

Advent

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FAITH FORMATION FOR CHILDREN | YOUTH | FAMILY | ADULT

Week 4 of Advent - Come into our Helplessness!

KEY POINT

Nothing is impossible with God. Our expectations might lead us to look for a Messiah in a palace, or at least among the powerful in society. Instead, God comes to a poor, unmarried girl, and makes her story a part of God's great work.

KEY VERSE

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

OPENING PRAYER

Begin your time together with this, or another, prayer:

God of promise, you show up in unexpected ways in unexpected places. Be with us now as we open your Word together. Give us the eyes to see you when we least expect you and the ears to hear your Word in new ways. In Jesus' name. Amen.

READ

Luke 1:26-45

ABOUT THE STORY

The Gospel of Luke begins with an intertwined story of two unexpected and miraculous births. The first birth announcement in the story comes, not to Mary, but to Zechariah, a priest who is married to Mary's cousin Elizabeth. Elizabeth and Zechariah have been unable to have children and are now well beyond childbearing years, and yet the angel Gabriel appears and tells Zechariah that Elizabeth will conceive and bear a son. When Zechariah questions the possibility, the angel renders him unable to speak until his son is born. Elizabeth conceives, and then the story moves on to Mary.

The two stories have many similarities. It is the same angel, Gabriel, who speaks to both Mary and Zechariah, and he uses similar words with both, telling them "Do not be afraid." But while Zechariah is a priest serving in the temple in Jerusalem, Mary is very far removed from the center of power. She is a young girl, a virgin we are told, living in Nazareth, which is a small town of little significance several days' journey from Jerusalem. She is engaged to be married to Joseph, which would have likely been an arrangement made by her father. During the one-year engagement, she would have remained in her father's home. Overall, Mary is not anyone of political, cultural, or economic significance. And yet she is the one who is chosen to bear the Son of God.

After she receives this news, she sets out to visit her relative Elizabeth, whose pregnancy the angel used as proof of God's ability to do the impossible. When Elizabeth sees Mary, her own child leaps in her womb, and Elizabeth blesses Mary and her child. Mary responds with a song, traditionally known as the Magnificat, the Latin word for "magnify," the first word of Mary's song in the Latin translation.

The song follows the form of traditional Hebrew poetry and echoes prophets and others from the Old Testament (or Hebrew Bible). Mary praises God for God's faithfulness and generosity, and the reader recognizes that something truly remarkable is happening with this pregnancy of Mary's. Through this child, the old prophecies are coming to life and God's promises will be fulfilled.

SHARE

- Share the story of a time when you have felt unworthy of an honor you have been given or unqualified for a task you have been assigned. What was your first emotion? What did you say or do in response? Did you come to feel up to it over time? As you listen to others' stories, reflect with them about why they might have been chosen for their honor or task. Discuss with one another whether others see more potential in us than we tend to see in ourselves.
- Read through the whole passage and note the names that are used for major characters: the angel, Mary, Elizabeth, John (Elizabeth's child), Jesus (Mary's child), and God. Why do you think Luke has listed so many names so early in the story? What other names do you see in the story? Why are names important in this passage?

PRAY

God of surprises, meet us this week in ways that move us beyond our comfort zone and call us into your community. Remind us always that you are walking with us, even when the way is unclear. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

BLESS

Share this verbal blessing with one another: May the God of surprises bless you this week. Amen.

FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION AT HOME:

- Look for an organization in your area that offers assistance and companionship to single mothers. See how you might be able to volunteer or support them.
- Make a list of those people you might turn to in times of uncertainty, as Mary turned to Elizabeth. Pray for them each by name, and perhaps send them a card letting them know you appreciate them.
- Write your own song of praise like Mary's. What names would you use to call on God? What would you praise God for?

