

Welcoming the Goodness of God

This week's scripture readings begin to connect the different puzzle pieces of God's coming reign. Intimate descriptions of family pregnancies are connected to grand ancient prophecies. Elizabeth's joyful greeting to her cousin Mary connect to a psalm lamenting a people who seem destined to eat only the bread of tears. Mary's song connects her present celebration with the blessings of Israel's past and with the hope-filled promises of the future.

Focus scripture: Luke 1:39–55

Mary hurries to Elizabeth's home in the hill country of Judea. Is she fearful of gossip or social rejection because of her impending pregnancy? Mary receives a warm and exuberant welcome from Elizabeth. Elizabeth recognizes that Mary is blessed both as a mother and for her faithfulness to God, and the child she carries is a gift from God.

What enables Elizabeth to see the righteousness of Mary's pregnancy, in spite of the culture's disdain? Perhaps because Elizabeth herself had been estranged from the society of the day. Elizabeth and her husband, Zechariah, were getting on in years (Luke 1:6) and had no children. Childbearing was of ultimate importance for Jewish women, as it was in many ancient cultures. It was assumed to be the fault of the woman if the marriage did not produce a child. Elizabeth's childlessness would have been a source of shame. Her pregnancy is a sign of God's favour; it removes the disgrace she has endured and restores her to a place of honour in her community.

Elizabeth could have become embittered from her years of ostracism. Devoid of competitive envy, Elizabeth not only speaks words of welcome, but her unfettered hospitality allows her own unborn child to welcome the coming of the One. Elizabeth's words position her among the prophets.

Extravagant hospitality grants Mary the courage to sing a song that closely echoes the song of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2:10. Part of the oral tradition in which she was raised, Mary would have been familiar with that song. Both songs celebrate God's compassion, mercy, and justice. The lowly will be lifted up; the haughty will be brought low. These reversals foreshadow the reversals Jesus' ministry will reveal. Both Hannah and Mary sing of revolutions that anticipate salvation from a just God.

The first four verses of the Magnificat (vv. 46–49), however, are unique to Mary. She sings of her relationship with God, and of God's activity within her own life. "My soul magnifies the

Lord," most likely uses the archaic meaning of the word "magnify" – to extol or praise.

A modern definition of magnify can misinterpret the word as an arrogant boast; implying that Mary enlarges God. We recognize, as did Mary, that human actions cannot enlarge the existing largesse and splendor of God. Instead, imagine Mary's soul as a magnifying glass, which merely makes the object more readily visible to human perception. A magnifying glass can also be used to focus light; it can concentrate the sun's rays onto a small area, heating or burning the exposed surface. Mary's praise illuminates God who will bring tenderness and clemency into the human world.

Mary's song echoes the ancient Jewish tradition and the stories of David. The story of Jesus is set firmly within the history of the Jewish people.

The other readings this week speak of the prophetic tradition within Jewish history, the long-held hope for a messiah, and the qualities that a God-ordained leader will have.

Micah 5:2–5a tells that God's leader will come from humble beginnings, and will shepherd God's people in the way of peace.

Psalm 80:1–7 is a request, a plea, to God to shine forth and restore the people. It connects with the other readings to the history and tradition of calling on God, of relying on God, through the ups and downs of life.

The writer of Hebrews 10:5–10 names Christ as the one who sings to God, as Mary does, of an intention and willingness to do God's will, to live in connection with the God of the Jewish tradition.

• • • • •

Elizabeth celebrates with Mary without hesitation. Mary sings a song magnifying God's goodness, rejoicing in what God has done for her and her people. Where is God calling you to welcome the in-breaking of God's reign? How might your celebration of God's goodness be part of a larger story? As you welcome God into your life, what puzzle pieces start to connect for you?



