

17 THE ROAD TO BETHLEHEM

Few facts about her are known. She was a young Jewish woman. Her name in her own Aramaic language was Myriam. We call her by her Greek name—Mary. Mary was probably only 14 or 15 years old when she became engaged to a carpenter named Joseph who was many years older than she.

In a way, Mary was the first believer, the first disciple of Jesus Christ. That is how Luke thought of her when he wrote his gospel. This ordinary young woman was the first to hear of Jesus and to trust that he was really God's son.

The gospel writer Luke wrote in Luke 1:26-28 that God sent the angel Gabriel to Mary. Gabriel told her that she would give birth to a child whom she was to name *Jesus*. Gabriel told Mary that someday God would make Jesus a king forever like his ancestor David.

Mary might have turned and run away. Instead, Mary was willing to do what God intended. She said to Gabriel, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" (Luke 1:38).

Years later, when Mary's child Jesus was a grown man, he would ask countless people to put their trust and faith in him. Mary, mother of the Lord, had faith from the beginning.

3 STATEMENTS

- God chose to come to all people in a particular place and time for a particular purpose.
- Mary knew that God always had a special concern for the poor and oppressed.
- The circumstances of Jesus' lowly birth were in sharp contrast to who Jesus was.

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Source

A PARTICULAR PLACE AND TIME

God had always been with the people of Israel. In your study of the Old Testament you saw that on all the roads and pathways the people of God found themselves, God was present with them and for them. God did not create the world and then abandon the world. God did not give rules and regulations from time to time for the people to follow "or else." *God chose to come to all people in a particular place and time for a particular purpose.*

As you studied in Session 16, the people of Israel had been looking forward to the coming of a messiah for centuries. In the time shortly after their return from captivity in Babylon, they had been looking especially hard. They were an oppressed people—first under the Greeks and then under the Romans.

God chose to come to all people in a particular place and time for a particular purpose.

Then one day it happened. To a young woman, perhaps only 14 or 15 years old, God sent a messenger with the good news that God would again come to the people in a very particular way.

Read Luke 1:5 to discover the place where the savior of the world would be born.

1. According to Luke 1:5, where does the story of the Savior begin?

Luke also narrowed down the location of the destination of Gabriel, God's messenger. Read Luke 1:26.

2. What city is mentioned?

Discovering the time of the coming of this good news is more difficult. It is easy for us to find the dates of modern events such as the Vietnam War or the date when Neil Armstrong became the first human to step on the moon. We only have to turn to printed history books or the memories of living people to find the dates. Discovering the date of Gabriel's announcement is much more difficult. Luke did not say "It happened in such-and-such a year." Luke only gave us some names of important people of the time. Ancient history books and other records are needed to discover the time of this announcement.

Look up the following Bible passages and write down the names of those mentioned who ruled as governors, kings, or emperors.

Luke 2:1 (ruled 27 B.C.—A.D. 14)

Luke 1:5 (ruled 37 B.C.—4 B.C.)

Luke 23:1 (ruled A.D. 26—A.D. 36)

Luke 23:6-7 (ruled 4 B.C.—A.D. 39)

On a separate sheet of paper, make a time line that goes from 40 B.C. to A.D. 40. There was no year A.D. 0. Plot the years of each ruler's reign on the time line.

With these dates we have narrowed down the period of time when

this message came, but we still have no clue to the year. We will need to look elsewhere for that information.

Read Luke 3:23. How old was Jesus when he began his ministry?

Now only one more piece of evidence is needed. How old was Jesus at the time of his crucifixion? The gospel of John is helpful here. John tells us that three times during his ministry Jesus went to Jerusalem to celebrate the yearly Passover festival. This means that Jesus was about 33 years old at the time of his crucifixion. Now all the clues are gathered.

What years are the possible years of the announcement of God's decision to become human in Jesus to save people?

