



MARY: A WOMAN FOR ALL SEASONS

SESSION 3

## Mary Among the Disciples

by Christa von Zychlin

BIBLE STUDY

### Theme Verse

John 19:26–27a *The Message*

When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, “Woman, here is your son.” Then he said to the disciple, “Here is your mother.”

### Opening

Hymn

“Each Winter as the Year Grows Older,” *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 252, *With One Voice* 626, verse 3

### A Litany of Readings

Luke 1:30–32

Luke 2:19

Luke 2:34–35

John 19:16b–18

John 19:25b–27

John 19:30

### Prayer

God of our past and of our future,  
we thank you for fulfilling your promises to us  
in unexpected ways.

We bless and praise you  
even amidst the hardships of our lives.

Help us to hold fast when things look darkest,  
and use the sorrows we live through  
to temper us for compassion, insight,  
and service to others.

As we continue our study of Mary,  
the mother of Jesus,  
we thank you for her example to us  
as a woman of leadership and prayer.  
In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

### Introduction to Mary, a Seasoned Woman

Read the following verses from Proverbs 31, part of a poem about a woman of strength. What are some of the characteristics of the capable woman?

**PROVERBS 31:17.** Her physique—frail or fit?

**PROVERBS 31:20.** Her outreach—tight-fisted or generous?

**PROVERBS 31:22.** Her outfits—cheap or quality?

**PROVERBS 31:25.** Her outlook—worried or welcoming?

**PROVERBS 31:26.** Her leadership—silently demure or competently clear?

**READ PROVERBS 31:1.** Whose voice may we be overhearing throughout this last chapter of the book of Proverbs?

Although the second half of Proverbs 31 is often subtitled “A Good Wife,” I think that’s misleading, since the word “wife” in the opening line (verse 10) can just as legitimately be translated as “woman.” If you tally it up, only a small percentage of this poem (4 out of 22 verses) is specifically about the role of a wife. A major-

ity of the verses speak of a woman's varied roles as a manufacturer (verses 13, 22, and 24), manager (verses 15 and 18), purchaser of real estate (verse 16), farmer (verse 16), philanthropist (verse 20), teacher and coach (verse 26), as well as mother (verse 28).

In the last few years some conventional wisdom has emerged concerning a woman's many roles in life: "You can have it all, you just can't have it all at once." At first glance, the woman described in Proverbs 31 can be pretty intimidating—maybe a little like that popular, beautiful, straight-A student people loved to hate in junior high school. After all, the woman seems to be a homemaker, entrepreneur, supportive wife, volunteer, and well-loved mom all at the same time.

After some study, however, we might imagine that Proverbs reflects the thoughts of an older woman looking back at the many facets of her own life over a series of decades.

Possibly she is also thinking about the rich, complex kind of life she would wish for the younger women in her life—her nieces, daughters, or daughters-in-law. Not all at once, but over the seasons of a lifetime, many women do have the privilege—and the challenge—of living out an astonishing variety of roles.

Just as nature's seasons influence and overlap each other, so too do the seasons of a woman's life often overlap, sometimes leading to unexpected events. In the Midwest, where I lived for the past dozen years, we have pretty distinct seasons, but sometimes the seasons are wonderfully mixed up.

One January, for example, I saw a bush blooming bright yellow in the snow of northern Wisconsin! I had to do some research to find out it was witch hazel, a shrub that will, under certain circumstances, bloom in deep winter.

Another year my neighbor's apple tree put out blossoms in late fall, so that this one tree had lovely pink blossoms and fully ripe apples at the same time. I often think of another long-ago neighbor who found

herself pregnant just about the time she was sending her youngest off to college. She had a girl and named her Autumn Joy.

If you think of your own life as a series of seasons, what major seasons have you experienced? What particular events marked the end of one season and the beginning of another?

## Mary, a Widowed Woman

**READ MATTHEW 2:21 AND LUKE 2:4–5.** Who is the most active person in these two passages?

**READ MATTHEW 13:54–56.** Can you tell from this passage whether Jesus' earthly father, Joseph, is living or dead?

It appears that only a short period of Mary's life was spent as a married woman. Although Joseph is mentioned in all four Gospels, he is active only in the first two chapters of Matthew and Luke. The last time we see Joseph is during the trip back home to Nazareth from the Temple in Jerusalem when Jesus is about 12 years old (Luke 2:41–51). After that, Joseph is mentioned in all four Gospels only in the context of speculation as to who Jesus really is (only a carpenter's son). Other than that, we never hear about Jesus' earthly father again. This has led many to suggest that Mary is a widow by the time we see her near the end of the Gospel of John and in the book of Acts.

In these last two biblical passages involving Mary, we know she is at least in her late 40s. She is well past girlhood and adolescence. The intense mothering season is over. Her son is a man in his 30s. Yet Mary's life and significance are far from over. We will see her take on new roles. She becomes a mother again, but in a new way—by adoption, not by birth. She will again receive the Holy Spirit, but this time not as a mystified young girl, but as a mature woman, possibly one of the only people who knew exactly what was going on in that upper room.

