



The Presbyterian Church in Canada

# Presbyterians *Read*

## Second Week of Advent

### Theme: God's Children, Annunciations and Exultations

“Brilliantly, Luke does not record what prompts this favor. There is no indication that Mary got divine notice because she helped her mother with the laundry, did well in school, had a beautiful singing voice, was pretty, prayed a lot, or was a virgin. We can fill in the reasons we want, but I prefer the readings that just let God be free to choose whomever: a fisherman, a cloth dyer, a tent maker, anyone” (p. 67).

### Opening Prayer

Use your own words of prayer, invite someone in the group to pray or use the short prayer below:

*Merciful God, we rejoice in the grace you have shown to us. We thank you for your servant Mary who humbly accepted your will for her life. Cultivate in us deep faith like Mary's so that we too will trust wholeheartedly and follow where you lead us. Guide us by your Spirit as we study your word to us in scripture. This Advent help us to honour you by treating others with the mercy, love and favour that you have shown us. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.*

### Gathering Questions

As participants gather for this second week of the study, begin with a question that will both allow people to get to know each other better and start exploring the topic.

### Pacing in Online and In-Person Gatherings

Before starting this week's gathering, ask yourself:

- How was the pacing of last week's gathering?
- At what points did people seem most engaged?
- Was there too much or too little information discussed last week?
- Do we need more breaks or variety of types of activities this week?

It is important to be realistic about how much information, activities and discussion people can handle. There are a lot of questions in this guide; you do not need to use all of them. Choose the ones you will delve into this week based on what people seemed most interested in discussing last week.

Here are a couple ideas for introductions that are related to the theme of this week’s study:

- 1) What is the meaning of your name? Were you named after a relative, friend, celebrity? Or did those who named you simply like the name?
- 2) What were the circumstances surrounding your birth? When and where were you born? Who welcomed you into the world?

## Overview of Chapter 2

*Consider reading this overview together as a group. It will help contextualize the discussion questions and focus the conversation.*

Who was Mary? We know that she was the woman chosen by God to bear Jesus. We know that she had a relative named Elizabeth. We know that she became Joseph’s wife. We know that she was “highly favoured” by God. But, as Levine points out, we do not know much about Mary’s background. We are prone to making assumptions about Mary, especially when it comes to the question of why she is favoured by God. While we may think it was because she was particularly pious or well-behaved, Luke does not record what prompts God’s favour (67). Levine argues that this textual silence is significant; it reminds us that God is free to “choose whomever”—a regular person like you or me (67).

What matters just as much, if not more, than who God chooses is how they respond to being chosen. “Not all who are called respond” (67), Levine reminds us. Hearers and readers of Jesus’ time, familiar with the annunciation stories in the Old Testament, may have asked themselves: “will it be the father, mother or child who will be the focus of this story?” (61). Very quickly Luke makes it clear Mary is the focus of this annunciation. After a short period of initial confusion, Mary responds by naming herself as God’s servant and entirely gives herself over to God’s plan for her life.

Mary’s song of exultation, known as the Magnificat, praises God’s fidelity in the past and present. It focuses on the way that God invites us into relationship and asks us to witness

