

mary's "yes!"

a bible study for advent

AIMS

To explore the story of Mary and relate it to our own lives, experiences and concerns.

INTRODUCTION

This Bible study is about Mary, as she is presented to us in the opening chapters of Luke's Gospel, but also her other appearances in that Gospel and the Book of Acts. In Luke's Gospel Mary's personal story is more fully told than that of any other follower of Jesus except Peter. If Peter illustrates for us our weakness and ability to fail yet still be welcomed by God, Mary's story lays before us just how costly saying "Yes!" to God can be. We are invited to place our own story alongside hers and see what we can learn about the effects of an intervening God let loose in our lives.



ABOUT THE SESSION

Three times we're going to read a short passage from Luke's Gospel about Mary and then think about the Mary we have met in the passage. Each time we will then have a period of about fifteen minutes of silence for participants to occupy for themselves, hopefully in the company of Mary. This may seem like a very long time to some, far too short a period to others. How each person uses these fifteen-minute periods of silence is entirely up to them. They may want to move around, find a corner of their own, or go outside if that helps. The idea is to help people to cross backwards and forward between Mary's story and our own story and start to make connections and identify what puzzles us, what challenges us and what encourages us. People may want to write some things down or draw a picture, maybe start some ideas for a poem or a prayer or a letter: anything that helps explore Mary's story (you may want to provide some resources so that people can choose to do this). Others may simply want to sit with a bit of Mary's story and find what they feel. At the end of each period of silence the groups will gather back together and invite those who wish to do so to share a flavour of their thoughts and feelings. There's no "right" way to

do this. It's an opportunity for everyone to explore aspects of Mary's story for themselves. The following notes are provided by way of guidance to session leaders (you may want to have a different leader for each part of Mary's story), and are not necessarily meant to be read out word for word, but give a flavour of what could be said.

PART ONE: MARY'S MOMENT

Read Luke 1:26-33

Before this moment we know absolutely nothing about Mary. This means that we can take her to be wonderfully ordinary up until this point – someone with whose predicament we can all try to identify.

So let's see if we can picture the scene.

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Imagine...

... if you will, a small single-storey white-washed courtyard in Nazareth. The noises from the street drift in on the heavy air. Perhaps some local children are playing a repetitive singing game; perhaps it's one that Mary used to play with other girls when she was growing up. Maybe a flock of sheep or goats sets up a chorus of loud bleating as it is herded up the narrow street and on into the centre of the town. The sounds of people at work & in conversation mingle reassuringly, forming a familiar yet ever-changing pattern of background noises – the sounds of people living & working around their houses - the sounds of "the way things are" and, for Mary, "the way they've always been".

As we watch, Mary stoops under the low entrance arch and enters the courtyard, returning from the baker's shop where she has taken her dough to be baked. She loves the way the scent of the jasmine in the corner greets her as she leaves the smells of the street behind. Under a dark fig tree in the far corner there is a bench offering rest and shade; her father's favourite spot after work in the last precious hour before the daylight fades. Under a simple lean-to in the other corner is the kitchen area, with its open fire, water jar and collection of cooking pots, oil and a few onions and other vegetables. This place is the centre of Mary's life, the centre of the house where she has grown-up, the place from which she will leave when she is to marry the man to whom she is betrothed - the carpenter Joseph. In a risky world, this place is as safe as it gets.

Then, out of nowhere, the great juggernaut of God's cosmic purpose roars up the street and shudders to a halt outside the house. God's messenger Gabriel stoops into the courtyard and everything safe and familiar is changed forever.

This is an awesome moment, for here, it seems, God has put himself into Mary's hands. Will she accept? Will she agree? Will she say "Yes!"



Reflection

Mary's conversation with Gabriel has a very Old Testament feel: there are rich echoes of the call of Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:4-10), or Isaiah (Isaiah 6:1-8). There are also real similarities with God's dealings with Hannah the mother of Samuel (1Samuel 1:1-2:10). This moment of God's new beginning is as rooted in the world of Abraham & David, of Sarah, Ruth and Hannah, as Mary is rooted in the familiar world and daily routines of a growing daughter in a Galilean Jewish village.

Yet this conversation is also something of a new beginning. There's a significant foretaste here of Jesus' oft-repeated call to discipleship. Indeed, as we shall see, Luke seems almost to present this young woman, Mary, as the first disciple of Jesus: the first person called to leave everything for His sake and enter an unknown world, trusting only in God.

But all of that lies a long way ahead. For now, our story tells us that Mary was "much perplexed". Is that something of an understatement? Try to imagine some of the thoughts, the emotions and the questions that must have swirled through Mary's head. Surely, this was not what she had expected, or allowed for. Was there anger? Was there fear? What was the hardest bit of this for her? How might you respond to the sudden, intrusion of the life-changing call of God?