She had met this Holy Spirit before, in another season of her life. This time the Spirit comes as a familiar power, and we can imagine her again saying “yes” to God. But before all that can happen, Mary has a terrible journey.

### Mary, a Woman of Sorrows

**READ JOHN 19:23–25a.** How many soldiers appear to be at the cross, according to verse 23?

**READ JOHN 19:25b.** How many women were near the cross?

**READ JOHN 19:31–37.** Think back to the prophecy of Simeon in Luke 2:34–35. Even though these verses come from two different Gospels, how is the one a fulfillment of the other?

Four soldiers, gambling for a condemned man’s clothes. Four women, keeping vigil over a condemned man’s groanings. The contrast is clear. The men are busy in their role as functionaries of the government. They worry about tearing up a perfectly good piece of clothing, but not about crucifying a perfectly innocent man. The other men, the disciples, have long since fled. It’s reasonable that they did—they could get killed for hanging around.

The women seem to be made of sterner stuff than Jesus’ male companions. Or maybe it was less dangerous, in this rare instance, to be a woman than to be a man in that patriarchal society.

Mary is surrounded by her friends and kinswomen. Her older cousin Elizabeth had died years ago. But in place of Elizabeth, it seems that Mary has a sister who has turned up just when Mary needs her most. And Mary Magdalene is there too. And then there is the mysterious other Mary, the wife of Clopas. Anything we say about her is sheer speculation—except to say that all three of Mary’s companions knew the importance of being there for Mary as she faced the toughest day of her life. They didn’t let her stand all alone at the foot of the cross.

We do not know if Mary stayed to the bitter end, watching the soldiers pierce Jesus’ side to make sure he was dead. The many works of art that depict the *Pietà* (Italian for “pity”) are not based on a Gospel text. There is no biblical record of Mary holding her dead son. But if she was able to get to his broken body, you know she did.

Some women are given that kind of strength. They keep watch, even while their hearts are breaking. They touch and they cradle and they rock their loved one right through the ordeal and into eternity.

Take a moment to think about a time when you were the one to accompany someone else during a crucible in life, as Mary’s sister and friends stood by her. Have you been through a crucible in your own life? Who has kept watch with you?

### Mary, Part of a New Creation

**READ JOHN 19:26–27.** How is the disciple described in verse 26?

**READ JOHN 3:6.** How might these words apply to the beloved disciple’s relationship with Mary?

At the crucifixion, we have the four soldiers, seemingly oblivious to the horror of the hour, and we have the four women, deeply attached to the man on the cross. And then there is this “beloved disciple” who defies the danger that scared off the other disciples and stays near Jesus.

Who is this beloved disciple? Traditionally he is thought to be the evangelist John, too modest to attach his own name to such a prominent place in the Gospel account. Maybe another reason this disciple is not named, however, is so that disciples in every generation can see themselves at the foot of the cross beside Mary and can understand themselves to be beloved disciples of Jesus. In that light, the words of Martin Luther’s 1522 Christmas sermon become even more meaningful:

“This is the great joy, of which the angel [of the Lord (Luke 2:9–12)] speaks, this is the consolation and the superabundant goodness of God, that man (if he has this faith) may boast of such treasure as that Mary is his real mother, Christ his brother, and God his father. For these things are, all of them, true and they come to pass, provided we believe them” (*Luther’s Works*, vol. 52, p. 15).

Do you have any “sons” or “daughters” in your life who are not your flesh and blood children? What is special about such a relationship that crosses generational and family lines? What are some ways in which generations are brought together in your church community?

## Mary Among the Apostles

**READ ACTS 1:12–14.** What is the context? Who are all these people who are named?

**READ GALATIANS 4:19.** Whose specific physical experience is being used as a spiritual metaphor for all Christians?

The seasons have passed for Mary. At least 33 years have gone by since the angel first visited her—almost two generations. Using our imaginations, we might see how the lines of her face have deepened, the twinkle of her eyes taken on a richer sparkle, the kindness of her expression grown more mature.

Under ordinary circumstances, Mary would have been a grandmother by now. But Mary seems unencumbered by family responsibilities. While mothering is highly valued throughout the Bible and grandchildren are always seen as a gift from God, in the New Testament women are freed from the cultural expectation that finds their value primarily in mothering and grandmothering.

Mary’s worth comes from something that precedes her motherhood—God’s calling and divine favor. Nor is Mary’s worth in any way dependent upon her living

to see her children’s children. She is clearly a woman saved by the triumph of the new life achieved by the Savior Jesus. She is a leader among the apostles and other followers of Jesus, who draw near to God in prayer. She is a servant of the Almighty, expectant again with the presence of the Holy Spirit.

How do you feel about joining Martin Luther and the beloved disciple in calling Mary “mother”? In what way might we think of her as the mother of the church? Thinking about Mary’s experiences and using St. Paul’s words from his letter to the Galatians, what does it mean to grow spiritually by having “Christ formed in you”?

