



CLOUD OF WITNESSES

MARY

Favored by God

Catherine Upchurch



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Introduction

Alive in the Word brings you resources to deepen your understanding of Scripture, offer meaning for your life today, and help you to pray and act in response to God's word.

Use any volume of **Alive in the Word** in the way best suited to you.

- **For individual learning and reflection**, consider this an invitation to prayerfully journal in response to the questions you find along the way. And be prepared to move from head to heart and then to action.
- **For group learning and reflection**, arrange for three sessions where you will use the material provided as the basis for faith sharing and prayer. You may ask group members to read each chapter in advance and come prepared with questions answered. In this kind of session, plan to be together for about an hour. Or, if your group prefers, read and respond to the questions together without advance preparation. With this approach, it's helpful to plan on spending more time for each group session in order to adequately work through each chapter.

- For a parish-wide event or use within a larger group, provide each person with a copy of this volume, and allow time during the event for quiet reading, group discussion and prayer, and then a final commitment by each person to some simple action in response to what he or she learned.

This volume explores the theme of **Cloud of Witnesses**. The pages of our Bibles are filled with the stories of women and men who have played a unique role in salvation history. By entering into a few key biblical passages written by or describing these people, we begin to see how our own story continues God's great work of salvation in the world. Their witness, handed on to us from centuries ago, continues to speak to us and challenge us to stand as faithful witnesses in today's world.

The Annunciation



Begin by asking God to assist you in your prayer and study. Then read through Luke 1:26-38, the story of the annunciation of the birth of Jesus.

Luke 1:26-38

²⁶In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David, and the virgin's name was

Mary. ²⁸And coming to her, he said, "Hail, favored one! The Lord is with you." ²⁹But she was greatly troubled at what was said and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus. ³²He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father, ³³and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." ³⁴But Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?" ³⁵And the angel said to her in reply, "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 called holy, the Son of God. ³⁶And behold, Elizabeth, your relative, has also conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her who was called barren; ³⁷for nothing will be impossible for God.” ³⁸Mary said, “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her.

After a few moments of quiet reflection on the scene, consider the information provided in “Setting the Scene.”

Setting the Scene

The Gospel of Luke is dominated by a journey motif or theme, with significant events seeming to occur in logical order as the reader moves with the action toward Jerusalem and the events of Jesus’ passion, death, and resurrection. Even this first chapter of the gospel account unfolds in an orderly way, with the announcement of the birth of John the Baptist (1:5-25), the forerunner of Jesus, occurring before the announcement of the birth of Jesus.

John’s parents, Elizabeth and Zechariah, serve as a type of bridge between the Old and New Testaments. Both are descendants of the priestly clans of Israel and described as “righteous in the eyes of God” (1:5-6). We may assume that, as righteous people, the law of God was their anchor, and faithfulness to God’s word their way of conducting themselves in the world. Later in the gospel, the Roman centurion who witnesses the crucifixion will declare Jesus to be righteous

Righteousness may be described as being in right relationship with God. In your life, who models this kind of righteousness for you?

(23:47, also translated as “innocent”). Joseph of Arimathea, who claimed his broken body, is also described as a “righteous man” (23:50).

This elderly couple epitomized the best of faithful Israel, and yet Elizabeth had remained childless. Such a fate was often seen as an embarrassment or even a judgment on a woman’s morality. Having been described as “righteous,” Elizabeth’s barrenness had nothing to do with her spiritual state. Her pregnancy is undoubtedly the stuff of miracles—God intervening in totally unexpected and seemingly impossible ways.

From the old and foundational comes something new and fresh, and it is this direction that Luke the evangelist pursues as he describes the encounter between the angel Gabriel and a young Jewish girl named Mary.

Understanding the Scene Itself

The entire passage will be considered a few verses at a time. The occasional questions in the margin (as above) are for discussion with others. If you are using these materials on your own, use the questions for personal reflection or as a guide to journaling.

²⁶In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David, and the virgin’s name was Mary.

Referencing “the sixth month” is a connection to the previous story of good news for Elizabeth and Zechariah, again connecting the two preg-

nancy events much as the two sons in their adult lives will be connected in public memory.

The particular angel sent to Mary (and in the previous story to Zechariah) is Gabriel, known in Jewish tradition from the eighth chapter of the book of Daniel, where he interpreted a vision of the end-times when God would sit in judgment of the wicked. After hearing Gabriel's interpretation, the prophet Daniel is said to have been left weak and ill for several days, even "desolate" at the news of such judgment (Dan 8:27). One can only imagine how a young girl generations later, familiar with her religious tradition of which Gabriel is a part, might have felt upon encountering Gabriel himself.

