



ADULT STUDY

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LEADER'S GUIDE Session 1

Finding Our Place at the Manger: An Adult Advent Study

Mary, Bearer of God

Goal for the Session

Participants will discuss the gifts and call of Mary and how their own gifts call them to prophetic action.

Preparing for the Session

- Read the Participant Handout and Leader's Guide at least once and note any changes you'd like to make for the needs of your group.
- Pray that all who come to the session will have a meaningful experience.
- Organize chairs in a semicircle to help facilitate conversation.
- All sessions do not assume adults have received and read the Participant Handout prior to meeting. Time will be used during the session for them to read specific sections and discuss them. Encourage participants to read the handout in its entirety during the week. Decide whether or not you wish to distribute the following week's participant handout to the group at the end of each session. Some may enjoy reading the handout before the gathering.

Session at a Glance

OPENING

- Prayer
- Welcome and discussion questions
- Opening litany

EXPLORING

- Forced choice
- Our gifts
- Prophetic action

RESPONDING

- Reflections on our gifts and call
- Thanks to our mentors

CLOSING

- New insights into Mary
- Prayer

Materials Needed

- Copies of Participant Handout
- Bibles
- Nativity set
- Pens
- Paper

Teaching Tip

The theological understanding of Jesus' mother, Mary, varies greatly across faith traditions. Be sensitive to the fact that if a participant grew up in a different faith tradition, he or she might bring a very different perspective to the discussion. Encourage participants to honor one another's experiences while keeping the focus of the session on the material provided in the Participant Handout.

Opening (5 minutes)

1. Prayer

Pray the following or use your own words to open the session in prayer:

God our Creator, you have been with us from the beginning, and you are with us here today. We pray that your Spirit will guide our conversation and open our hearts and minds to hear this familiar story anew. May we be transformed by your Word throughout this Advent season. Amen.

2. Welcome and Discussion Question

Welcome the group and explain that throughout this four-week series, each session will focus on a different character in the nativity story and what we might learn from them. Today's session will focus on Jesus' mother, Mary. Read Luke 1:46–55 (the Magnificat) to the group and ask them to discuss: What have you been taught to believe about Mary's significance in the nativity story?

3. Opening Litany

Once participants have had a few minutes to respond, focus the group's attention on the nativity set and, pointing to Mary, open with the following litany, instructing participants to say, "We thank you, God, for Mary" when you so indicate.

Leader: For the young woman, born into humble circumstances, capable of great things . . .

Participants: We thank you, God, for Mary.

Leader: For the gifts she offered to God and the world, without hesitation . . .

Participants: We thank you, God, for Mary.

Leader: For the prophetic words she spoke with courage . . .

Participants: We thank you, God, for Mary.

Leader: Amen.

Exploring (25 minutes)

4. Forced Choice

Have participants take a few minutes to read the section titled, "Mary, Theotokos, Bearer of God" in the Participant Handout. Designate opposite ends of your meeting space as the following:

- One end of the room = "By virtue of her son's sinless life, she too became free of original sin, a status conferred by God" (the Roman Catholic understanding of Mary).
- Opposite end of the room = "Mary was not a virgin but a maiden chosen by God" (Protestant understanding of Mary).

Explain that there is a spectrum of belief now designated across this classroom space, and ask participants to pick a spot somewhere along this spectrum that reflects their personal understanding of Mary. Encourage participants to really ponder their response before picking a spot, and explain that depending on the tradition in which each of us is raised, we may be influenced by more than one understanding of Mary. Once participants have chosen a spot, ask for volunteers to explain a bit about why they chose the place they did on this spectrum of belief.

5. Our Gifts

Have participants take a few moments to read the section titled "Igniting Our Gifts" in the Participant Handout. The author says we have all been chosen and given gifts. Drawing on the example of Virginia, ask participants to join in pairs or small discussion groups and recognize the gifts of others in their lives, especially those whose gifts may be overlooked. After everyone has had some time to reflect, ask them to share their

responses with the larger group. Discuss together the following: As a church community, how do we best recognize and celebrate the gifts of others?