A PARTICULAR PEOPLE AND PURPOSE

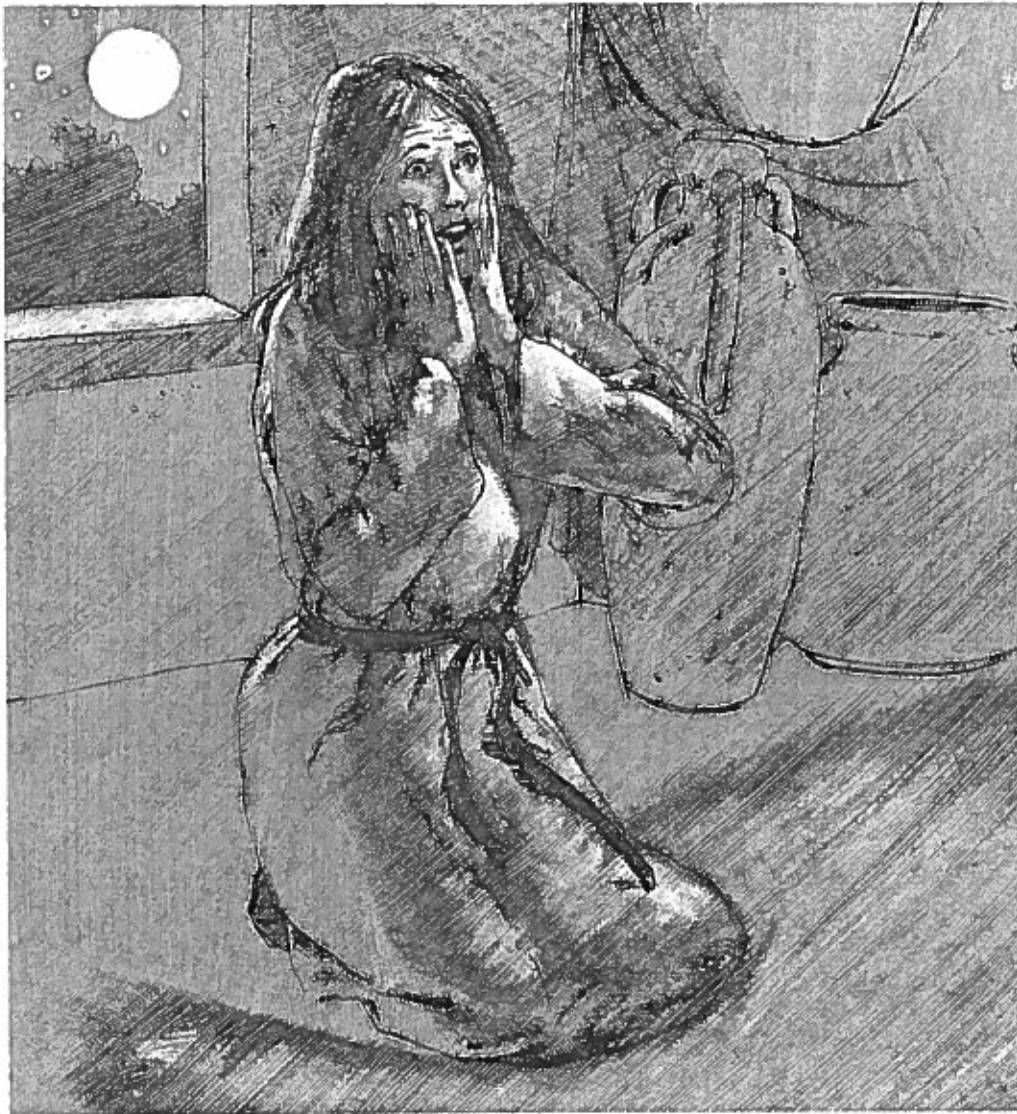
The angel Gabriel came to Mary of Nazareth sometime during the reign of Herod the Great. Herod is known through history books, but little is known about Mary except for a few things Luke told us.

- She was a virgin (1:27)
- She was engaged to a man named Joseph (1:27)
- She was a relative of Elizabeth, wife of Zechariah, a priest (1:36 and 1:5)

We really don't know much about Mary. Many people probably know more about rock stars and athletes. But maybe that is how God had intended it all along. Maybe it is better that we do not get all concerned about histories or lists of family members. Maybe it is better to see Mary for who she represents—the un-famous, the unpopular, and the un-rich. It was to that kind of people that Gabriel came with the good news of the coming Son of God.

