

**2 Sam. 7:1–11, 16**  
**Luke 1:46b–55 or**  
**Ps. 89:1–4, 19–26**  
**Rom. 16:25–27**  
**Luke 1:26–38**

# A Call and a Handmaid's Response

## Goal for the Session

*As Mary decided to accept God's will for her life, adults will reflect on God's will for them.*

## ■ PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

### Focus on Luke 1:26–38

#### WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” Lewis R. Donelson

Then Gabriel gets to the heart of his message. Mary will conceive and bear a son. The series of messianic images in 1:32–33 concerning the destiny of this son forms the christological heart of the passage. Each image in these verses is fundamental to Luke's story of Jesus. Jesus is portrayed as the Davidic messiah, who as the son of David sits on David's throne and whose rule, astonishingly, will never end. There is no hint here, as there is in Matthew, of the coming crucifixion and the historical irony of these promises. Jesus is also named here as “the Son of the Most High.”

#### WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” Cynthia L. Rigby

Gabriel reminds Mary that to be incapable of conceiving in and of ourselves is not the end of the story, that “nothing [is] impossible with God.” The best discussions of Mary's response recognize the pitfalls inherent in rendering Mary either a passive participant, who has no choice but to submit to God's will, or an autonomous individual, who can choose differently than to bear God to the world. The doctrine of Christian vocation offers clarity. Mary's obedience is neither optional nor forced. Mary acts freely when she offers herself as a servant of the Lord. To embrace her identity as the Mother of God is the only choice that is true to her calling, because it is consistent with who she actually is.

#### SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” Ashley Cook Cleere

The angel Gabriel overturns Mary's dubiousness by explaining that the Holy Spirit will overshadow her. The angel then underscores God's incomprehensible capacity to accomplish wondrous aims by telling Mary that her relative Elizabeth had conceived a child at an advanced age, and explains, “For nothing will be impossible with God.” This refrain conveys support, comfort, and courage for those confronting overwhelming expectations. Her response to the annunciation is exemplary: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Mary comprehends that her life, and not only hers, but the whole world's, is about to be rearranged.

#### NOW WHAT is God's word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,” Kimberly Bracken Long

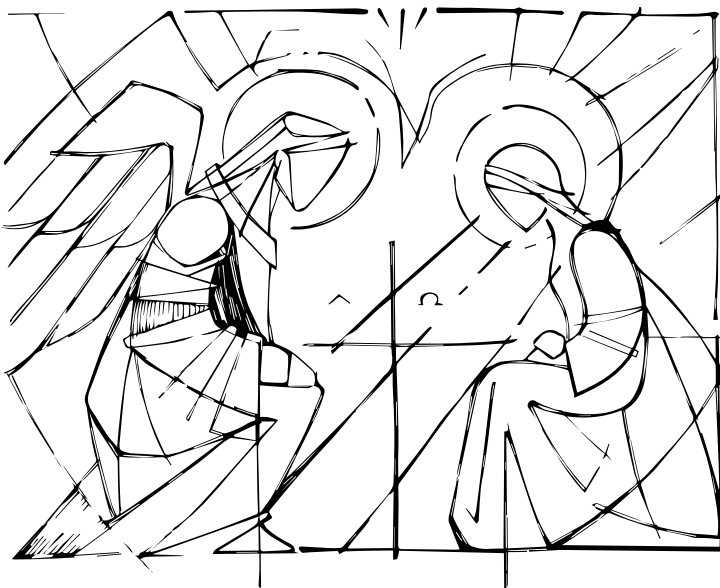
It is tempting to imagine that the human predicament, whether we define that as the state of our warring world or the state of our broken lives, can never be healed or overturned. Yet Luke tells us that not only is redemption possible; it has already happened. Because of the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Christ, the holy continues to break into our lives, to bring us closer to the completion of creation and the already-and-not-yet reign of God.

## Mary, the Favored One?

The fourth Sunday of Advent may be the only Sunday of the year that Protestants are comfortable focusing on Mary. Mary stands at the center of this lection, which tells the story of the annunciation—the *announcement* of the incarnation by the angel Gabriel. In twelve verses, Mary is described as favored, perplexed, thoughtful, and afraid. She questions, believes, and submits to her vocation. Given this array of images, it is not surprising that Mary is depicted in rich and varied ways. A cursory perusal of artwork titled “The Annunciation” reveals Marys who are afraid, who are demure, who are assertive. Some show Mary and Gabriel talking as two old friends sharing a secret. Others show Mary sitting at Gabriel’s feet in submission, agitated by the news he is sharing.

Theologians have traditionally depicted Mary as the model Christian believer, the unblemished representative of the church. Mary has the reputation of being in perfect sync with God, responding to God’s command in absolute obedience. She is the “blessed one” who is called by God to bear the Christ child, the “servant of the Lord” who desires that God’s will come to fruition, even in and through her. All agree that Mary is elected to a particular purpose in which she wholeheartedly participates. But the character of Mary’s election and her response have been energetically debated in the history of interpretation.

When Gabriel addresses Mary as “favored one” or “blessed one,” what is being conveyed? Roman Catholic moral theologians understand Gabriel’s greeting as highlighting Mary’s extraordinary nature. Mary is *unlike* other Christian believers insofar as she is sinless and because she is both mother



and perpetual virgin. In Protestant theology, by contrast, the extraordinary thing about Mary is precisely her ordinariness—Mary is a member of the “priesthood of all believers” who emulates for all of us sinful, embodied saints the mysterious reality that we are integrally included in the work of God. Reformer John Calvin rejects the idea that Gabriel’s identification of Mary as “favored” suggests she is “worthy of praise.” Rather, Gabriel recognizes Mary as the “happy one” who has received “the undeserved love of God,” who alone is to be adored.<sup>1</sup>

—From Cynthia L. Rigby, “Theological Perspective,” *Feasting on the Word, Year, B, Volume 1* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 92–94.

1. John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 33.