



# MARY'S SONG: THE MAGNIFICAT

by Diane Jacobson

OF MANY GENERATIONS:  
MARY, ELIZABETH, AND LYDIA

BIBLE STUDY : SESSION 2

## Theme verse

“Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.” Isaiah 58:12.

## Introduction

As we'll see in this session, much in our theme verse is reflected in Mary's song.

## Digging In

Begin with prayer, a song, hymn, and a devotional reading of Luke 1:46–50.

God of all generations, bless us as we gather to study and sing. Ground us in the past and make us instruments of your Word into the future. This we ask in the name of Christ. Amen.

## Hymn

“My Soul Proclaims Your Greatness” (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 251)

## Questions to Ponder

1. Invite someone to read Luke 1:46–50 and ask one, two, or three of the following questions: What do you notice? What challenges you? What gives you hope? What is God up to?
2. When you finish discussing your opening questions, take out your pens and papers and make a gift list inspired by Mary's song. What gifts does this song give to you? What gifts would you like to pass on to the next generation?

## Remembering the Literary Context

Often when we hear the Magnificat, we think that Mary is responding directly to the announcement by the Angel Gabriel. But as you recall from last month, Mary sings her song in response to Elizabeth's unexpected greeting and blessing. Her song in many ways matches Elizabeth's song. They are singing to us inter-generationally by singing to each other.

When Mary and Elizabeth sing, they join three significant women in the Bible who teach us to sing in response to both victory and blessing. Miriam, Deborah, and Hannah all sing such songs, giving God the glory. In singing songs, these women become our teacher, our theologians, our guides. The poet, the singer, is the soul of the people.

In session one, we spent some time exploring the connections between the first chapter of Luke and the story of Hannah in 1 Samuel 1–2. Luke invites us to imagine that Mary, when faced with Elizabeth's remarkable recognition, found no better words of response than the words of Hannah, that distant ancestress of the faith. It is as though Mary dug deep down into the tradition and lit upon that other story of unexpected and miraculous birth and joined herself to Hannah forever through the intertwining of their songs. Hers is a deep understanding of both sacred word and the ever broadening depth of inter-generational understanding.

## Questions to Ponder

3. Invite the group to read Hannah's song in 1 Samuel 2:1–10. What are the similarities and differences between the Hannah's song and the Magnificat? What song from your past would you sing in response to a friend naming you as having a special calling?

## How Shall We Sing a Biblical Song?

Before we dig into the details of Mary's song, let us consider one of the important ways that biblical poetry creates meaning. Rather than depending on rhymes as we tend to do in English, all biblical poetry is structured around the rhythm of the parallel line. Almost all lines have two parts, A and B. One scholar describes the rhythm as "A and what's more B." Sometimes the two parts echo one another. This is what we usually think of as parallel thoughts.

### Sing the Song: Begin with Praise

Turn your attention to the opening three verses of Mary's song in Luke 1:46–56:

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.  
Surely, from now on all generations will call  
me blessed;  
For the Mighty One has done great things for  
me, and holy is his name.

The song begins with exultant praise, a pure outpouring of praise coming from soul and spirit. We feel the praise in the echoing rhythm of the first verse. It is no small matter that Mary responds to God's gifts with praise. This is Mary's first lesson in discipleship. We are called to name the manifestations of grace in our lives and to give God the glory. Often we moderns tend to fall into the trap of thinking that the blessings in our lives are our own doing. We turn to God when we want things, but we can forget to praise God for doing great things in our lives.

### Questions to Ponder

4. In what way have you praised God lately for what has occurred in your life? How does praising God shape you as a disciple?

## Divine Strength, Human Lowliness

One further emphasis of the opening verses of Mary's song stands out. The strength and favor of God "the Mighty One" comes in human lowliness, in human weakness. People in Scripture are so often called when they are young, weak, or broken like Hannah. One thinks of Jeremiah, David, Moses, and scores of other biblical leaders who are strongest at their weakest point. Mary's line is thus most striking—he has "looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant." Think together about what this means and how it foreshadows the life and death of Mary's son. God's greatest strength will be made manifest on a cross. Mary's song of praise is profoundly deep.

This insight is sealed by the completion of the parallel line, "Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed."

She adds to her own blessing by saying that what will elicit blessing from future generations is not only that she carries the Messiah but also that the Lord has favored her lowliness. Mary's standing as the one who represents the lowly is the very reality that elicits her ties to all generations.

### Question to Ponder

5. Over the years many women in the church have thought themselves to be insignificant, not worth attending to. How might Mary's words address and even reorient this perception?

### Sing the Song: To and For the World

Mary's song begins with her personal experience of grace, but it does not stay there. Her song moves out from her own experience into the community, to describe the particular ways of God in the world. Mary begins the middle of her song by proclaiming: "His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation."