6. Prophetic Action

Have participants take a few moments to read the section titled “Prophetic Action” in the Participant Handout. The author lists many examples of prophetic action taken by various congregations. Discuss the following:

- What other examples of prophetic action can this group think of?
- How might this faith community use its gifts and circumstances to engage in prophetic action?

Responding (10 minutes)

7. Reflections on Our Gifts and Call

Have participants take a few minutes at the end to write down both a list of gifts they believe they have received from God as well as some ideas as to how they might put these gifts into action in service to God and neighbor.

8. Thanks to Our Mentors

Once participants have had some time to reflect on their gifts, ask them to close their eyes and picture someone who has been a mentor to them in their faith journey. This person may have played a prominent role, or it may be someone whose influence was subtle. Ask participants to silently say a prayer of thanksgiving for this person.

Closing (5 minutes)

9. New Insights into Mary

Center the group’s attention back to the nativity scene, pointing to Mary in particular. Referring back to the

“forced choice” activity in the beginning of the opening section, ask the group if their understanding of Mary has been changed by anything discussed in today’s session.

10. Prayer

Distribute the Participant Handout for session 2 and ask participants to read it before the next session. Close by reading Luke 1:46–55 once more.

Teaching Alternative

Encourage participants to complete a spiritual gifts inventory, either before coming to the day’s session or even on an available device during the session. There are many available online, including this one from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America: <https://www.elca.org/Our-Work/Congregations-and-Synods/Faith-Practices/Spiritual-Renewal/Assessment-Tools>. After taking the inventory, have participants share which gifts the assessment identified and note the variety of gifts and strengths in the group. How does this illustrate Paul’s words to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 12:4–7?

Key Scriptures

Luke 1:46–55

1 Corinthians 12:4–7

For More Information

Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination: 40th Anniversary Edition*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018.

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PARTICIPANT HANDOUT Session 1

Finding Our Place at the Manger: An Adult Advent Study

Mary, Bearer of God

Introduction

A few years ago, over a thousand people—1,039 to be exact—gathered outside Provo, Utah. Dressed in costumes lovingly sewn by scores of people, barnyard animals in their midst, they staged the world's largest living nativity scene. An adjudicator from the Guinness Book of World Records was on-site, verifying that the crowd had indeed surpassed the former record set in Lancashire, England. This crowded nativity scene can help us reflect on how there is room for everyone at the manger.

The crèche, or nativity scene, is common throughout the Advent season. We find it on greeting cards, under Christmas trees, or brightly illuminated on the lawns of public places. It's a sentimentalized version of Jesus' birth narratives found in Matthew and Luke, complete with wise men who traveled long distances to join the shepherds and holy family.

Familiarity with this scene may not, as the saying goes, breed contempt, but it can lead to a glossed-over experience of these individual characters and their importance in our lives. The purpose of this study is to examine what we know of Mary, Joseph, the shepherds,

and the wise men. How can Scripture and the traditions surrounding them speak to us in our modern context? Like those participants in the living nativity scene, how can we find our own places at the manger as we await the joy of Jesus' birth?

We begin our study by examining the life of Mary.

Mary, Theotokos, Bearer of God

I live in San Antonio, where a large portion of the population is Mexican American and Roman Catholic. Veneration of Mary is ubiquitous, especially images of *Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe*, the patron saint of Mexico. The Virgin's image is common throughout our city, and the five-hundred-year-old story of her appearance to an Aztec peasant named Juan Diego is part of local folklore.

Roman Catholics believe that Mary was miraculously impregnated by the Holy Spirit, and they refer to this as the Immaculate Conception. By virtue of her son's sinless life, she too became free of original sin, a status conferred by God.

Protestants have a simpler interpretation of Mary's role. Many do not believe that she was a virgin, but more importantly, they believe she was a maiden chosen

by God. In the Gospel narratives, Jesus is born into a working-class family living in humble conditions. One title used for Mary in Orthodox circles, originating among Syrian Christians, is Theotokos, God-bearer. How can each of us, in our own way, be bearers of the Divine, displaying qualities of what Jesus called the kingdom (or realm) of God?

The concept of humans as God-bearers can be seen in the powerful verses of that song attributed to Mary: the Magnificat (Luke 1:46–55). Voiced by Mary after the angel Gabriel announced she would be mother to the long-awaited Messiah, it reverberates with two themes that help us find our places at the manger.