Focus scripture

**Luke 1:39–45,
(46–55)**

Additional scriptures

**Micah 5:2–5a
Luke 1:47–55 or
Psalm 80:1–7
Hebrews 10:5–10**

Teach us to sing your praise, O God. Teach us to sing with notes formed by hopes and acts of justice. Teach us to sing with harmonies shaped by mercy's wide embrace. Teach us to sing Mary's song of birth and rebirth for all creation in Jesus the Christ. Amen.

If you have Internet access, visit www.seasonsonline.ca to access Spirit Sightings for connections between current events and the focus passage.



The Focus for Adults

Both Elizabeth's and Mary's greetings wholeheartedly welcome God's blessings, even when such blessings are unexpected. An uninvited guest or an unplanned pregnancy might be challenging; Mary and Elizabeth choose to see them as opportunities to celebrate.

Mary sings the story of how the world changes for the good of all. The birth of the Christ child changes everything and nothing will be the same. Members of your group will be all too aware that there are still lowly ones to be lifted up and there are still thrones of power in need of bringing down. But in Advent we hear the promise that change is possible if we dare to believe.

As we draw nearer to Christmas, a holiday filled with traditions where we know what to expect, we discover that some surprises are yet to unfold. How will you let God surprise you this week? What connections will you find between God's work in your life and God's work in the greater world?

Dare we trust the promise of Mary's song? Pray that such faith – and faithful action – may be encouraged by this session.

Note: The sessions for the two weeks following this Sunday are designed for all ages to meet together to celebrate Christmas and the Epiphany. This week you can distribute copies of biblical background materials for the next two weeks.

Prepare

Before the session

- ❑ Read and prayerfully reflect on this week's scriptures, Micah 5:2–5a, Luke 1:47–55 or Psalm 80:1–7, Luke 1:39–45 (46–55), Hebrews 10:5–10, and [biblical background material](#) (p. 21).
- ❑ To access connections between current events and the focus passage, visit www.seasonsonline.ca and click on *Spirit Sightings*. Bring information that might inform this week's session.
- ❑ Set a worship space with blue or purple fabric (according to the tradition of your congregation), an open Bible, and an Advent wreath with four candles (four blue, or three purple and one pink).
- ❑ Bring Bibles, matches, and [basic supply kit](#) (p. 2).
- ❑ Bring, if possible, *Seasons Songbook* (Volume 8) and *Seasons Music CD* (Volume 8), CD or MP3 player; downloadable sheet music and MP3 recordings are available at www.seasonsonline.ca.

Gather

- ❑ Bring copies of resource sheet "[Prayers for Advent](#)" (p. 91).

- ❑ Bring, if possible, song "May Peace Be with You" (p. 10 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 8; #24 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 8).

Engage

- ❑ Bring photocopies of Luke 1:39–55 and copies of resource sheet "[Rebirth of Hope](#)."

Respond

Choose one or two options. Prepare and bring the materials.

- ❑ **Dig deeper:** copies of resource sheet "[The Beatitudes of Elizabeth](#)"
- ❑ **Music:** hymnals or songbooks, pieces of card stock
- ❑ **Christmas prayer:** copies of poem "Hope Is the Thing with Feathers" on resource sheet "[Poems](#)" (p. 92)
- ❑ **Spiritual practice: Holy Reading** nothing extra required

Bless

- ❑ Bring, if possible, song "I Am a Child of God" (p. 19 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 8; #13 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 8).
- ❑ Bring copies of biblical background materials for [December 30](#) (p. 27) and for [January 6](#) (p. 35).



Welcoming the Goodness of God

Scripture

Luke 1:39–45
(46–55)

FOCUS To discern how we might bear God's love into the world

Gather

Welcome participants and introduce any newcomers or visitors.

Opening ritual

Gather around the worship space. Distribute copies of the resource sheet "[Prayers for Advent](#)" (p. 91) and invite two volunteers to lead the prayer for "Advent Four" and light all four candles of the Advent wreath.

Sing or listen to, if possible, the song "May Peace Be with You" (p. 10 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 8; #24 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 8).