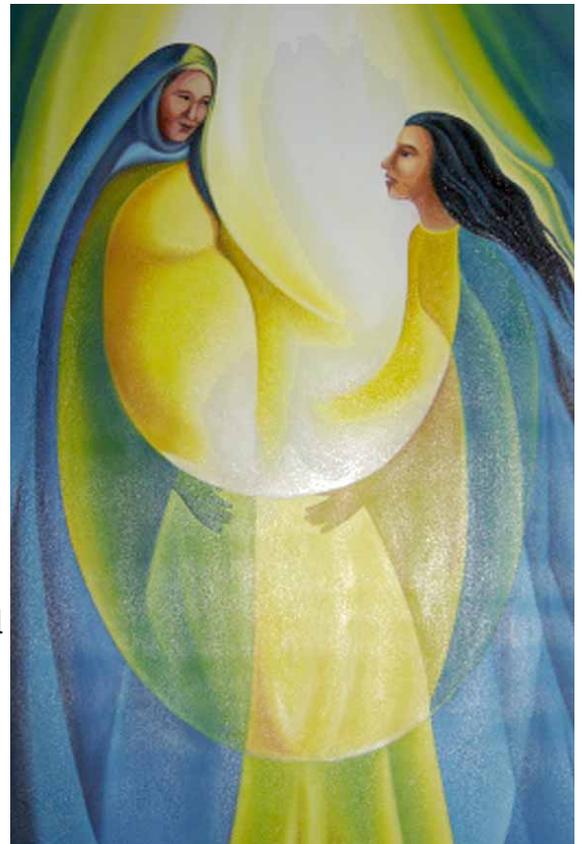
### Online Tip: Visuals of Mary

Visuals are important for keeping people’s attention in online gatherings. Mary is probably one of the most depicted characters from the Bible. Find different artists’ renderings of Mary. Put several of them up on the screen as you read the overview of this week’s chapter. Ask people to choose which depiction of Mary coincides best with the portrait of her that Levine paints in this chapter.

Cleveland Museum of Art: Open Access Images of the Annunciation

Vanderbilt Divinity Library: Images of the Annunciation

Vanderbilt Divinity Library: Images of Mary and Elizabeth



*Visitation, from Art in the Christian Tradition, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN*

and participate in God’s mighty works. It is a reminder that “God could call on us, indeed has called on us, no matter our place or family of birth, economic status, or gender (70). God asks a lot, but, as we see through Mary, God also give us the strength to respond.

### **Delving into the Themes**

Choose one of the following questions to get the discussion about chapter 2 of the book going.

What details about Mary’s story that Levine unpacks in this chapter were new to you? How have these details added to your understanding of Mary’s role in the gospel?

Levine writes that “Mary, the mother of Jesus, is remembered primarily because of her son, but motherhood is not her only characteristic. She, too, is poet and prophet and protector” (58). Considering all that you know of Mary, how does she fulfill these other roles? Are there any other roles you’d give to her? Why?

### **Biblical Reflection**

The passages that Levine uses as the basis of each chapter are long. For the purposes of discussion, the passage has been divided into two parts with a couple of accompanying questions for each. Choose which

part of the text you’d like to discuss together, or, if you have time, discuss both sections. Consider inviting the group to decide what you will discuss based on their interests and time available.

#### **First Part of the Passage: Luke 1:26–38**

Read the first part of the Scripture passage slowly using the CEB translation found on pgs. 53-54 of *Light of the World*. Since the verses aren’t numbered in the book, please note that you will stop reading after the line: “Then the angel left her” (v. 38).

Read it a second time using a different translation. Then, discuss the following questions.

#### **Questions**

Levine describes annunciations as a literary form or convention that invites readers to “delight in its variations” (61). Looking back at last week’s reading (Luke 1:13–25), compare Gabriel’s announcement to Zechariah to his announcement to Mary from this week.

### **Use Polling to Engage Participants**

Some online meeting platforms allow you to poll participants. This is a fun way to gauge what direction participants would like to go with the discussion. The first question in this section lends itself well to a poll. For example:

**Question:** What detail about Mary’s story was new to you? If lots of details were new to you, choose the one you found the most intriguing.

- 1) the Bible doesn’t tell us much about Mary’s background
- 2) we make assumptions about why Mary is favoured but Luke doesn’t make it clear why
- 3) Mary’s namesake is Miriam
- 4) Mary is also a prophet
- 5) None

Look at the results of the poll and decide what you’ll discuss based on the results.

*\*Polling can also be done without the video conferencing feature by just asking for a show of hands.*

- In what ways are they similar? How are they different?
- What storytelling techniques does Luke employ in each of them?
- What are the extraordinary features in each birth story?

