



Mary and Elizabeth's Visitors

The Hope of the Messiah

About the Story

The Gospel of Luke begins with an intertwined story of two unexpected and miraculous births. The first birth announcement in the story comes, not to Mary, but to Zechariah, a priest who is married to Mary's cousin Elizabeth. Elizabeth and Zechariah have been unable to have children and are now well beyond childbearing years, and yet the angel Gabriel appears and tells Zechariah that Elizabeth will conceive and bear a son. When Zechariah questions the possibility, the angel renders him unable to speak until his son is born. Elizabeth conceives, and then the story moves on to Mary.

The Point:

Nothing is impossible with God. Our expectations for a world-changing leader might lead us to look for the Messiah in a palace, or at least among the powerful in society. Instead, God comes to a poor, unmarried girl, and makes her story a part of God's great work.

The two stories have many similarities. It is the same angel, Gabriel, who speaks to both Mary and Zechariah, and he uses similar words with both, telling them "Do not be afraid." But while Zechariah is a priest serving in the temple in Jerusalem, Mary is very far removed from the center of power. She is a young girl living in Nazareth, which is a small town of little significance several days' journey from Jerusalem. She is engaged to be married to Joseph, which would have likely been an arrangement made by her father. During the one-year engagement, she would have remained in her father's home. Overall, Mary is not anyone of political, cultural, or economic significance. And yet she is the one who is chosen to bear the Son of God.

After she receives this news, she sets out to visit her relative Elizabeth, whose pregnancy the angel used as proof of God's ability to do the impossible. When Elizabeth sees Mary, her own child leaps in her womb, and Elizabeth blesses Mary and her child. Mary responds with a song, traditionally known as the Magnificat, the Latin word for "magnify," the first word of Mary's song in the Latin translation. The song follows the form of traditional Hebrew poetry and echoes prophets and others from the Old Testament (Hebrew Bible). Mary praises God for God's faithfulness and generosity, and the reader recognizes that something truly remarkable is happening with this pregnancy of Mary's. Through this child, the old prophecies are coming to life and God's promises will be fulfilled.

Last Week/Next Week

Last week, Isaiah told of the day when God would bring great reversals, lifting up those who had been brought low and bringing transformation that would recreate and renew the world. This week, Mary's song echoes Isaiah, indicating that the child that she carries will be the one to bring the fulfillment of these promises. On Christmas, we will see the beginnings of this fulfillment, as the angels bring the good news first to the lowly shepherds in the fields, instead of to the courts of kings.

Opening Prayer

Begin your time together with this or another prayer:

God of promise, you show up in unexpected ways in unexpected places. Be with us now as we open your Word together. Give us the eyes to see you when we least expect you and the ears to hear your Word in new ways. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Into the Story

Share the story of a time when you have felt unworthy of an honor you have been given or unqualified for a task you have been assigned. What was your first emotion? What did you say or do in response? Did you come to feel up to it over time? As you listen to others' stories, reflect with them about why they might have been chosen for their honor or task. Discuss with one another whether others see more potential in us than we tend to see in ourselves.

Learning the Story

We meet Mary for the first time as she learns that she will bear the Son of God. She responds, not with meek and passive acceptance, but with fiery resolve in praise and proclamation.

Read Luke 1:26-33 – The Angel's Visit

- ❓ Note the details in this scene (names, locations, lineages). Are these necessary to the narrative? Why do you think they are included?
- ❓ What is Mary's reaction to the angel's greeting? If you were asked to play Mary in a skit, how would you portray her?
- ❓ Before moving on to read Mary's words, consider what your own reaction would be. What questions would you ask? What convincing would you need? Would you accept this task of carrying "the Son of the Most High" (verse 32)?

Read Luke 1:34-38 – The Clarification

- ❓ What is the main claim the angel makes for God in this portion of the text?
- ❓ What evidence does the angel offer to back up this claim?
- ❓ Why do you think Mary asks the question she asks in verse 34? Why do you think she responds as she does in verse 38? What about the angel's answer satisfies her?

Read Luke 1:39-45 – The Family Visit

- ❓ The story of Zechariah and Elizabeth is told in the first half of the chapter, and the story of John’s birth comes immediately after today’s passage. Why do you think Luke has intertwined these two stories?
- ❓ What claim does Elizabeth make about Mary’s pregnancy? How does she know this?
- ❓ What blessings does Elizabeth offer?
- ❓ Put yourself in Elizabeth’s place and imagine how you might react to the arrival of your young, pregnant, unmarried kinswoman. How is Elizabeth’s reaction surprising?

Bible Connections

- ✝ Hannah sings God’s praises (1 Samuel 2:1-10).
- ✝ Gabriel appears in the Old Testament (Daniel 9:21).
- ✝ John the Baptist begins his ministry (Luke 3:1-22).

Read Luke 1:46-56 – The Song

- ❓ How does Mary describe God in her song?
- ❓ How do you think this description of God reflects Mary’s situation in particular?
- ❓ Why do you think that Mary sings this song at this moment in the story?