Moving into the theme

Families are complicated. Sometimes, when life changes unexpectedly, different family members interpret the change in very different ways. Think of a time something in your family changed. It could have been a birth, a marriage, a new job, a death, or something else that shook things up for you.

- **What was the change, and how did you react to it?**
- **What helps you to welcome changes into your life? What makes it harder?**

Engage

Setting the context

Recall the reading for the second Sunday in Advent, Luke 1:68–79, which celebrates the birth of John, the son of Elizabeth and Zechariah. This week's reading focuses on an earlier section of this chapter. Mary, excited after her visit from the angel Gabriel, goes to visit Elizabeth. Both stories emphasize, in keeping with the whole of Luke's gospel, the surprising work of God's Spirit. In today's passage, Mary and Elizabeth rejoice in the impending births of their children and God's purposes for change through them.

Exploring the texts

Distribute photocopies of **Luke 1:39–55**. Explain that as you read this passage aloud group members are to listen for the changes that God will bring (or has brought) through Jesus' birth. After the reading, invite participants to circle five phrases or sentences that they consider the most important of those changes. Explain you will read the text a second time. This time, ask individuals to join with you in reading aloud whatever they circled. After the reading, ask:

- **Luke is the only gospel writer who uses the term "Holy Spirit." What experience do you think Luke is trying to capture in this text?**

- **What does it mean for someone's spirit to rejoice in God? And does it say something different when the person, like Mary, is facing unexpected challenges?**

Mary's song is not just a description of her individual experience. It celebrates what God has done "from generation to generation," including reversing expectations by having "filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty."

- **What is the connection between Mary's experience and the experience of her people?**

Note the verb tenses in Mary's song in **Luke 1:47–55**. In most cases Mary celebrates what God has done. During the Season of Advent, we live both in the present and into the promised realm of God.

- **How does Mary's song speak of the present realm of God?**
- **How does Mary's song encourage living into promised realm of God?**

Other readings Invite participants to form three groups. Assign each group one of the additional readings: **Psalm 80:1–7**, **Micah 2:2–5a**, and **Hebrews 10:5–10**. Ask them to read their passages and discuss:

- **In what ways does this text speak of the changes God promises or brings to life?**
- **Where do you see a connection between this passage and Elizabeth’s blessing or Mary’s song?**

Gather the groups, and have each offer a brief summary of their discussion.

Making life connections

Even though they are both facing challenging circumstances, Elizabeth and Mary spend time celebrating with one another and welcoming the

goodness of God.

- **Where do you see faith communities providing this kind of support for people?**

Distribute copies of the resource sheet “The Rebirth of Hope” and provide time for participants to read.

- **How do you hear Mary’s song inviting change in your own life?**
- **How might Mary’s song inspire the church to respond to the cries of a broken-hearted world?**

Respond

Choose one or more of the following options.

- **Dig deeper: Blessed are you** Elizabeth blesses Mary, and voices the change God will bring through the infant Jesus. Distribute copies of the resource sheet “[The Beatitudes of Elizabeth](#)” and invite group members to read the material and discuss the questions.
- **Music** The words of the “Magnificat” (**Luke 1:47–55**) have inspired many great works of sacred music. Review hymn books, songbooks, and prayer books used in your church for pieces that are based on the words of **Luke 1:42–55**. Read the words of the hymns or songs aloud, or sing some of them together as a group. Then invite group members to read again for themselves **Luke 1:46–55** and choose some key words from these two “songs” (such as blessed, joy, holy, mercy, promise, strength) to write on pieces of card stock. Have them use these cards as a focus for reflection and meditation during the twelve days of the Christmas season.

- **Christmas prayer** The words of Mary and Elizabeth about the changes God’s reign will bring invite us to consider how God chooses to act in our own lives and in the life of the world. Read the poem “Hope is the thing with feathers” on the resource sheet “[Poems](#)” (p. 92). Distribute copies of the poem and invite participants to write their own prayer poems expressing the hope that “perches in their souls” during this season.