Mary knew that. *Mary knew that God always had a special concern for the poor and the oppressed.* She knew that the strong and famous thought they had no need of God.

After Mary received the news she would miraculously bear this Son of God, she sang a song we call the *Magnificat* (Luke 1:46-55). This song identifies the ones to whom the Son of God would come and what God has done.



Mary knew that God always had a special concern for the poor and oppressed.

Read Mary's song in Luke 1:46-55. This song sets up a contrast between the rich and powerful and the poor and weak. As a class, make one list of words in the *Magnificat* that identify the rich and strong. Make a second list of words that identify the poor and weak. Make a third list of words that state what God has done with each of these two groups of people.

1. After reviewing your three lists, what does this song of Mary's tell you about the God who decided to send the Son of God?

2. What does this song tell you about the one whom Gabriel called "the Son of the Most High" (Luke 1:32)?

3. Was this announcement good news or bad news for Mary and the people she represented? Explain your answer.

Gabriel's announcement was repeated a second time months later to shepherds tending their flocks in the fields. These men and women who were the first to hear the good news of the birth of the Savior were not part of the rich or famous people. They were common, ordinary people. It was to people like them that God came. It is people like you to whom God keeps coming with the good news of Jesus Christ.

A SAVIOR WHO IS CHRIST THE LORD

You probably have heard the story of Jesus' birth. Perhaps you have been in a Christmas pageant that acted out this story of Jesus' birth. Mary and Joseph were not in Bethlehem on a family vacation. They had been forced to make the long and difficult journey to Bethlehem because of a government order. In a sense they were refugees under the control of the powerful Romans.

The circumstances of Jesus' lowly birth were in sharp contrast to who Jesus was. In his story of Jesus' birth, Luke identified Jesus as "the Son of God." Jesus fulfilled the promise made to Abraham and Sarah and to King David that God would establish a king on the throne of Israel forever (Luke 1:32-33). This Son of God would not sit off in the heavens ruling from afar, but would be concerned with the day-to-day lives of the people. This one whose birth was announced to a young woman and to shepherds would be a Savior who is Christ the Lord, the fulfillment of the hopes and dreams of God's people.

The circumstances of Jesus' lowly birth were in sharp contrast to who Jesus was.



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This one whose birth was announced would be born. Now, on the surface, a birth does not seem so strange to us, but think about it for a moment. In the birth of Jesus, who is the Christ, the Messiah

of God, God has decided to become one of us. God has decided not to be some faraway God, but to become flesh and blood just like you.

That was the good news Luke wanted to bring to his people. That is the good news that Luke's gospel continues to bring to people like you. God chose in Christ to come to all people in a particular time and place for a particular purpose—to be for you, to be a Savior. As Jesus journeyed with the people of Israel in his time, Jesus continues to journey with you in your time.

Shaping life

WHAT IS HAPPENING TO ME?

There may be times when you do not feel very important. There are many things that you are *told* to do—clean up your room, go to school and confirmation class, and the like. There are equally as many things that you do not get to do, such as vote, sign legal contracts, or be lawyers, physicians, professional mechanics, or hold public office. At times you may feel very insignificant, not worth a great deal to your community.

Mary might have felt much the same as you. She, too, was young. She was a woman in a society that gave women no status. Her marriage to Joseph was one that was probably arranged by her parents who had received

FURTHER

opportunities

Mishna minutes

For centuries the *Magnificat* (Luke 1:46-55) has been considered to be one of the most moving pieces of literature written. Many people have drawn hope and courage from it. Read the *Magnificat* in Luke 1:46-55 at least once each day this week. Read it slowly, pausing at words or phrases that you find meaningful. You may wish to keep a journal of your thoughts as you read it. By repeated reading you will discover that you have memorized it. If you memorize the *Magnificat* you will discover that it will come to mind in times and places where you need to hear its good news. You also may wish to memorize a hymn version of the *Magnificat* such as "My Soul Now Magnifies the Lord" (LBW 180) or "My Soul Proclaims the Greatness of the Lord" printed on page 176.

payment for her. In the eyes of the world, Mary was just an ordinary woman. But in the eyes of God, Mary was everything.

