



BIBLE STUDY

RESPOND

The cloud of witnesses surrounding us can teach us much about what it means to bring your best self to the life you've been given. This Bible study will invite us into the dynamic web of life anchored by “renew, respond, and rejoice.” This is vocation in the richest sense of that term—who are you and how are you called to service in a world full of surprises? There is so much to do. How do we stay spiritually healthy in the face of overwhelming need?

Gifted to Serve

by Catherine Malotky
and David Engelstad

Key verse

Luke 1:46–48

And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he had looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed.”

Materials you will need

- Journal
- Bible
- *Evangelical Lutheran Worship (ELW, the red book)* or *Lutheran Book of Worship (LBW, the green book)*
- Paper cup with a hole poked in the bottom
- Measuring cup with water in it and a bowl to catch the water

Beginning

Reflection

READ LUKE 1:46–48 ALOUD.

1. Mary received astounding news. Imagine Mary singing this song after learning that she would conceive a son who would be important to the well-being of her people. How would you characterize her spirit based on the words of this hymn?
2. Hold the punctured paper cup over an empty bowl. Pour water into the cup. What happens? What has to happen to keep water in the cup?
3. In your journal, write about a time when the blessing poured into you, and then poured out on someone else. How did you feel about it? What did you notice about the staying power of the blessing you received? Have you ever tried to pour from an empty cup? How did that go?

Set the stage

This session shifts our focus from renewal to response. We often seek renewal—think of an empty cup in need of filling. We invite God to fill us with blessing and affirm our gifts. When we respond, we are pouring out the essence and substance of our renewal. Love, compassion, kindness, and other gifts flow into us, and we respond by sharing our abundance with a world in need. We become servants.

Recall the people of Israel, wandering in the wilderness, being given manna each day by God. There was always manna enough for the day, but no more. This demanded that they both trust God and also discipline themselves to gather the manna each day. Your daily devotions and other acts of renewal are like this practice. These activities become spiritual food so that you might have the strength and energy to serve others.

In this session, we will explore the way response flows from renewal. Critical questions to keep in mind as you study:

- How do I discern which of my gifts God wishes me to offer to others at this time?
- What do I do if God seems to be asking me for more than or less than I think I have to offer?
- Whom do I serve? Where will/can I offer my gifts?
- How do I serve from a sense of fullness?

Learning from the saints

In thinking about *respond*, we will consider the stories of two women: Mary the mother of Jesus, and the widow at Zarephath. One was asked to respond as a young woman full of potential, while the other was asked to respond at a time when death seemed imminent. Both are now remembered as faithful responses to God's call. (See "Choosing Joy," p. 12.)

Mary's witness

In the story of Mary's call to be the mother of Jesus in Luke (1:26–56), Mary was a young woman full of potential, engaged to be married, at the front end of a life she could imagine might be full of dreams come true. If you don't know the story, read it to acquaint yourself.

4. What, exactly, was Mary told she was chosen to do? (Luke 1:31)
5. Based on this call or "assignment," what tasks would her job description include if you were to write it? Get specific! What was the time line for this responsibility?
6. What challenges did Mary encounter along the way? Think of Mary pondering how to be the mother of Jesus. What kind of thoughts and questions can you imagine may have gone through her mind as Jesus was growing up? (Luke 2:21–51)
7. What do you think she might have done to provide herself with the support she needed to respond to this calling? What would you have done or what did you do as a brand new mother? (see Luke 1:39–56 and 2:21–24)

Years of tradition and story-telling have smoothed out the challenges of Mary's assignment. For Mary, *respond* was the daily call to love and parent Jesus, and she did so by asking for God's help and trusting in God's blessing.

8. Consider call(s) that come (or came) to you when you feel/felt full of potential and vitality and are literally bursting with life. What does enthusiasm contribute to the ways you respond? How is your response vulnerable if it is based too heavily on enthusiasm?

The widow's witness

The widow at Zarephath's story is told in 1 Kings 17:8–24. It's a story of loss, preceded by the death of her husband, and soon, she believes, her own death and her son's. Read the story aloud.