- **Spiritual practice: Holy Reading** *Lectio divina* or “holy reading,” is an ancient practice of meditating on scripture. Invite participants to engage in a reflection on this week’s focus passage. Read Luke 1:46–55. Identify an individual or group for whom the fulfillment of these words would be good news. Prayerfully seek the Spirit’s leading in discerning an action you can take on their behalf. Move forward with this action; do it as one anointed by God’s spirit. If time is limited, encourage them to use this discipline to guide devotion time at home.



Bless

Gather around the lit Advent candles again. Invite adults to reflect on the changes and hopes identified in the exchange between Elizabeth and Mary. Read aloud the focus statement: “To discern how we might bear God’s love into the world.” Encourage all group members to keep this in mind this week as you celebrate the Christ child.

Sing, or listen to, if possible, the song “I Am a Child of God” (p. 19 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 8; #13 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 8).

Pray the prayer on the [biblical background](#) page (p. 21).

Distribute the biblical background materials for [December 30](#) (p. 27) and [January 6](#) (p. 35).

Reflect

How did you sense the discussion of Mary’s song shaping the group members’ perceptions of Advent and Christmas? Plan how to share a Christmas greeting with each group member this week.



Rebirth of Hope

In this reading from the gospel of Luke, we can see how God loves and calls into service all people, including those who may seem meek and ordinary. We are reminded that God's reign of hope and justice comes in ways that surprise us and fill us with joy. In this gospel, peasants bring plenty; women nurture a revolution; and God chooses to work powerfully in and through the very ones who appear powerless.

Mary sings the glory of God's powerful love. She sings because God acts with justice and mercy to lift the lowly; God scatters the proud and feeds the hungry. Mary sings for all the generations who have hoped, and hope even still, for God's promise of justice to be fulfilled in their lives. Even as we wait for the birth of the babe, hope is being born again in today's world through those who work for God's justice. A story from Haiti, the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, speaks of justice and hope in a place so beset by the ills of the world that one might be tempted to give up hope altogether.

Each day, hundreds of villagers take medications to AIDS victims in the far reaches of Haiti. This AIDS treatment program was started by Dr. Paul Farmer, a Harvard medical professor and anthropologist. Dr. Farmer has been working in Haiti since he was in his 20s and is committed to bringing life-sustaining medical help to those living with AIDS. One of the biggest obstacles to expanding AIDS treatment in poor countries is the scarcity of doctors, nurses, and high-tech equipment. Dr. Farmer's program, Partners in Health, has minimized reliance on medical professionals by training ordinary citizens in rural Haiti to dispense medicines, draw blood, take X-rays, measure vital signs, and spread the word about how to prevent HIV infection. This program is bringing life and hope to otherwise forgotten people.

Reflect on other stories you have heard or read in which God's justice and hope are being proclaimed and acted out in the world. Though it may seem surprising and, at times, hard to believe, God also chooses to act in our lives. God's Spirit fills us with power so that our ordinary lives might bear God to the world.

From *The Season of Hope* by Cathie Talbot, copyright © 2006 by Wood Lake Publishing. Used by permission.



The Beatitudes of Elizabeth

“Beatitudes” is a term that usually refers to the set of blessings with which Jesus begins the teaching known as the Sermon on the Mount (in Matthew 5:3–12 and Luke 6:20–23). *Beatitude* comes from a Latin word meaning “to bless.”

Yet the first beatitudes – or blessings – in the gospel of Luke are not spoken by Jesus, but by Elizabeth to her relative Mary (Luke 1:42–45). Although the Beatitudes of Jesus are sometimes translated as “happy are those...” rather than “blessed are those...” Elizabeth’s beatitudes go far deeper than happiness.