## Closing

Read Psalm 100 aloud together, and then pray in your own words, or use the prayer appointed for the commemoration of Mary, Mother of Our Lord, August 15 (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, p. 57, or *Lutheran Book of Worship*, p. 34):

Almighty God,  
in choosing the virgin Mary  
to be the mother of your Son,  
you made known your gracious regard for the poor,  
the lowly, and the despised.  
Grant us grace to receive your word in humility,  
and so be made one with your Son, Jesus Christ  
our Savior and Lord,  
who lives and reigns with you  
and the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and forever. Amen. 🌸

**The Rev. Christa von Zychlin** serves with ELCA Global Mission in Hong Kong, China. She invites you to share in her current adventures at <http://marathonangel.blogspot.com>.

## SESSION 3

# Mary Among the Disciples

by Christa von Zychlin

## Prayerful Preparation

At the Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist in Milwaukee, a bronze sculpture of Mary depicts a slightly different Mary than the one we usually see. This Mary has lines under her eyes. Her figure is slightly fuller than that of a teenager. She is beautiful in a more weathered, more matured way than we typically think of Mary, the mother of Jesus.

In taking a few moments to become centered and prayerful in preparation for leading this final summer session, perhaps you can call to mind two or three older women who have been role models for you over the years.

Read over the theme verses for this session (John 19:26–27a) and lift up a short prayer for yourself and the members of your group: *Thank you, Lord, for choosing me as your beloved disciple. Let me be a mature instrument of your love for others, especially those who will be participating in the Bible study. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

## Practical Preparation

Consider preparing a simple feedback form for participants to use at the conclusion of this last session. Keep the survey short and anonymous, using questions such as these:

- What I liked best about this study
- What I liked least
- One thing I learned
- One suggestion for improving the next study

Have you asked others for help in providing music, refreshments, and visual aids? Be sure to thank them

publicly. The visual images for this session, both that of Mary by the cross with the beloved disciple and that of Mary at prayer with the disciples in the upper room, are a bit more difficult to find, but they are out there and will enrich your session if someone brings them in.

## Opening

Welcome people warmly and read the theme verse together and sing a hymn. The suggested hymn is an Advent hymn, and sings beautifully of the change of seasons in creation as well as in our own lives.

Before the litany of readings, invite participants to pay attention to the way in which words spoken to Mary at the beginning of the Gospel of Luke take on a new meaning at the foot of the cross in the Gospel of John.

Place a cross in the center of your gathering and have up to six different women read the passages, one after another, with a pause—maybe 30 seconds—after each reading. Then, without comment, go right into the prayer.

## Notes on the Study

Have some fun sorting through these characteristics of a capable woman! Tradition attributes the book of Proverbs to King Solomon, but it may be a compilation from several sources. These words may possibly convey the voice of a royal mother echoing down through the centuries.

Major seasons of your life may be marked by the schools you attended or moves from one home to another; jobs, friends, marriage, divorce, births, ill-

nesses, and deaths all signify beginnings and endings in our lives.

For further discussion: People often have seasons in their church relationships and spiritual lives as well. What are some seasons you've experienced as a church member? Think of a time when you felt most active and involved or a period when you didn't worship regularly. Remember a time when your church or Bible study group really struggled or a time when it was especially vibrant and strong.

### **Mary, a Widowed Woman**

We don't know when Joseph died, but tradition has it that Mary was a widow. How might this be a comfort for widows today?

### **Mary, a Woman of Sorrows**

Some scholars dispute the idea that there were four women at the cross, suggesting that there were only three because Mary of Clopas *is* Mary's sister. As popular a name as Mary was in first-century Palestine, however, it's hard to imagine a family naming *two* of their daughters Mary.

For the discussion question on crucibles you may wish to consult a dictionary or encyclopedia in order to refresh your understanding of this word.

### **Mary, Part of a New Creation**

John is often depicted as the youngest of the disciples—that is why he has no beard in most Christian art,

including Da Vinci's "Last Supper." As a young man, he may not have been seen as a threat by the authorities and therefore it may have been less dangerous for him to remain near Jesus than it would have been for an older disciple.

Some ways in which generations are brought together in your church community may include music programs, service projects, worship, mentoring programs, and Sunday school. Especially lift up areas in which people of different generations work or relate side by side, rather than only those where older people teach or supervise younger ones.

### **Mary Among the Apostles**

In the Galatians text, Apostle Paul is giving us a metaphor of spiritual growth that only Mary ever experienced in the flesh: having Christ formed in her. How do you think that works as a metaphor for both men and women?

Some participants may be uncomfortable with the idea that Mary is a spiritual mother for Lutherans, whereas others may find this an extremely helpful image. That's all right—God gives us many different ways of experiencing divine love and guidance, including through our relationships with one another.

### **Closing**

End with a joyful reading of Psalm 100, and ask one of the participants to close with the words of the suggested prayer. 🌸

**Don't Wait!**  
NEW BIBLE STUDY

An exciting new Bible study starts in our September issue. You won't want to miss "To God's Beloved: Paul's Letter to the Romans."

Call 800-328-4648 to subscribe today! [www.lutheranwomantoday.org](http://www.lutheranwomantoday.org)