



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.

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.)

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 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. 🌸