Elizabeth offers three “beatitudes” or blessings as she speaks to Mary:

- “Blessed are you among women.” (Luke 1:42)
- “Blessed is the fruit of your womb.” (Luke 1:42)
- “Blessed is she who believed there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her.” (Luke 1:45)

The first blessing lifts up Mary among women. These words echo a blessing that was given to two other women in biblical times. Jael and Judith received this blessing for acts of the sword (Judges 5:24–26; book of Judith 13:6–8, 18). The difference is that Jael and Judith received such a blessing not for bearing children, but for the actions they took on behalf of their people.

- **What does Elizabeth’s blessing of Mary say about action on behalf of others?**

In the second blessing, Elizabeth blesses Mary’s unborn child. In Luke 1:14–17, an angel had told Elizabeth’s husband, Zechariah, that their unborn child would be a cause of rejoicing. And Elizabeth says, in Luke 1:44, that the child in her own womb leaped for joy when Mary came for a visit.

- **In what ways does this speak of a connection between Elizabeth’s child (John the Baptizer) and Mary’s child (Jesus)?**

Elizabeth’s third and final blessing is that of affirming Mary’s belief and trust (see Luke 1:38; 2:18; 2:51). In doing so, the gospel writer sets Mary as the first “believer” in this gospel.

- **What can we learn from Elizabeth’s beatitudes about the role Mary plays in the gospel story, beyond being the mother of Jesus?**

Prayers for Advent

Advent One

- One:** The Season of Advent invites us to share in God's promises, in the scriptures and in the promise of Jesus' coming.
- Two:** As we wait for God's promises to be revealed we light a candle to represent our anticipation. (*Lights one blue or purple candle.*)
- One:** May we wait with patience and with trust.
- Two:** May we live with expectation and hope.
- All:** O God, come journey with us through Advent, as we choose hope in this "now and not yet" time. Amen.

Advent Three

- One:** The Season of Advent invites us to look forward, to re-orient our lives to reflect God's reign of justice.
- Two:** We light the first two candles again, remembering God's promises and our longing for peace. (*Lights two blue or purple candles.*)
We light a third candle to represent our repentance and joy. (*Lights another blue or the pink candle.*)
- One:** May we wait with patience and with trust.
- Two:** May we live with expectation and hope.
- All:** O God, come journey with us through Advent, as we proclaim the good news in this "now and not yet" time. Amen.

Advent Two

- One:** The Season of Advent invites us to share in God's blessing, as we live toward God's reign.
- Two:** We light the first candle again, remembering God's promises. (*Lights one blue or purple candle.*)
We light a second candle to represent our longing for peace. (*Lights second blue or purple candle.*)
- One:** May we wait with patience and with trust.
- Two:** May we live with expectation and hope.
- All:** O God, come journey with us through Advent, as we travel in the way of peace in this "now and not yet" time. Amen.

Advent Four

- One:** The Season of Advent invites us to celebrate, to sing of birth and re-birth for all creation.
- Two:** We light the first three candles again, remembering God's promise to be with us, to bring peace and joy. (*Lights three blue candles or two purple and one pink candle.*)
We light the last candle to remind us of Mary's song of justice and salvation. (*Lights last blue or purple candle.*)
- One:** May we wait with patience and with trust.
- Two:** May we live with expectation and hope.
- All:** O God, come journey with us through Advent, as we live with love in this "now and not yet" time. Amen.



Poems

Hope is the thing with feathers

Hope is the thing with feathers

Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul,
And sings the tune without the
words,
And never stops at all,

And sweetest in the gale is
heard;

And sore must be the storm
That could abash the little bird
That kept so many warm.

I've heard it in the chilliest
land

And on the strangest sea;
Yet, never, in extremity,
It asked a crumb of me

By Emily Dickenson

Diamante poems

DIAMANTE POEMS are seven-line poems written in the shape of a diamond.

Simple version: Write a sixteen-word sentence and change it into a diamante poem by following this pattern for each line: one word, two words, three words, four words, three words, two words, one word.

More challenging: create a poem with the first and last words having opposite meanings:

