

BIBLE STUDY: The Magnificat Can Be a Dangerous Song

This single-session Bible study and discussion guide can be used by adults or older teens, as individuals or in small groups, for consideration of civic commitment as people of faith.

- BIBLE PASSAGE • REFLECTION • PRAYER • SONG • DISCUSSION QUESTIONS •

BIBLE PASSAGE

“In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. And [Gabriel] came to her and said, ‘Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.’ But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.’ Mary said to the angel, ‘How can this be, since I am a virgin?’ The angel said to her, ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.’ Then Mary said, ‘Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.’ Then the angel departed from her” (Luke 1:26-38).

“Mary said, ‘My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowly state 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; indeed, his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the imagination 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. He has come to the aid of his child Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever” (Luke 1:46-55).

REFLECTION *By Fern Lee Hagedorn*

We are familiar with these passages. The angel Gabriel comes to Mary with the news that God has chosen her for something special, to bear the Son of God. “How can I become pregnant?” young Mary must have wondered. “Why me? I will be shamed, exiled and maybe killed.” Perhaps other fears flashed through Mary’s heart and mind. After talking to Gabriel and learning the possible consequences of her pregnancy, Mary trusts that God will give her courage and knows that, through God, all things are possible. In fact Mary responds with a joyful song, praising God: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.”

The Magnificat Can Be a Dangerous Song *continued*

Then come some prophetic lyrics:

“He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the imagination 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” (Luke 1:51-53).

The Magnificat is one window into the nature of the God we worship and our Christian life. God is choosing us to be agents of God’s unconditional love and of God’s justice — which bring with them consequences.

As church, we try our best to love our neighbors. Caring for the physical needs of others — charity — is much needed. At the same time we are called to look under the surface to find out why charity is needed. Churches operate food pantries to feed the hungry (*Why is there hunger?*). We collect clothes and coats for the needy (*Why can’t they afford them?*). *Why are there homeless adults and children? Why can’t everyone have adequate health care? Why do some communities experience higher rates of cancer? Why can’t some children read? Why are our prisons so full? Why are young and old making treacherous journeys to the United States?*

We may not think these are “our” problems. Some (often powerful) voices blame the victim: “It’s their own fault.” Still others respond, “We have to protect our own.” What is our response when we look under the surface? What is my response when I look into my own heart? Questions such as these may expose my own complicity, my own self-interest, but asking them is necessary.

As church, we are called to love God and our neighbor. Mary’s words show that naming wrongs, saying them out loud, is a form of praising God. As church, we can take on unpopular positions, those that expose entities — private and public — responsible for putting power, money, privilege or popularity ahead of the welfare of people. The public and private powers in this world are mighty. Their might is increased when they join forces. God tells us, through Mary’s prophetic song, that we are up against the powerful. Loving God and the neighbor is not on the top of their list.

Our faith in God calls us to passionately and compassionately ask questions and look for answers that may make the rulers of this world nervous, angry and vengeful. We may be called unpatriotic. We may even be accused of not being a “true” Christian. As we ask the questions, we may cause trouble. And we may face danger.

In the Magnificat, God foresees the mighty brought down and the rich sent away. God fills the hungry with

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The Magnificat Can Be a Dangerous Song *continued*

good things! We are not powerless. With our God-given courage we must be forthright in confronting the mighty when they forget about — or even cause the suffering of — people. We are challenging established practices, calling out selfishness and immorality, and proclaiming the words of the Magnificat.

Can this be our song too?

PRAYER

Gracious and loving God,
Thank you for choosing Mary, and for choosing us, to be bearers of your good news. Forgive us as we confess our own self-interest over the interests of our neighbors. Grant us the courage to expose those in power who do not seek the good of your people. Increase our faith. Protect us from harm. Grant us courage. Remind us of what you have already done for us. Remind us to give thanks always.

SONG

“Magnificat” (ELW 236)

“My Soul Does Magnify the Lord” (ELW 882)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Read, ponder and discuss Luke 1:51. How do you see it manifested today?
2. Read, ponder and discuss Luke 1:52. How do you see it manifested today?
3. Read, ponder and discuss Luke 1:53. In our world today, who are the hungry? The rich?
4. Challenged by the author to “look under the surface,” can you share a congregational or personal reflection on how self-interest may align with or depart from being “agents of God’s unconditional love and of God’s justice”?
5. Decide on a concern or issue, and choose a questioner and responder for role-playing. The responder has the authority to influence a positive outcome for your concern. Have a conversation. What did you discover?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Fern Lee Hagedorn is a member of Tabernacle Lutheran Church in Philadelphia, Pa. A member of the ELCA Association of Asians and Pacific Islanders, she serves on the Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod’s anti-racism team and was part of the task force responsible for writing the ELCA social statement Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action. Hagedorn has also served as a staffer and board member of national and international Lutheran entities and as a volunteer broadcaster on WJFF-FM, a public radio station in the Catskills Mountains of New York state.

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