### Incorporate Music

The nativity story has been an inspiration to many musicians and song writers throughout the years. Consider incorporating music into your Presbyterians Read gatherings. This can be done online or in person. Here are a few suggestions for music to accompany this week's readings:

- “Gabriel’s Song” by In Ordinary Time
- “My Soul Magnifies the Lord” by Steve Thorngate
- “Visitation Song” by Aly Aleigha

### Second Part of the Passage: Luke 1:39–56

Read the second part of the Scripture passage slowly using the CEB translation found on pgs. 54–55 of *Light of the World*. The passage begins with the line: “Mary got up and hurried to a city in the Judean highlands” (v. 39).

Read it a second time using a different translation. Then, discuss the following questions.

### Questions

Mary sings about salvation in a way that aligned with Jewish notions of salvation in Jesus’ time. As Levine explains it:

*Salvation means freedom or release from current circumstances: slavery, poverty, ill health, hunger, and thirst. In her song, Mary is talking about salvation in the past and the present, not about the far future. She can feel the salvation, in her body, in her soul, in her spirit and in her womb (p. 76).*

Read Mary’s song in verses 46–56 again with this notion of salvation in mind.

- How are the personal/individual and collective/communal brought together in Mary’s song?
- What is added to your understanding of salvation by reading Mary’s salvation song?
- What current circumstances do you and/or your community seeking release from?



## Spiritual Practice

Each week there is a suggested spiritual practice for participants to engage in at home. Review the spiritual practice together as a group and discuss any questions that may arise.

### Praise

We see in Mary's song that Luke's gospel is, as Levine describes it, "a gospel of trust" and "a gospel of thanks" (77). Both Zechariah and Mary exuberantly express their trust and thanks for being chosen to be part of God's plan. They praise God when the miraculous happens, but we also know that they were people who expressed thanks to God in their everyday lives. Zechariah's burnt offering in the temple and Mary's deep knowledge of scripture in her song signal to us that these are people for whom praise is familiar.

This week's spiritual practice is praise. The way that each of us glorifies God is different because we are all uniquely made. What ways do you praise God in your daily life?

This week choose one way that feels right to you to intentionally praise God for what God has done in the past and/or the present. Here are a few ideas that might help:

- Use Zechariah or Mary's song as a model to write your own song of praise. Remember that their songs of praise are both personal and collective. What has God done for your community?
- Write out as many names for God as you can. Use the Bible as a reference to help expand your list. What do we learn about God from the different names? Which of these names resonates in your life right now? Use this name to pray or to make art out of it.
- Words of blessing appear over five hundred times in the Bible. Elizabeth's exultation is the first time it appears in Luke's Gospel. Today, people often use the word "blessed" very casually. Spend time pondering Elizabeth's proclamation this week. Invite God to show you or teach you something about blessing this week. How are you blessed? How is your community blessed?

#### Online Tip: Endings are Important

Sometimes we rushed through the end of online gatherings because we are running behind schedule or are already thinking about the next meeting; however, endings are important. We conclude most in-person meetings with prayer and have time to say goodbye. It is important to mark the transition between the online gathering and heading back into the rest of the day.



## Closing Prayer

For the closing prayer this week, use the Magnificat as a model. Take turns saying one line each of this prayer:

With all of our hearts, we glorify you, Lord!

In the depths of who we are we rejoice in God our saviour.

Thank you for looking on us, your lowly servants, with favour.

Holy is Your Name.

You show mercy to everyone, from one generation to the next.

You have pulled the powerful down from their thrones and lifted up the lowly.

You have filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty-handed.

You have come to aid your servants.

We remember your mercy to your servant Israel.

Lord, come to our aid, just as you did for Israel's ancestors.

Look on us with favour, just as you did with your servant Mary.

Amen.

## OR

- Invite participants to recall something they are grateful for. Leave time for people to reflect and pray it out loud if they are comfortable.
- Invite participants to remember a person or situation that God's intervention is needed. Leave time for people to lift those prayers up to God silently or aloud.

