



MARY: A WOMAN FOR ALL SEASONS

SESSION 2

Kinships, Friendships and Holy Encounters

by Christa von Zychlin

BIBLE STUDY

Theme Verse

Luke 1:39–40, *The Message*

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

Opening

Hymn

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

Reading

Luke 1:39–45

Prayer

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

we thank you for her example to us as a woman who reaches out to others. Help us to grow in our capacity for reaching out beyond ourselves. Help us to become more open to receiving your friendship and blessing from others. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

Introduction to Kinships and Friendships

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

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

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

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

The youth director at our former church had a poster on her wall with a glossary of some of the short-hand people use in instant messaging and cell-phone text-messaging.

Some of the more well known phrases include LOL (laugh out loud) and BBL (be back later) and of course, the sets-a-pastor’s-teeth-on-edge OMG (oh my god). But what really strikes me about this poster is how many of the phrases have to do with friendship:

BF = best friends

FF = friends forever

BFF = best friends forever

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

The fact that people, especially young people, have so many expressions for their good friends strikes me as a really hopeful sign in our world. We human beings are designed for close friendships, the kinds of relationships that take us through thick and through thin. The biblical friendship between Mary and Elizabeth is an ancient example of a LYLAS and BFF kind of relationship. (See “Bold Connections,” p. 26.)

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

Mary’s Kinswoman, Elizabeth

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

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

READ LUKE 1:6. What more do you learn about Elizabeth?

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

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

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

But for Elizabeth, matters are different. She was born and raised to be the mother of priests. She herself is described as a descendant of the priestly line of Aaron, and has married a priest.

All Elizabeth’s neighbors and relatives would have been waiting for her to have children. God’s word says, “Sons are indeed a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb a reward” (Psalm 127:3). Wasn’t there a promise for the men who walked in God’s ways, that “your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your children will be like olive shoots around your table” (Psalm 128:3)?

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

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

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

Mary Takes Off Running

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

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

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

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

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

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

And then she took off running.

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

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

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

Of Priests and Prophets

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

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

READ LUKE 1:56. How long does Mary stay with Elizabeth?

What a “quickening” there was for Elizabeth and her unborn child! It turns out that contrary to all expectations, her child won’t be a priest like his father and grandfathers, whose role was to preside at religious ceremonies, doing things in the proper order.

No, Elizabeth’s child, John the Baptist, would grow up to become a prophet, like his mother. Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, speaks startling words of truth to Mary. This is the work of a prophet!

But Elizabeth also blesses Mary, and this is the work of a priest. Mary, for her part, sings a song of happiness and worship, exulting in a God whose mercies transcend the generations.

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

Holy Encounters

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jesus. Smiling, he pointed back to me and repeated, “Good Mama—is a holy work.” And with those words, I suddenly was transformed from a frustrated harried mom to a woman blessed with the same calling as Mary, the mother of our Lord. (See “Open Yourself to the Holy,” p. 22.)

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

Closing

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

Mighty God,

by whose grace Elizabeth rejoiced with Mary and greeted her as the mother of the Lord:

look with favor on your lowly servants

that, with Mary, we may magnify your holy name and rejoice to acclaim her Son

as our Savior, who lives and reigns with you

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

Amen. 🌸

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

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SESSION 2

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Prayerful Preparation

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

An excellent resource is the description of the *lectio divina* on page 48 of *Opening Up the Book of Faith: Lutheran Insights for Bible Study* (Augsburg Fortress, 2008). If you can't find a copy of this book in your church library, you might be able to borrow it from your pastor.

You can also read about the *lectio divina* method of Bible study at www.boldcafe.org/0307/hottopic2.html. You may want to use this method of Bible study with your small group at some point.

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

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

Practical Preparation

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

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

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

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

Opening

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

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

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

Notes on the Study

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

Introduction to Kinships and Friendships

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

Mary's Kinswoman, Elizabeth

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

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

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

Mary Takes Off Running

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

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

Of Priests and Prophets

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

Holy Encounters

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

Closing

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



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