9. How does the mood of this story compare to Mary's story?
10. Is the widow in need of renewal? What would help her (17:7, 12)?
11. Given what you know about the widow's predicament, if you were the widow, how might you have responded to Elijah's first request (17:10–11)?
12. Recall a time when you felt like you were starving, or felt depleted and empty.

We all go through periods in our lives when we are not getting what we need to be healthy and responsive. When you have felt this depleted, it is easy to assume that God will surely agree that this is not a good time to ask you to part with your meager resources. How do you or might you tell God that this is not a good time for you to be a “provider” for others?

At the beginning of the story, God tells Elijah, “I have commanded a widow there to feed you.” The widow does not hear this command from God, just Elijah does. So when Elijah asks her for some food, her response is guarded and hesitant. For a woman

who parented and tended a household, what kind of hospitality is it to offer such a pittance to a stranger in need? Surely Elijah could do better elsewhere. She must have wondered, “Can't he see that my days of giving are over? Can't he see that God wouldn't want to take what little I have?”

13. The widow's capacity to respond was severely diminished by her circumstances, and yet Elijah asked her to serve. What emotions did she have to muster up in order to respond? What helped her to re-imagine what God might have been up to with this seemingly insensitive request?
14. What did Elijah's request reveal about God's opinion of her capacity to respond? How might this have been a source of renewal for her?

Trying it out

Despite the fact that many people think it's the big things that will bring them happiness, often it's a small act of kindness that brightens their day. A person diagnosed with cancer would like to hear, “It's all gone and will never come back.” But more often, what they hear that brings them hope is the voice of a friend saying: “You and your story are sacred to me. You can tell me anything.”

Respond is often a quiet act. Like the air we breathe, it nurtures life without calling attention to itself; often without people even being aware of it. And as such, it

not in spokane?

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cultivates humility. Instead of asking, “What can I do that others will notice,” it invites us to ask, “What can I do that others need me to do?”

Self-talk

In the story of the widow’s mite, Jesus commends to his disciples the behavior of a widow whose offering was but two copper coins (Luke 21:1–4).

15. Do you commend yourself when you make a response that seems minor? Why or why not?
16. Jesus also said: “Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much” (Luke 16:10). God is clearly aware of our “little” acts of kindness and hospitality and assigns great value to it. What might help you to notice and value this behavior as God does?

It is likely that you are well practiced at this quiet kind of *respond*. Maybe you are so well practiced that, like the widows in Luke 21 and 1 Kings 17, you no longer hear the voice of God calling you to make these responses. Cultivating the habit of responding “faithfully in a very little” is good. But even better is both cultivating that habit and also noticing that God is the inspiration and witness of this habit. Why? Because little acts of faithfulness run the risk of being overlooked by others, even our loved ones.

Self-care

In a context where there is little or no thanks, *respond* can sometimes turn into *resent*. We can feel used, unappreciated, taken for granted. We can wonder: “What difference does it make that I do these things?” We can be tempted to quit responding, as a way either to force others to notice our importance and the importance of what we do; or as an act of giving up and giving in to the perspective that we have nothing important to offer. (See “Renew, Respond, Rejoice...Resent?” p. 22.)

This is why it is so important where we fix our gaze when we respond. In addition to seeing those we serve and their response, faith would invite us to also see God’s response to us. When we see God smiling at us, encouraging us, inspiring us, and promising to bless our responses—then we can know that what we have done has already made a difference. No matter what other thanks we might receive, we know God is at work in us and through us.

17. Think of a time recently when you responded lovingly to someone. Recall what you were thinking/feeling when you were making this response. Note these things in your journal.
18. Now, imagine God as the author of your response. See God guiding your acting. Hear God encouraging and championing your response. See God lingering as a witness to your loving, inviting you to savor and enjoy love well intended and spent. How does that change your thinking/feeling? Note these things in your journal.