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I invite you to take Mary's moment and try, as best you can, to imagine yourself inside it. What do you think Mary might be thinking and feeling at this moment? How have you reacted when there was tension between your plans and what seemed to be God's purposes? Take time to enter Mary's moment then start to cross back and forth between her life and your own. How might you respond to the unsettling intrusion of God? Exactly how you do this is up to you. Take time; share Mary's moment.

Fifteen minutes silence

During this time remember to invite the participants to explore the story so far in their own way. Have paper, pens and crayons available if they want to use them.

After this the group is invited to gather and share. You might wish to round off this section of the study with the following hymn...



"SHOULD I BE ANGRY...?" A First Song for Mary

tune: Slane 10 10 10 10, Rejoice and Sing no. 531

Should I be angry or should I be sad?
Should I be frightened or should I be glad?
Must I abandon the person I've been,
cling to my God through a life unforeseen?

Why must this happen, why must this be me?
Will I be trapped or will this set me free?
Will I survive this against all the odds?
How much is my life, how much is my God's?

Will strangers mock me or just stand and stare?
Will those I love still continue to care?
Where will I find words to say what you've done?
Will I have more friends, or will I have none?

Though I'm not worthy to answer Your call,
life lived without You is no life at all -
so in my quagmire of turmoil and stress,
God, give me boldness to whisper my....."Yes!"

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PART TWO: Leaving & Arriving

Read Luke 1:39-45 & 56

Imagine...

...we're still in the courtyard of a small house in a hill town, but now we're in Judea, far to the south of where we were before. We're in the courtyard of the house of Mary's Uncle Zechariah and Aunt Elizabeth. For, you see, Mary said "Yes!" to God's message... but then, after the messenger left and she was hugely alone, she must have begun to think. In a brief phrase that it would be easy to sweep past assuming that it had no particular significance, our story says, "Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country".

Once Gabriel has left and she is all alone, Mary's first response is to hurry from her home and from the community that knows her best, seeking out her Aunt Elizabeth, whom the messenger said was six months into a miraculous pregnancy of her own.

There's a vast unspoken pressure on Mary here. How would people react to her tale of an angel? What proof would it take? What proof did she have? How would they view her now?

Reflection

Mary assuredly didn't need a degree in public relations to see there were difficulties, that she would be at the mercy of every cruel and callous comment that Nazareth could invent, every harsh act of rejection that her family and Joseph's might care to devise. God had left her defenceless and at the mercy of the ugly side of human nature. Mary surely knew that when Moses had to convince the Israelites that he had been with the Lord, God had given him three special miraculous signs to perform, and the help and support of his brother Aaron. But now, she, a young woman, who could not even give evidence in court, was left to explain all this completely on her own. And she had to explain it to a family & a town that were confident that they knew exactly how irresponsible young girls got pregnant: it wasn't rocket science.

Would anyone understand? Would anyone even listen? Was there anywhere she could find strength to face all the ugliness of human rejection?

Saying "Yes!" to God had, in an instant, turned her hometown into a dangerously foreign land. Saying "Yes!" to God meant her previously kind neighbours were potential wolves capable of limitless cruelty. Saying "Yes!" to God might even turn her own family into a savage feeding frenzy of rejection, wild with shame and anger and disappointment with her. The safest place in the world for Mary had, at a stroke, acquired the potential to be the most painfully dangerous place on earth.

Aunt Elizabeth must have seemed her only hope. No wonder she hurried. No wonder the risks for a young woman travelling alone are almost of no concern to her. Mary needed help to face the effects of saying "Yes!" to God. Where else could she go?



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We have already tried to think ourselves into the situation Mary faced as she faced the challenge of God's sudden, life-changing call. Now, let us try to think our way into what exactly Mary met in this second wall of risk. She has said "Yes!" But the angel has gone and she is alone. She has to pick this up and face other people. From our own experience of the pain and the wonder of what other people can do to us and for us, let us see what we make of this part of Mary's predicament. In the terms of the Bible story we can use four questions to help us explore Mary's situation.

Questions for part 2:

Two of them come from Luke 1, verse 39

- What was Mary hurrying away from?
- What was Mary hurrying to?
- The other two come from Luke 1, verse 56:
- Why did Mary stay three whole months with her Aunt Elizabeth?
- Why did she then return home?

Fifteen minutes of silence

Once again, invite the participants to explore the story so far for themselves. Then the group is invited to gather together and share. You might wish to round off this section of the study with the following hymn...

"WHEN PEOPLE ARE CRUEL" A Second Song for Mary

tune: The Bard of Armagh (Laredo), Rejoice and Sing no. 583

When people are cruel and words are malicious,
bless us with friends who will listen and care.
When tongues strip us naked and lash us and whip us,
clothe us with friendships that show that You're there.

When gossip condemns us without a fair hearing,
bless us with friends who stay far from that game.
When lies are let loose just to linger and fester,
guard us with friends who, with truth, clear our name.

If false friends grow wary and keep to their distance,
bless us with friends who will feel what we feel,
who hold us with honesty tempered with kindness,
friends who've been hurt, yet who know that You heal.

