

ST. MARY'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

Faith Quest

Bible Background for Mary and Elizabeth

This lesson set was written by Rev. Lisa Martin, except where other sources are noted. Permission is given for use within the local church setting. The lessons contained here are computers, movies, drama, and games

Lesson Summary

Movies - Children will watch Jesus of Nazareth for an overview of Jesus' birth story, with a focused discussion about Mary and Elizabeth.

Drama- Children will form dyads and imagine the conversation between Elizabeth and Zechariah, Mary and Joseph, Elizabeth and Mary.

Games - Children will play games to sort out the similarities and differences in John and Jesus' birth, and between John and Jesus' mother.

Scripture

Luke 1:5-66

Memory Verse

"For nothing will be impossible with God." Luke 1:37

Bible Background

The "Magnificat" of Mary has as its root Hannah's prayer in 1 Samuel 2:1-11. Hannah, a woman long infertile more closely resembles Elizabeth than Mary. Some ancient manuscripts actually read "Elizabeth" here, and some say "she" leaving the speaker ambiguous. [All modern translations use the phrase "Mary said," (Luke 1:46) but that is more due to tradition than convincing evidence from Biblical sources.] Like Hannah's son, Samuel (who went to live with the priest Eli as soon as he was weaned), both John and Jesus were dedicated at the temple and went on to prophetic ministries.

The gospels of Matthew and Luke have some material in common with Mark, and some additional material in common with each other, but some very key passages that are unique to their gospels. The birth narratives fall into these categories. Mark and John tell no stories of Jesus birth. Matthew covers stories of Joseph, the Magi, and King Herod. Luke covers stories of Mary, Elizabeth and Zechariah, the trip to Bethlehem and the shepherds, and Jesus' presentation at the temple. Almost nothing, other than his parents' names, is corroborated between the Matthean and Lucan birth narratives. [Even the genealogies (Matthew 1, Luke 3:23) differ markedly.] Matthew emphasizes that Jesus is the Messiah, the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies. Luke's birth story emphasizes that Jesus came for the unclean and oppressed. Look at the list of unclean or oppressed people that are involved in this early story: Elizabeth, a childless woman past child-bearing age; Mary, an unwed mother; shepherds; Simeon an old man near death; Anna, elderly widow. The emphasis on Jesus coming to the marginalized people continues to be emphasized throughout the gospel of Luke, especially in stories found on in Luke (the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son). Luke 1:52-53 is a good summary of Luke's interpretation of the gospel.

What do we know about Mary? Surprisingly little. She was a young, Jewish girl of the first century AD, living under Roman occupation, betrothed to Joseph. Women in Mary's day had it hard. Parents wanted boys. Girls born to poor families were often abandoned and left to die either at birth or as small children; they could also be sold as slaves. Both Roman and Jewish law had forbidden this practice and yet it went on. This led to a shortage of marriageable women (age 12 or older) so by this point in her life, Mary would have been a valuable commodity. Her father would ask a bride price for her, considered compensation for the expense of raising a daughter. A man who had been saving money for years would pay the bride price and the couple would be considered betrothed. Such marriages could be arranged through a matchmaker, or between the groom and a male relative of the bride. Often when the betrothal took place, the girl would go to live with members of the man's family until she was of age to marry. This period also ensured that she was not pregnant before the marriage. At anytime during the betrothal person a woman could be dismissed by the groom. If she was dismissed for cause, the money would be returned to the groom. If it was simply his whim, the woman's family would keep the money already paid. A woman did not have the right to end the relationship. Joseph's decision to "dismiss her quietly" might indicate that he was willing to dismiss Mary without naming a reason and thereby forfeiting the dowry money he had paid.

In addition to having low status as a poor woman, Mary faced was oppression from the government. Judea was a Roman colony, although most of the problems they faced didn't come directly from the emperor. Rather, the emperor appointed local leaders who were the true oppressors. As long as they carried out the wishes of Rome, they were free to govern as they will. In the case of Herod, that meant heavy, heavy taxation so he could build glamorous palaces and great public works. Ridiculous taxes were expected from all people. If you couldn't pay your taxes, you would have to sell all or part of your land, or be sold yourself into slavery, often forced military service. Families lost the farm and became day laborers, free people became slaves, and families that once had lived in the same place for generation after generation became fragmented and sent all over the kingdom. Joseph's position as a carpenter did not signify a well-paid, high-skilled craftsman as it does today. Rather it was an indication that he was landless and forced to work for wages.

Read Luke 1:46-55 thinking about Mary's world and what she saw happening all around her. Do you think Mary was more joyful at this news because she understood suffering?

What do we know about Elizabeth? Even less than Mary. It is her husband, Zechariah who receives the promise from the angel (Luke 1:5-23) and since he was struck mute because of his doubt, Elizabeth knew nothing of the angel's visit. When she says in verse 25 "This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people." She is not responding to the angel's visit. Probably, like Rachel and Hannah before her she prayed daily for a child. This statement of Elizabeth's faith is her belief that God answered her prayers. It is not until Mary arrives and the child leaps in Elizabeth's womb (vs. 41) that the Holy Spirit descends upon her and she receives some divine interpretation of what is happening to her, and her kinswoman, Mary. Clearly there is a contrast set up here between Mary and Zechariah (faithful and doubting) with Elizabeth as some sort of bridge. The righteous priest doubts, while the disgraced unmarried woman has faith. This sort of topsy-turvy look at who is right in God's eyes and who is wrong appears in all four gospels, but is especially prevalent in Luke.

The relationship between John and Jesus is important to note here, too. Luke goes to great lengths to show that John came before Jesus, and that John, even as an infant in utero, knew who Jesus was. In the early decades of Christianity, the relationship between John and Jesus was still confused, with communities of people who continued to follow John alongside Christian communities. Luke is, in part, convincing the John-followers that the one they should be following is Jesus.

The best way to read this story is SLOWLY. It is so familiar to us, that we can easily lose a lot of the meaning because we "know" what comes next. Be aware that we all put our "Christmas Culture" interpretation on this text. Take some time to examine what the text actually says, not what you think it says, or what someone once suggested it says.

What did the angel actually say? Mary? Elizabeth?

What, according to scripture was Mary's reaction? We often think of her as frightened, but the scripture only says she was perplexed and pondered the greeting. (She pondered later, after the shepherd's visit, too).

What images of Mary do you have from art or drama?

What Christmas memories influence your understanding of this text?

Teaching this Story to Kids

John vs. Jesus – We will be comparing and contrasting the situations of Mary and Elizabeth, which leads to the connection of Jesus and John.

Dumb – The NRSV translates Luke 1:20 as "mute" but many translations still use the word "dumb." If this comes up, explain that Zechariah was not stupid, and that "mute" is probably a better word because it means that someone can't speak. People who can't speak due to deafness or other disability are as smart as anyone else.

Disgrace – Elizabeth refers to her disgrace Luke 1:25. The ancient understanding was that if something bad happened to you it was because you did something bad. Elizabeth would have seen her inability to have children as a punishment from God. We understand infertility in medical terms today – but even we sometimes slip into feeling that medical problems are a punishment. How would you explain this to children? Mary, unwed and pregnant, would also have been considered a disgrace by her culture. How would Mary be viewed today?

Virgin -- There's no way around it, understanding the nature of the miracle in this story means having an understanding of normal procreation. Since you probably don't want to go into a discussion of the birds and the bees you can simply explain that Mary and Joseph didn't do any of the normal things people do to make a baby, that Jesus was a "miracle."

Matthew vs. Luke – Joseph is not a major factor in Luke's telling of the story and Herod and the magi don't appear at all. Don't let the children collapse all the events into one story. Biblical literacy includes understanding that the gospels are the good news told from four very different points of view. In this rotation, we aren't going to spend a lot of time with Joseph because we are focusing on Luke's story.