Igniting Our Gifts

Mary's Song begins this way.

And Mary said,
"My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of
his servant. (Luke 1:46–48)

How can each of us, in our own way, be bearers of the Divine, birthing new realities for what Jesus called the kingdom (or realm) of God?

Here is a reminder that not only does God choose the powerful to accomplish divine purposes, God has chosen *each* of us, in whatever place we find ourselves. Each has been chosen. Each has been called. God gives each person gifts to follow this call, just as God did with Mary. This is what the apostle Paul said so clearly in his first letter to the Corinthians.

Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one

might boast in the presence of God. (1 Corinthians 1:26–29)

Christmas is a season of gift-giving; *too many gifts*. The celebration of a baby born in a feeding trough has been warped into a consumerist frenzy. It is important for each of us to examine our own practices of consumption within the context of our culture. However, our focus here is on different kinds of presents: *our spiritual gifts*. Paul talks about these gifts extensively in 1 Corinthians chapter 12, with opening words that are familiar to many of us.

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. (1 Corinthians 12:4–7)

Paul made lists of different types of talents. Much has been made of these catalogs, and traditional spiritual gift questionnaires are designed to help us discover our own giftedness within the confines of Paul's words. The challenge for all is to activate these gifts in our own lives and worshiping communities.

These instruments can be helpful, but Paul never meant his lists to be limiting. *Any* of our natural abilities and personality traits, when energized by the Holy Spirit, can be used for Christ's purposes in our world. This extends to every sphere of our influence: home, community, work, and church. The important thing is that each of us must unwrap these gifts and ignite them in our lives.

We have all seen giftedness in action—a teacher with an uncanny ability to bring subject material to life; a financial planner or accountant whose facility with numbers is amazing; artisans, craftsmen, or musicians whose mediums pour out of them as fluid means of creativity; caregivers who bestow dignity on patients who are suffering physical pain or grief.

Think of those whose gifts have graced your own life. Think of how they enriched your spiritual journey, serving as both encouragers and shining examples. Now turn your thoughts to your own life. Are you a

person who recognizes the gifts in others and encourages them to use them? Further, can you confidently name the gifts God has given you and how you are employing them?

Naming and affirming giftedness in our communities of faith is a powerful way to celebrate a great truth of the Reformation—the priesthood of all believers. This is a radical concept on two levels. It dismantles the power of priests as the only intercessors to God, stating that *all* of us have equal access to our Creator, anytime, anywhere. It is also a potent reminder that the work of ministry is meant for everyone, not just those ordained by institutions.

An example of a modern-day Mary is a woman at a church I served named Virginia. She was a nursery worker, a role that is often out of sight, out of mind, and infrequently celebrated. Virginia had gifts of patience, mercy, and a God-given ability to relate to children on their own levels. I saw her gifts in action as she cared for my special-needs son, Kristoffer. She helped him feel included and loved, displaying measures of patience and grace that humbled me as his father. Like Mary, Virginia has a special call and special gifts. Who are the Marys in your life?

Prophetic Action

Mary recognized that the Creator of all things employed her uniqueness in the divine plan for history. What is this plan? As we delve deeper into the Song of Mary, we see God's emerging blueprint spoken in prophetic poetry. After marveling at God's affirmation of her worth, Mary foretells what God hoped to accomplish through the coming of the Christ.

He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

He has brought down the powerful from their
thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty. (Luke 1:51–53)

This is the world-overturning power Jesus showed us through his teachings, actions, and ultimate statement of nonviolent love on the cross. In human societies where royalty, riches, and political power still construct racial and economic pyramids of power, Jesus toppled these structures for all who follow him faithfully.

We find our places at the manger when we involve ourselves in prophetic, counterculture actions in our communities.

In his book *The Prophetic Imagination*, Walter Brueggemann speaks of Jesus' role as a dismantler of societies' usual patterns.