Read Luke 1:26-56 – The Names

- ❓ Read through the whole passage and note the names that are used for major characters: the angel, Mary, Elizabeth, John (Elizabeth’s child), Jesus (Mary’s child), and God.
- ❓ Mary is called “favored one,” “blessed,” “mother of my Lord,” and “servant.” What do you make of this list, given that this is a young, unmarried peasant girl?
- ❓ Jesus is called “great,” “Son of the Most High,” “heir to David’s throne,” “ruler of the house of Jacob,” “holy,” “Son of God,” “blessed,” and “Lord.” Why do you think Luke has listed so many names so early in the story?
- ❓ What other names do you see in the story? Why are names important in this passage?

Bible Nuts & Bolts: A Brief History of the Bible (New Testament)

The New Testament is a collection of several different kinds of literature. In the Gospels, a genre unique to Christians, each writer tells the story of Jesus in a way that highlights aspects important to their community. The other most common genre is the Epistles. These letters were written by early church leaders like the apostle Paul to help their communities faithfully deal with particular situations. Over the centuries, Christians turned frequently to favorite Gospels and letters. As the church organized, they selected the most popular and most theologically relevant documents, and listed them as the official collection, or canon. While there are differences among Christians traditions, the Bible as we know it was largely agreed upon by the fifth century.

Living the Story: Prayer

Stand or sit in a circle with your Bibles open to today's passage. Go around the circle, reading Mary's prayer out loud, beginning with the quotation marks in verse 46. One person reads a verse, and then the next person reads the next verse, on around the circle, ending at the end of the quotation marks in verse 55. Spend a few moments in silent contemplation. Go around the circle again, each person sharing one word that Mary's song evokes for them. It can be anything, but try to keep it to one word. Repeat this twice more, alternating reading with sharing.

Closing Prayer

In a circle, place your hand on the back or shoulder of the person on your right. Pray for them:

God of surprises, meet us this week in ways that move us beyond our comfort zone and call us into your community. Remind us always that you are walking with us, even when the way is unclear. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Daily Readings (Week 1)

Sunday—Read Luke 1:26-45 [46-56]

Mary learns that she will bear the Son of God and responds with a song of praise. Make a list of the things that Mary says God has done and consider where you have seen God act in these ways.

Monday—Read 1 Samuel 1:9-18

Hannah's prayers for a child are mistaken for drunken ravings. When have you wanted something so badly that you did not care how you appeared to others?

Tuesday—Read 1 Samuel 2:1-10

When Hannah's prayers for a child are answered, she responds with a song of praise. Reread Luke 1:46-55. What echoes of Hannah's song do you hear in Mary's Magnificat?

Wednesday—Read Luke 2:1-20

The birth of Jesus takes place in Bethlehem, and the Son of God is laid in an animal's feed trough. What does it mean to you to hear that the Savior of the world was born in such low circumstances?

Thursday—Read Isaiah 7:13-17

King Ahaz is promised that God will be with the people, bringing judgment and salvation. How might some receive this promise as good news while others hear it as bad news? Write a journal entry in King Ahaz's voice, relating how he might react to news of this promise.

Friday—Read Isaiah 11:1-9

A time is coming where all of creation will live in peace. Think of the ongoing conflict in the world. Name specific conflicts as you pray for God to bring about a peaceful end to them.

Saturday—Read John 1:1-13

The opening of the Gospel of John takes place on a cosmic level, showing that Jesus (the Word) was present during creation. Why do you think we do not reenact this passage in our Christmas pageants? Illustrate what this new creation looks like to you.

At Home

- ✝ Look for an organization in your area that offers assistance and companionship to single parents. See how you might be able to volunteer or support them.
- ✝ Make a list of those people you might turn to in times of uncertainty, as Mary turned to Elizabeth. Pray for them each by name, and perhaps send them a card letting them know you appreciate them.
- ✝ Write your own song of praise like Mary's. What names would you use to call on God? What would you praise God for?

Daily Readings (Week 2)

Sunday—Read Luke 2:21-38

Simeon and Anna are moved by the Holy Spirit to proclaim great promises about the child Jesus. Find a parent at your church who may be struggling with their young one, and compliment the child on something positive you see in them.

Monday—Read John 1:14-18

The cosmic scope of the Gospel's opening takes focus as the divine Word becomes flesh and lives among us. What does this passage say about Jesus?

Tuesday—Read Psalm 23

For many, this psalm about God as our shepherd is a favorite Bible passage. Whether or not it is your favorite, read the psalm once through, and then read it again, pausing after each line. As you pause, say a prayer related to those words.

Wednesday—Read Jeremiah 23:1-4

The prophet Jeremiah uses a metaphor about shepherds and sheep to describe Israel. Think of someone you know going through a difficult time and give them a phone call or send a card.

Thursday—Read Matthew 2:1-12

The wise men from the east travel far to visit the newborn king, Jesus. What gifts would you bring to the child?

Friday—Read Matthew 2:13-15

King Herod is jealous of a potential new rival, and violently so. The holy family escapes persecution by fleeing to Egypt. Say a prayer for refugees and all who are fleeing violence.

Saturday—Read Luke 2:39-40

Jesus, Mary, and Joseph return to Nazareth, where Jesus lives out his childhood. Donate food, diapers, or other needed items to a local food pantry or similar charity.