Closing

Light a candle and remember times when you have been aware of God’s call to you. Close with this offertory prayer:

Blessed are you, O God, maker of all things. Through your goodness you have blessed us with these gifts: our selves, our time, and our possessions. Use us, and what we have gathered, in feeding the world with your love, through the one who gave himself for us, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen. (ELW, p. 107) 🌸

The Rev. Catherine Malotky and the Rev. David Engelstad have spent two and a half decades as ELCA pastors, serving congregations together in the early years, and then following separate ministerial paths into communications and chaplaincy. Their interests in spiritual direction, coaching, and faith formation inspired this Bible study. They are honored to be the parents of two 20-something daughters and two aging canines. They have just begun empty nesting and are enjoying hiking, biking, writing, and photography.

RESPOND

Gifted to Serve

Overview of session concepts

In our day, we can too quickly imagine that our response to God's call needs to be spectacular. The media brings us stories about momentous accomplishments, and often biblical stories are about the famous or those who had game-changing impact on the life of God's people. However, our response to God's call is often modest, and in fact, it is more often the steady, day-in and day-out responses we make that actually change the world, slowly and over time.

Jesus' mother was not asked to create a start-up business or be volunteer-extraordinaire at her local synagogue. Mary was called to be a mother, to further God's purpose in each moment of Jesus' growth and development.

The widow at Zarephath was not called to make rain out of nothing or rescue her household through ingenuity and brilliant diplomacy. Instead, she was called to trust enough to give away her last bit of flour and oil to the prophet who asked for it. Her willingness to trust was not rewarded with pomp and circumstance. In fact, her son died soon after. The prophet brought him back to life, but she still had to deal with the agony of his decline and death first.

Beginning

Reflection

Gather the group's attention and invite them to center their energy for the session ahead. You could light a candle in silence as a way of creating a worshipful atmosphere. Ask a volunteer to read Luke 1:46–48 slowly. Then work your way through the questions. Though the cup and water is a simple demonstration,

it creates a physical image of how renewal and response are intimately connected.

READ LUKE 1:46–48 ALOUD.

1. Mary was hopeful and trusted in the promises God said her son would fulfill.
2. The water runs out of the bottom of the cup. In order to keep water in the cup, you have to keep pouring water into the cup.

Learning from the saints

4. What, exactly, was Mary told she was chosen to do? (Luke 1:31) In modern language, she would become pregnant, give birth, and become a mother.
5. Encourage participants to be specific: change the baby's diapers (however that looked in those long ago days); get up at night to nurse the baby; manage skinned knees; feed her child daily; tell him stories before bed; and so forth. The time horizon was every day for the rest of her life, as it is for any mother.
6. Anna and Simeon were the first of many to say things about Jesus that Mary had to either believe or reject. Jesus began exercising his spiritual interests early. In some ways, as a prodigy, he needed special attention.
7. She sought out other mothers, like Elizabeth. She followed the traditions of her faith by circumcising and naming her son (2:21) and presenting him at the temple (2:22–24).
8. It helps you to dive in; get going. It wears off; we can become discouraged; lose our sense of motivation or the energy to persist in our calling.

The widow's witness

The widow at Zarephath's story is told in 1 Kings 17:8–24.

9. Mary's story is full of hope and new life. The widow's story is about life's ending.
10. The widow is in need of water and food, a most basic physical renewal, or she will die.
11. Most participants will probably say they would not respond to Elijah's first request. She has virtually nothing. Why should she share it with him?
13. Trust and hope. She had to re-engage the idea that her days of purpose and service were not over just because her gifts were so meager and ordinary. "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways" (Isaiah 55:8).
14. God noticed the widow, saw her value, trusted her faithfulness, and gave her a role that needed to be played out. She had to

have come to the surprising realization: God really still needs me. If *God* deemed her capacity sufficient, that's renewing!

Closing

Do take the time to create a worshipful atmosphere at the end. You could sing a version of the Magnificat as part of the closing. It is the gospel canticle in the Service of Evening Prayer (*ELW*, p. 314–315), or choose another rendition. There are many!

Light a candle and remember times when you have been aware of God's call to you. Close with this offertory prayer:

Blessed are you, O God, maker of all things. Through your goodness you have blessed us with these gifts: our selves, our time, and our possessions. Use us, and what we have gathered, in feeding the world with your love, through the one who gave himself for us, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen. (ELW, p. 107) 🌿



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