Which is to say that Mary begins her proclamation of God's public work by singing of God's never-ending mercy. God ever looks on the world with compassion.

God's mercy is extended to those who fear him. We are sometimes put off by the word *fear*, but the idea is central to both biblical and Lutheran notions of our relation to God. To fear God is to love God, to stand in awe of God, to obey God, and to know God's power as well as God's grace. The grace of the first half of the verse is literally extended "from generation to generation." For Mary, grace is the foundation of all generations.

And in Mary's song, grace is made manifest in a most astonishing fashion, for her song now moves to praise the Lord's capacity for profound reversal: "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."

Mary's song has social punch. The world is not what it seems. God's passion for justice has and will mark the world. Mary has seen the reality of God's favor operative in her own life. But God's work is much bigger than her own experience. Mary understands God to have promised that all reality is or shall be marked with the same capacity for divine intervention and reversal. She does not know yet how this will come about, but she trusts in God's promise.

### Questions to Ponder

6. Look again at our theme verse, Isaiah 58:12. How do the middle verses of Mary's song give content to the notion of being a "repairer of the breach?"
7. You might make a list of the reversals you see in Mary's song. What reversals might you add if you were singing this song?

### Questions to Ponder

8. How do you suppose that a prince might respond to Mary's proclamation of reversal? How do we who have so many privileges respond?

## Sing the Song: Remembering the Promise Made to Past Generations

Look now at the last verses that Mary sings: "God has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, Abraham and to his descendants forever."

Mary points us back to God's ancient promise and asks that we engage in the profound theological activity of remembering. Remembering is the very activity that forms us in the faith from generation to generation. Think about this! When we remember, we tell stories from our past that are central to understanding not only who we have been but also who we are and who we wish to become. We are literally re-membering, forming ourselves as a community.

### Remembering the Literary Context

To get the full impact of this remembering to which Mary calls us, look once again at the ending of the companion song that Hannah sang.

In 1 Samuel 2:10, Hannah points us forward:  
The LORD will judge the ends of the earth;  
he will give strength to his king,  
and exalt the power of his anointed, his messiah.

In many ways, this ending of Hannah's song is its most remarkable feature. Hannah ends with a promise that God will give strength and power to his king, his "messiah." In Hebrew the word "messiah" means, the "anointed one." Think about this! Hannah, just as Mary will do in the distant future, has just sung about the bows of the mighty being broken and the poor being raised from the dust.

Hannah has proclaimed that one does not prevail by might, and then she sings of the Lord exalting the power of his king. How can one both break the mighty and exalt the king? The tradition continually struggles with this paradox. When we read Hannah's song as Christians, this promise points us to a messianic king

whose crown is a crown of thorns and whose throne is a cross.

And then, a thousand years after Hannah, Mary asks us to remember this very promise. Mary looks back to God's promises to her people and sings of God's relationship to Israel in remarkable ways. She names the past as touched and owned by God.

Mary invites us to remember that God always remembers past promises. God remembers by reason of God's own divine and everlasting mercy. This is the very same mercy shown "from generation to generation." Precisely because God is merciful, God's promise to Israel is steadfast and eternal.

That is, this promise is dependent solely on God's essential character—God's tendency towards mercy. So in recalling the promise of the past, Mary also points us forward to the fulfillment of God's promise in Christ.

### Questions to Ponder

9. **Mary asks us to remember. What stories do you tell when you are asked to remember God's promise and God's mercy? Do you tell personal stories? Do you tell stories from your congregation or community? Do you tell biblical stories? Turn to your neighbor and tell one such story.**

### Sing the Song from Generation to Generation

It's time to bring our thoughts together. In her song Mary truly becomes our teacher, theologian, and guide. Her song bestows on us a profound lesson in discipleship. From Mary we learn to begin with praise. From Mary we learn to see power in weakness. From Mary we learn to see our own lives within the larger picture of God's work in the world. From Mary we learn to begin with God's grace. From Mary we learn of God's passion for justice. From Mary we learn to see all things in the light of God's promise. And from Mary we learn how to gather these things together and sing them from generation to generation.

### Questions to Ponder

10. **Take out your initial gift lists of what Mary's song gives to you and the gifts you would like to pass on. What would you add now to your lists? What most stands out for you?**

### Broadening the Context: Mary's Journey in Luke

In her song, Mary has pointed us to a number of aspects of discipleship. But a final step in exploring Mary's song is broadening the context once more. Mary becomes our teacher not only in what she sings but also in how she acts.

In his fuller portrait of Mary throughout his gospel, Luke helps us to understand that gradually, through pondering in her heart, Mary comes to accept the inevitable and unrelenting direction of her son's mission. She ponders Gabriel's greeting when she first hears the news of the son she is carrying (1:29). She ponders as well the angelic words reported to her by the shepherds at the manger (2:19).