The scene takes place in a particular location, Nazareth. This town is not directly mentioned in the Old Testament, in spite of the reference in the Gospel of Matthew (2:23) that the prophets said, "He shall be called a Nazorean." Some scholars believe Matthew's note is a play on the word *nešer*, meaning "shoot," as in the shoot of Jesse (Isa 11:1). In the Gospel of Luke, Nazareth is the home of Joseph and Mary, and the location of Jesus' childhood home.

Located about halfway between the Sea of Galilee and the Mediterranean Sea, Nazareth is near the lower end of the Lebanon mountain range, approximately sixty-five miles north of Jerusalem. (See the map on page 40.) Although little is known of this town at the time of Jesus, Luke records that Gabriel's annunciation to Mary occurred there. This is also the location of the famous scene that begins the public ministry

of Jesus as he reads from the scroll of Isaiah in the synagogue and proclaims, “Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:16-21).



Basilica of the Annunciation

God worked within Mary's life circumstances in Nazareth. How might God be working in your own circumstances at this time in your life?

Today Nazareth is a rather large city that includes a number of noted churches, two of which relate to the events of the first chapter of Luke. Saint Joseph's Church, containing ruins from the first century, is revered as the workshop of Joseph (described as a carpenter in Matt 13:55) and the home of the Holy Family. The Basilica of the Annunciation, completed in 1969, memorializes the encounter between Mary and the angel Gabriel described in the first chapter of Luke. As the largest church in the Middle East, the basilica is frequented by international tourists who wish to worship there and meditate on the numerous depictions of Mary from all parts of the world.

In Luke's telling of the story, he says simply, “the virgin's name was Mary” (1:27), a name from the tradition of Miriam, sister of Moses and Aaron, a name meaning “sea of bitterness and sorrow.” Mary is described as a virgin who is betrothed to a man named Joseph. In this culture, betrothal was a formal agreement of marriage, the marriage itself beginning once the young woman was physically mature enough to

become pregnant. Given that Mary is not yet living with Joseph, we may assume that she was still too physically immature to bear a child. This sets the stage for God's intervention in her life.

Joseph is "of the house of David," indicating Jesus' connection to the everlasting dynasty promised to David: "Your house and your kingdom are firm forever before me; your throne shall be firmly established forever" (2 Sam 7:16).

²⁸And coming to her, he said, "Hail, favored one! The Lord is with you." ²⁹But she was greatly troubled at what was said and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God."

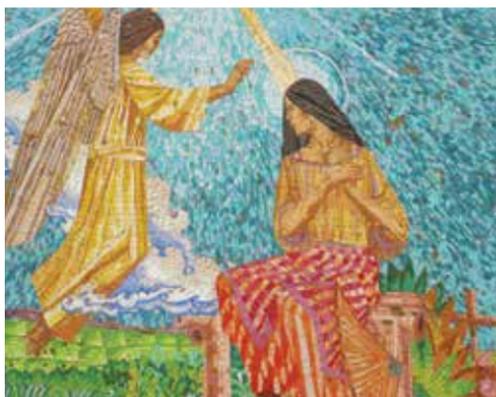
Unlike Zechariah who was a priest serving at the temple when he received the news of Elizabeth's pregnancy, Mary was simply a young woman living in an obscure village. And yet Gabriel's first words to Mary tell us immediately and directly that she is among those favored by God. Why would this message have troubled Mary? The Greek term *charis* and Hebrew *hēn* may both be translated as "favor" or "grace." In the Jewish tradition it generally means that God is positively disposed to the person, though this should not be confused with receiving special treatment or favoritism.

Mary surely wondered how she could be counted among those receiving divine favor. Consider some in the Jewish tradition who are said to have been favored by God: Noah (Gen 6:8);

When have you been fearful of God or the promptings of God?

How has God's promise to be present with us helped to put your fears into perspective?

Joseph (Gen 39:20-23); Moses (Exod 33:12-13); Hannah (1 Sam 2:21) and her son, Samuel the prophet (1 Sam 2:26). In each of these cases, the characters are charged with difficult tasks—from preserving creation from destruction, to taking charge of royal duties, to leading people out of slavery, to speaking God’s word to those who find it difficult to hear. Being favored by God usually came with great responsibilities. But it also came with the reassurance that there is nothing to fear.