In both his teaching and his very presence, Jesus of Nazareth presented the ultimate criticism of the royal consciousness. He has, in fact, dismantled the dominant culture and nullified its claims. The way of his ultimate criticism is his decisive solidarity with marginal people and the accompanying vulnerability required by that solidarity.¹

We find our places at the manger when we involve ourselves in prophetic, counterculture actions in our communities. This does not mean simple charity, as important as it is. Obviously, Christ called us to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit the sick, but charity alone will not demonstrate Jesus' deepest message to our communities.

What constitutes prophetic action? As my colleague Rob Mueller and I examine in our book *Neighborhood Church: Transforming Your Congregation into a Powerhouse for Mission*, the answer to this question will be unique to our own settings. Here are some congregational prophetic actions that we have witnessed:

- In our culture, which often demonizes immigrants, one group of churches formed a human wall along the US/Mexico border, a wall not of steel and concrete but of loving arms that welcome refugees.
- One church listened closely to the stories of those who came to their door for aid, discovering that many of them were women who had been scarred

by lives in the sex trade. The church began a Bible study called “Women of Worth,” helping these children of God find healing, dignity, and new purpose in our world.

- Another church, following an incident of racial violence in their community, reached out intentionally to brothers and sister of multiple ethnicities, classes, and religions to hold a candlelight vigil for peace.
- In a community where materialism and fast-paced lifestyles are eroding families, another church decided to emphasize the Sabbath, canceling worship one Sunday a month and encouraging others to simply relax, enjoy creation, and treasure their loved ones.

No matter what form our prophetic action takes, there is a key question to ask ourselves: How does this ministry demonstrate the world-overturning power of Jesus’ teachings? How will it call people to examine their own complicity in our culture, which is riddled with false idols and systemic injustices?

Conclusion

Mary discovered her own unique worth in God’s plan and learned how her gifts were meant to be used for the kingdom of God. She also glimpsed the world-overturning nature of the new reality her son would proclaim.

This Advent, how can we take these two themes—recognizing that God has chosen us and hearing the radical call of the Gospel—and make them a reality in

Mary’s Appearance in Scripture

Apart from Jesus’ birth narratives, Mary has few appearances in the New Testament.

In Matthew, we hear that she fled with Joseph to Egypt following the visit of the magi. Joseph had been warned in a dream to do this in order to escape King Herod and his slaughter of innocent children (Matt. 2:13–15).

The only mention of Mary in Mark’s Gospel comes in chapter 6 as Jesus is teaching in the synagogue of his hometown, Nazareth. The crowds are amazed by his wise words and healing power. They wonder where these gifts came from, saying, “Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?” (Mark 6:3).

Luke, by far, has the most extensive portrayal of Mary in the Gospels. We hear the beautiful story of her relationship to Elizabeth, mother of Jesus’ cousin, John the Baptist. We hear how she and Joseph brought Jesus to the temple to be circumcised on the eighth day, as required by Jewish law. Luke’s final mention of her is when Jesus is twelve years old. The family has traveled to Jerusalem for Passover, and as they leave to return to Nazareth, they discover that Jesus is not among their group of travelers. They search for three days, finding him in the great temple of Jerusalem, already transfixing others with his teachings. Mary scolds him, saying “Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety” (Luke 2:48).

In John’s Gospel, Mary is never mentioned by name; she is simply identified as Jesus’ mother. We see her at the wedding in Cana as the party runs out of wine. She says to Jesus, “They have no wine.” Jesus replies, “Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.” Persistent, Mary says to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you,” and Jesus transforms the water into wine better than any yet served at the wedding (John 2:1–5). Mary’s only other appearance in John is the famous scene at the foot of the cross, as Jesus asks John to watch over her following his crucifixion (John 19:25–27).

After Jesus’ death, we find Mary mentioned only one more time. In Acts chapter 1, she joins the other disciples in the upper room for prayer on the day of Pentecost (Acts 1:14). This leads us to believe that she played an integral part in the early community of faith.

Mary’s later life and death are absent from Scripture. What became of her? Early church tradition holds that, following the wishes of Jesus, she went to live with John, moving with him to Ephesus.

our own lives? How can we become God-bearers in our own humble settings? As we answer these questions for ourselves and our churches—then act on them—we find our places at the manger.

Note

1. Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination: 40th Anniversary Edition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018), 81–82.

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SAMPLE SESSION