And later, when the 12-year-old Jesus makes his own way to the temple to sit among the teachers, Mary also responds to her son's words that he must be in his "Father's house" by treasuring them in her heart (2:51).

And even before that time, at the dedication of her son in the temple, Mary is met by Simeon who seals his blessing with these haunting words,

This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul also (Luke 2:34–35).

In time Mary sheds her role as mother, gives up her own claim on her child's future, and becomes his disciple. Mary comes to see her own son as the one whom she, as others, must follow. On the cross, her son becomes her savior, and there she must accept the piercing of the sword in her soul. The very same "soul" that magnifies the Lord at the beginning of her song, rejoicing in the gift of her child, must give that child into a dark future

for the sake of the world that God loves.

Finally we picture Mary, not as Luke leaves her, but as John has her, standing at the foot of the cross (John 19:25).

### Questions to Ponder

11. Mary's song is completed when the whole story of her life as a disciple surrounds it. What final lessons might you add to your gift list, given the fullness of Mary's life?

To wrap up this session, take up Mary's song and read it or sing it one more time.

### Looking Forward

In our final summer session we will turn from Elizabeth and Mary to another gathering of women in the New Testament led by Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. Spend some time in the next weeks reading and living with Acts 16:11–15. Put it in the context of all of Acts 16. And just for fun, find some favorite purple object or piece of clothing to live with for the month and wear it or bring it to the next session. 🌸

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LEADER GUIDE : SESSION 2

### Digging In

As we did last month, we begin with devotional questions. You might want to look again at the suggestions made then concerning the four sorts of questions we can bring to a biblical passage.

### Questions to Ponder

One way to invite the group to read Hannah's song and compare it to Mary's is to read them together as a litany.

### Remembering the Literary Context and How Shall We Sing a Biblical Song?

Our literary reading of Mary's song invites us to consider two questions: What is the literary context, and how do we read biblical poetry. Many folks have written about how biblical poetry works. The scholar who described the rhythm as "A and what's more B" is

James Kugel in *The Idea of Biblical Poetry*, (New Haven: Yale, 1981). A fine accessible summary of parallelism as "echoing" or "extending" can be found in Rolf and Karl Jacobson's *Invitation to the Psalms: A Reader's Guide for Discovery and Engagement*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013).

In the online resources ([www.gathermagazine.org](http://www.gathermagazine.org)) you will find "Two Poetically Balanced Looks at the NRSV of Mary's Song" that will help you read Mary's Song as poetry.

### Sing the Song: Begin with Praise

As you work your way through Mary's song, you might want to make room for actual singing. You could regularly pause and ask the gathered women what song each part reminds them of. Somehow we think differently when we sing together. And such activity serves as a reminder that Mary's Song is just that!

## Wisdom from Luther

We began this session asking devotional and literary questions. Throughout this session we will encounter wisdom from Luther's essay on the Magnificat. You'll find these online. Luther invites us into thinking theologically about Mary's Song. And what we encounter through Luther's readings are some very central convictions about how God works in our lives. Two of the central ideas we will encounter are these:

Luther begins with a theology of grace. As Luther reads the Bible, he becomes convinced that God comes first to us. We do not have to work or earn our way to God. In fact we cannot come to God by doing anything. Salvation is an unearned gift of grace from God for Jesus' sake.

Luther also speaks of a central theology of the cross. For Luther, understanding that God works through the cross for our salvation is the key to understanding who God is and how God works with us and for us. Luther believes that Scripture, taken as a whole, points us to a God who works through suffering rather than through glory. God is revealed most truly to us through suffering in the world in ways that lead us to the cross.

## Remembering and Broadening the Literary Context

One could look in much greater detail at the similarities between the stories of Hannah and Mary. Both sto-

ries stand at the beginning of the birth of prophets and kings. They are a thousand years apart. A great date to remember is that David was king in 1000 B.C. When you look at the story of Hannah, you see in her an irrepressible desire for a son. And then she gives birth to Samuel. And what does she do? She brings her son Samuel to the house of the Lord and there she gives him into the Lord's service.

She says: "For this child I prayed, and the LORD has granted me the petition that I made to him. Therefore I have lent him to the LORD; as long as he lives, he is given to the LORD." (1 Samuel 1:27-28)

Hannah's response is stunning. She recognizes a truth about her calling. Much as she wanted this child, much as she felt incomplete without him, her wish was not, finally, for her own self-fulfillment. She wished for this child so that her child might fulfill his own divine calling. She was acutely aware that all children finally belong more to God than they do to us. In this way she is also a foremother of Mary in her own journey of giving her son back to God.

Perhaps this is yet another way that Hannah and Mary serve as models for us in the church. Are we, like our foremothers, able to see our callings as directed outward, away from ourselves, in service to God and to God's people?

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