³¹“Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus. ³²He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father, ³³and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

Now Gabriel’s message takes on the particular way in which Mary will experience God’s favor. She will conceive and bear a son. In the Old Testament tradition, two women were visited by an angel and told they would bear sons, men who played significant roles in salvation history. One woman was Hagar, Sarah’s maid and the woman who would bear Abraham’s first son, Ishmael. The Lord’s angel appeared to Hagar

when she ran away to the desert (Gen 16:7-13) and announced that her descendants would be numerous, specifically, “You are now pregnant and shall bear a son; / you shall name him Ishmael.” The other woman was the previously barren mother of Samson to whom an angel of the Lord said, “Though you are barren and have had no children, you will conceive and bear a son” (Judg 13:1-5). Samson would be one of Israel’s leaders who wielded power against Israel’s enemies, the Philistines.

The name and titles of Mary’s child recorded in Luke reveal that the child is the fulfillment of all of Israel’s hopes, as this passage makes use of language that is typically associated with God’s presence and power to act on Israel’s behalf.

The name “Jesus” means simply “the Lord saves,” a clear proclamation of God’s overarching purpose. Just as the psalmists (e.g., Ps 48:2; 86:10; 96:4) acclaim that God is great and mighty, Gabriel indicates this child will grow up to be “great.” In Israel’s tradition, those who are called by God and remain faithful are sometimes referred to as sons of God, and the “Most High” is a clear reference to God. Israel’s kings were also designated as sons of God (e.g., 2 Sam 7:14; Ps 2:7; 89:28). And finally, the promise to David that his kingdom would be established forever (2 Sam 7:13-17) is brought to fulfillment in this promise to give Mary’s child “the throne of David.”

Luke focuses on the names and titles for Jesus that connect with Israel’s expectations. What titles for Jesus do you most often use in prayer? Why?

³⁴But Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?” ³⁵And the angel said to her in reply, “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 called holy, the Son of God. ³⁶And behold, Elizabeth, your relative, has also conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her who was called barren; ³⁷for nothing will be impossible for God.”

Mary’s response reveals her humanity as she tells Gabriel that a pregnancy is not possible because her marriage is not consummated and, in fact, she has never had sexual relations. More important in the way Luke weaves his story is the connection to Israel’s hopes for a promised Messiah to be born of an Israelite virgin (Isa 7:14). This is not an ordinary reporting of the facts but opens the way for a profound promise and the first appearance in Luke’s gospel of the Spirit of God.

It is the gift of God’s Spirit who not only brings about the birth of Jesus, but also plays a significant role throughout the Gospel of Luke and Luke’s second volume, the Acts of the Apostles.

In Luke’s accounts, it is the Spirit who

- reveals the significance of Jesus’ birth to Simeon (Luke 2:25ff.);
- descends on Jesus at his baptism (Luke 3:22);
- accompanies Jesus in the desert at the time of his temptation (Luke 4:1);
- animates Jesus from the start of his public ministry (Luke 4:18-21);

Where do you see evidence that the Spirit of God is still at work in our world?

- becomes a divine gift to Jesus' followers (Luke 11:13; Acts 1:8-9; 2:1-4, 33; 10:44);
- teaches Jesus' followers how to respond to opposition (Luke 12:10-12; Acts 7:54-60);
- equips Jesus' followers to preach throughout the region (Acts 13:1-4; 19:21-22).

Gabriel tells Mary, "The holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you." Similar words are spoken to the followers of Jesus gathered together after Jesus' death and resurrection: "you will receive power when the holy Spirit comes upon you" (Acts 1:8). In the latter case, the church is being equipped for the mission from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. In the former case, Mary is being told that her mission to bear the "Son of the Most High" will be the work of God's own Spirit within her. It is not human power but God's power that will overshadow Mary as she begins this mission.

Again, some background might help communicate how Mary heard these words about being overshadowed. In the heart of the Jewish tradition is the experience of the exodus from Egypt, with the accompanying wandering in the desert and making a covenant with God. Consider that Moses, drawn to a burning bush while shepherding sheep, experiences a revelation of God, an encounter that he surely believed would

How would you describe the activity of God's Spirit in your own life?



overwhelm or even destroy him and so he hid his face (Exod 3:1-6). As the liberated slaves made their way toward the Promised Land, God's presence overshadowed them in the form of a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night (Exod 13:21-22). God's presence was both overwhelming and comforting. Being overshadowed by God's presence and power could have left Mary experiencing both as well. Like the prophets before her, overshadowed by God's presence and empowered to speak God's word, Mary will also bear God's Word to the world.

