advertised perfect Christmas gift(s). But what “song” might touch more deeply the hearts and wills of your group members—and your own—in Advent’s season of waiting? Difficult economic times and not-always-perfect relationships might seem to relegate this season’s promises to the margins. Today’s session offers a way for participants to reclaim those promises from words of blessing and a song of hope.

Help me to hear, and help me to sing, the gracious possibilities and transformations embodied by Mary and Elizabeth. Amen.

YOU WILL NEED

- Bibles
- Advent wreath and four candles
- table and cloth
- large gift-wrapped box, with a slot cut into the top for sliding notecards through
- pens
- notecards
- map of first-century Israel and Judah
- copies of Resource Sheet 1
- copies of Resource Sheet 2
- copies of Resource Sheet 1 for December 30, 2018

For Responding

- option 2: Resource Sheet 1
- option 3: songbooks or hymnals with version of “Magnificat”

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

In advance of the session, cover a table with a cloth. Place the Advent wreath on top. Place the gift-wrapped box alongside the wreath.

Welcome adults and introduce any guests or visitors.

Distribute notecards and pens. Invite participants to identify something for which they have waited a long time that would be cause for celebration, or a promise made to them (or by them) whose keeping would bring joy. Write that on the notecard. Affirm that these will be read aloud later, if that might affect what individuals write.

When individuals finish their notecards, have them place the cards in the gift box. As they do so, light the four Advent candles.

Lift the gift box before the group. Invite silent reflection on these questions (pause after each question):

- ✠ What, or who, gives you hope that this wait will be over or this promise will be fulfilled?
- ✠ In what ways might you celebrate when that happens?

Have the group read in unison Psalm 130:5–6 as a prayer of invocation.

EXPLORING

Have a volunteer read the “What?” excerpt on Resource Sheet 1 aloud to the group. Invite participants to identify what they know of Mary and Elizabeth by way of background for what unfolds here. Ask for two volunteers to read Luke 1:39–45: one will read the words spoken by Elizabeth; one will read the narration of the episode. Invite general comments and questions about this portion of the passage.

Call attention to the map of the area and trace the journey Mary made from Nazareth to Bethlehem. If there is not a distance measure on the map, tell participants that it is approximately 80 miles distance, a four-day walk in that time. Read Luke 1:26–38 and lead a brief discussion about possible reasons Mary had for visiting Elizabeth. Possible answers may include the following:

- ✧ Both women were being talked about publicly and Mary sought company.
- ✧ Mary wanted confirmation of what the angel Gabriel told her.

Have participants tell the three blessings that Elizabeth pronounces upon Mary. As you do so, explain that family blessings usually were pronounced by the father or elder male of the family—while here, Elizabeth blesses Mary (keeping in mind that Luke ends chapter 1 with a blessing pronounced by Elizabeth’s husband, Zechariah).

Read Luke 1:46–56. Draw attention to the two distinct narratives contained in Luke 1:39–55. Form two groups. Assign one group 1:39–45 and the other 1:46–55. Have each group discuss and prepare a summary of the purpose(s) behind their verse sets. Offer the summaries of purposes and discuss how the two passages relate to each other.

Luke is filled with characters and stories that reflect concern for those pushed to the margins of society as well as stunning reversals (shepherds, rich man and Lazarus, Pharisee and publican, Beatitudes and woes). Mary’s song, and its parallels to Hannah’s, introduces these thematic emphases.

Read aloud the “Where?” excerpt. Note its emphasis on linking the “Magnificat” (from the Latin word that opens Mary’s song) with the Old Testament. Distribute and review the material on Resource Sheet 2 (The Songs of Mary and Hannah). To further this connection, ask for two volunteers to alternatively read 1 Samuel 2:1–10 and Luke 1:46–55 (so, for example, 1 Samuel 2:1 will be followed by Luke 1:46). Discuss:

- ✧ Why might Mary and/or Luke have so closely paralleled Hannah’s song? What do the two hold in common?
- ✧ How might Luke’s use of this song solidly grounded in the Old Testament reflect how he hopes his audience/community will view the Hebrew Scriptures and Judaism?

Read aloud the “Now What?” excerpt. Invite participants to comment on the thoughts expressed in the excerpt, particularly to such phrases as “subversive incarnation” and “a thoroughly marginal person” and “the upside-down world God has inaugurated.” Discuss:

- ✧ Where do you see those ideas reflected in the passage?
- ✧ Where do you see those ideas reflected in what this season of Advent means for the church and our witness in the world?
- ✧ In what ways might the words of these women shape our words and lives?

EASY
PREP

Two cautions for visitors:
(1) do not presume this
“waiting” will draw to
an immediate close; (2)
do not promise more
than you can deliver.
Put yourself in that
individual’s situation:
what would it mean for
you to trust God?

RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities depending on the length of your session:

- 1. Birthing Hope** Community and connection are important for the keeping of promises and the birthing of hope. Note that some have said God provides two things to Mary and Elizabeth that they lacked at this juncture in their lives: community and connection. Ask the group: In what ways does the community your church offers, and the connections it helps people make with God and with one another, lead to celebration and new life? Encourage participants to lift up and act upon ways to bring that community and connection to others outside of your congregation.
- 2. Who Will You Visit?** Mary’s visit brings the gift of human companionship and joyful witness to God’s working in Elizabeth’s time of waiting. Read and silently reflect on the “So What?” excerpt. Have participants call to mind someone they know who is currently engaged in a difficult time of “waiting.” Encourage adults to visit that person in the next week or two. Provide time to reflect on what they might say or do in that visit to offer encouragement, and to bring witness out of their own experience as well as from today’s passage to the God who gives birth to hope and rejoicing.
- 3. Sing Mary’s Song** Mary’s song cries for singing by us in our own praise of God whose promises are our hope. Several hymns and canticles render Mary’s song (“Magnificat”). Some examples include: “My Soul Gives Glory to My God” (Miriam Therese Winter), “My Heart Sings Out with Joyful Praise” (paraphrase by Ruth Duck), and “My Soul Proclaims Your Greatness” (Augsburg Fortress). Sing one or more of these, or others in your church’s hymnal or contemporary songbook.

CLOSING

Gather around or in front of the Advent wreath. Say or paraphrase these words.

Four candles now burn on the wreath, reminding us that our waiting for Christmas and its celebration is almost over. But—other waitings remain. Waitings for hopes yet to be fulfilled, waiting for promises still to be kept. In such a time, Mary came to Elizabeth—and both spoke words of blessing and joy that arose out of trust in God. We too live in such times. So hear again the hopes we bring in the form of a closing sentence prayer we offer this morning to God:

Open the gift box, and invite adults to each pick one of the cards and prayerfully read it aloud. Close with this benediction:

May the God of Mary and Elizabeth bless you on your way, and bring hope to fruition in your life, and in all creation.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for December 30, 2018, or e-mail it to the participants early in the week so that they have adequate time to reflect on the Scripture passages and the excerpts throughout the coming week.

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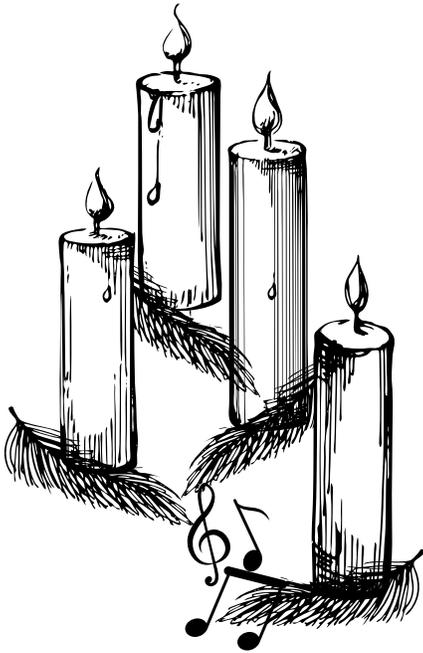
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The Songs of Mary and Hannah

The theme of miraculous birth that results in celebration of God's saving purposes links the song Mary sings with that of Hannah, mother of the prophet Samuel, in 1 Samuel 2:1–10. Scholars see decisive parallels between the songs of the two women, particularly in the way God is depicted in both as overturning the status quo of wealth and power in bringing deliverance to God's people.

Hannah's Song: 1 Samuel 2:1–10

- 1 "My heart exults in the LORD"; . . .
I rejoice in my victory.
- 2 "There is no Holy One like the LORD,"
- 4 The bows of the mighty are broken,
but the feeble gird on strength.
- 5 Those who were full have hired themselves
out for bread, but those who were hungry
are fat with spoil.
- 7 he brings low, he also exalts.
- 8 He raises up the poor from the dust;
he lifts the needy from the ash heap,
- 9 "He will guard the feet of his faithful ones,
- 10 He will give strength to his king,
and exalt the power of his anointed."

Mary's Song: Luke 1:46–55

- 46 "My soul magnifies the Lord,"
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior
- 49 and holy is his name.
- 51 He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud
- 53 he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
- 52 He has brought down the powerful from
their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;
- 48 for he has looked with favor on the lowliness
of his servant.
- 50 His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
- 54 He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
- 55 according to the promise he made to
our ancestors, to Abraham and to his
descendants forever."