The appearance of the angel Gabriel must have been a very frightening experience for her. How do you think you would have reacted if you had been in her shoes?

We often think that God only called people "back then in Bible times," but God continues to call people just like Mary and you today. God calls us for a purpose through our Baptism into Christ.

In groups of two or three discuss the following questions.

- For what purpose do you think God has called you?
- How can you be like Mary and be a Christ-bearer for those around you?
- What good news can you bring to the un-famous, the unpopular, and the un-rich?

Activity 1

Read Matthew's version of the birth of Jesus in Matthew 1:18—2:23. Write down a list of the ways Matthew's story differs from Luke's story. Draw a picture of each story that highlights their differences.

Activity 2

Interview someone you know who is a Christian. Ask why he or she thinks it was important that Jesus was God in human flesh. Ask also for his or her thoughts on what this means for the way we relate to God and to each other.

Activity 3

Compose your own *Magnificat* poem that describes the way you see God active in human life today.

Activity 4

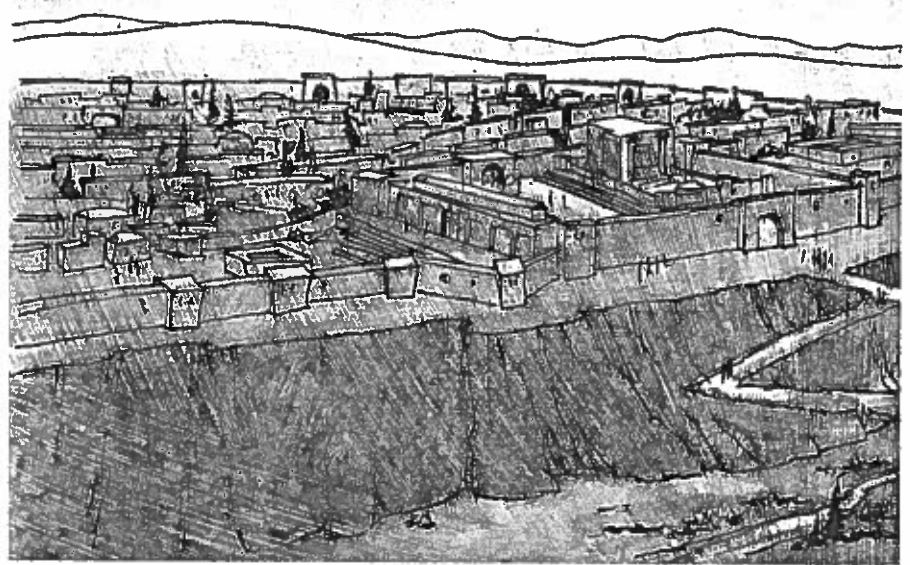
Develop a group dance that expresses how Mary, Joseph, or the shepherds felt when they heard the good news that God would come to all people.

FOCUS

ON THE JERUSALEM TEMPLE

The temple in Jesus' time was built on the site of Solomon's temple, but it was much more impressive. King Herod was one of the greatest builders of the ancient world. Solomon's temple already had been destroyed once and rebuilt into something less glorious than at first (see Session 8). Herod expanded the temple and used the finest materials in the project.

From start to finish, the building of the new temple took over 40 years. It was not complete during the ministry of Jesus, though it was being used.



When the sun shone on the huge white stones of the temple, no one could stand to look at it directly. It had doors so massive that only groups of adult men could open and shut them.

The temple was destroyed in the year A.D. 70 as the Romans put down a Jewish uprising. Ironically, the temple was burned and leveled soon after it was completed.

Today the Dome of the Rock stands on the site of Herod's temple in Jerusalem. Only one wall of the temple, the Wailing Wall, remains.