The next verses (1:36-37) move Mary, and us, further into the realm of religious imagination, not as a flight of fancy but as an invitation to embrace something much greater than logic would allow. God has intervened to allow a barren relative to conceive a child. Here again there is a connection of sorts to the previous story of Elizabeth's pregnancy. On one end of the spectrum, Elizabeth is too elderly to conceive and bear a child, and on the other end, Mary is too young and is not married. Has Gabriel finally captured her imagination? Is this announcement about Elizabeth the sign that Mary needs to assure her of God's call and gift, and her unique role in salvation history?

"[F]or nothing will be impossible for God" is another phrase that both serves Israel's memory and promises a new future. When Sarah overheard the news given to Abraham that she would bear a child (Gen 18:9-15), she laughed, causing the Lord to say to her husband, "Is anything too marvelous for the LORD to do?" Now, in the

Are you able to identify with Mary's response to Gabriel? How so?

Is there an "impossible" situation that you would like to ask God to transform?

announced pregnancy of Elizabeth, the angel invites Mary to enter into that same sense of wonder and awe in the face of God's power and generosity. She is now ready to respond to God's plan, to choose to put herself at the service of this God who intervenes in history and whose promises are worthy of trust.

³⁸Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

Mary's response to God's plan, translated as it is in our own language, sometimes sounds so docile as to be passive. Perhaps this impression is further complicated by the fact that so much art over the centuries, as profoundly beautiful as it may be, depicts Mary with her eyes down-cast and her head tilted in submission. But we must be careful not to confuse resignation or a sense of unworthiness with true humility.

The Latin root of "humility" is derived from the word *humus*, the term that applies to the earth. We could say that Mary is of the earth, grounded in her identity. Mary is a "handmaid of the Lord," much as Hannah, the mother of Samuel, was a handmaid and servant who prayed for a son (1 Sam 1:11). Mary knows her place in relationship to God and therefore she knows that she can be of service. This is the time that her service is needed. Far from passive, she is actively responding to God's plan and embracing her role.

Perhaps it would serve us well to see her response to God's plan in light of another response

in Israel's history. When Moses heard his name called from the burning bush, he uttered a simple word, "*Hineni!*" meaning "Here I am." In the context of that event described in Exodus 3, Moses is not simply answering to his name; he is placing himself at God's service, ready to be given a commission. Similarly, Mary is placing herself in service to God's plan, even as unbelievable as it sounds to her.

Consider how and when you have been aware of saying "yes" to what God has in store for you. Did consenting to God's plan call forth a greater ability to trust God in other areas of your life?

Her *fiat* (Latin, meaning "let it be done") reminds us that we may freely choose to reject or to participate in God's life in us, and God's movements in our world. In Mary's case, a young woman from a small village, someone who would have been considered a bit marginal, is now front and center in the plan of God, not just for her own life but for the life of the world. She said "yes," trusting in God's will and power to create life, even though she could not have known completely what it would mean for her or her family.

Praying the Word / Sacred Reading

Return to the passage in Luke 1:26-38, reading it deliberately and prayerfully. Consider what words or phrases stand out for you and spend a bit of time rolling these words and phrases over in your heart. If you are sharing this with a group, allow for some quiet time, and then talk about the various pieces of this passage that stand out for each of you.

Place yourself in the position of Mary, perhaps looking back at this time in her life when the whole world changed for her. If the following words help you to do that, then use them as your own prayer or as a group prayer, or feel free to create your own prayerful reflection on the scene by placing yourself in her position.



When I was just a young girl,
barely old enough to call myself a woman,
you, O God, sent an angel to visit me.
I was innocent and couldn't know what you
 had in mind
but I did know the stories of my people,
and I recognized that Gabriel's mere presence
 could be foreboding.
Why, of all the angels, would you send Gabriel,
the interpreter of frightening signs from the
 time of Daniel?
Would this be a frightening time for me?
Why would Gabriel tell me that I was favored?
Isn't that the same message that came to our
 great prophets?
Your "favor" seemed to get them in all kinds
 of hot water.
And weren't our kings favored too?

It seemed to me that to be favored
could lead to places that troubled me—
being called upon to speak on your
 behalf,
being asked to act as you would act,
being misunderstood,
being rejected—
To be favored was not simply a privilege,
it was a responsibility.

“Do not be afraid” were the sweetest words I
 could have heard.

You, God, were in charge,
 and would use my pondering,
 and my confusion,
 and my joyful consent
to do something beautiful in me,
something beautiful for all generations!

Living the Word

Consider some tangible way you may help someone you know hear God’s words, “Be not afraid,” in their own life situation. Is there something you can do to demonstrate your willingness to be with someone in need of courage? Can your presence with another person be a confirmation of God’s desire to accompany that person through a fearful time?