O Lord of the cross and the taunts and the spitting,
left by your friends in the hour of your need,
our prayers have no answer if we, too, are fickle –
Christ, make us friends who show friendship indeed!

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PART THREE: LIVING WITH THAT "YES!"

Read Luke 1:45

Reflection

We've considered Mary's first response to God's hugely disruptive intrusion into her life. We've thought about her second vast problem – how to cope with the reaction of other people. Now we turn our attention to the ongoing situation – How do you go on living with God, year after year, when you've said "Yes!" to what God has asked of you?



Elizabeth declares Mary to be truly blessed by God because she believed that events would turn out in the way God had said. But what, exactly, did that 'blessing' involve? The bits of Mary's story that Luke shares with us do not show a life of ease where 'every month was May'. Walking with God brings Mary a lot of pain. Let's review the evidence.

Luke takes up Mary's story with that precarious and profoundly uncomfortable journey to Bethlehem and that ill-attended birth in a borrowed shed, devoid of family support and lacking in any sign of delight. The only visitors who welcome the child are a clutch of unknown, ill-at-ease and probably rather smelly shepherds with wild tales of angels and heavenly choirs. Mary may have stored it all up in her heart, but surely it cannot have been how she had always imagined motherhood would be?

Eight days later, Luke shows us Joseph & Mary dedicating the baby Jesus in the great temple in Jerusalem (Luke 2:22-38). The greetings of Simeon and Anna were kind and very well meant, but their prophecies were not so much reassuring as unsettling. They emphasised the ways in which this was God's child and almost ignored the ways this was Mary's child.

We next hear of Mary when Jesus is about twelve years old (Luke 2:41-52). The family has travelled with others to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover. One day's journey out from the city on the way home Mary and Joseph had one of those moments all parents dread – "I thought he was with you!" "No, I was sure he was with you!" They rush back to Jerusalem and spend three long, fraught days and three anxious, sleepless nights searching the likely and the unlikely parts of the city before they find him holding court with the elders in the Temple. And there can't have been much reassurance or comfort in their son's greeting: "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?"

Mary only makes one brief appearance during Jesus' ministry in the towns and villages of Galilee (Luke 8:19-21) Luke tells how she came with Jesus' brothers to look for him. Luke spares us Mark's suggestion that they were coming to take him away because they'd heard he'd gone mad. Still, even as Luke tells it, the experience can't have helped Mary. When they arrived where Jesus was, they couldn't get near him for the crowd and rather than come out to them Jesus simply says, "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it!" – a fine saying for the rest of us, but another painful sidelining moment for Mary – all the more painful if she was still trying to care, still trying to live out her "Yes!" to God and her mother's care for her son.

But all these demandingly difficult moments for Mary pale into insignificance in comparison to what lay ahead that final Passover in Jerusalem. Luke does not name Mary as being at the foot of the cross (it is John's Gospel that does that), but a later reference to her being with the followers of

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Jesus in Jerusalem strongly suggests that she was close at hand for all the awfulness of her son's arrest, ugly trial, public humiliation and cruel, cruel death. No parent can easily deal with news of the death of their child, but a death as public and ugly and devastating as this? This is the blessedness of saying "Yes!" to God. This is the cost of Mary's faithfulness.

So, would you or I have stayed around for all of this? Luke makes it clear that Mary did. His last mention of her occurs in the First Chapter of the Book of Acts (Acts 1:14), when the followers of Jesus return to the city after the Ascension to wait for the coming of God's Spirit. Luke says that the remaining eleven apostles kept praying and that they were joined by "certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus". Despite it all, Mary is still there. She is still faithful to her son, her God and her promise – truly the first follower of Jesus, regardless of cost. So, what has God done to your life since your first received the call? What have been the ups and downs? Has it been worth it? Explore, if you will, what God has done in Mary's life and what God seems to be doing in your own. Can you still say Mary's "Yes!"?

Fifteen minutes of silence

For a third time, invite participants to explore the story so far. Then the group is invited to gather and share. You might wish to round off this section of the study with the following hymn...

"IF THIS IS YOUR BLESSING..." A Third Song for Mary

tune: St. Denio, Rejoice and Sing no. 67

If this is Your blessing, then how do You curse?
Your calling disturbs us; makes life seem much worse.
Our plans have been shredded, our lives made a mess,
Your gifts work against what the world calls success.

And yet, in the midst of the trouble You bring,
You show us compassion and make our hearts sing.
Why, even our weeping and cries of despair
give birth to renewal because You are there!

So now, though You force us to struggle each day,
we'll stay by Your side, we'll go no other way,
for no worldly promise comes close to Your call -
mere servants of God share the best life of all.

EVALUATION

Please don't forget to evaluate this Bible Study. Try to answer these questions for yourself and for others who will use this material:

1. What was the most helpful thing?
2. What was the least helpful thing?
3. What would you like to try now?

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