



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 Visitation



Statue at Church of the Visitation

Begin by asking God to assist you in your prayer and study. Then read through Luke 1:39-45, the story of the visitation, when Mary travels from Nazareth to the hill country to be with Elizabeth.

Luke 1:39-45

³⁹During those days Mary set out and traveled to the hill country in haste to a town of Judah, ⁴⁰where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the infant leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth, filled with the holy Spirit, ⁴²cried out in a loud voice and said, "Most blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³And how does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴For at the moment the

sound of your greeting reached my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled."

After a few moments of quiet reflection on the passage, consider the background information provided in "Setting the Scene."

Setting the Scene

With this scene we travel a distance of about ninety miles between Nazareth and the Judean hill country, between the area around the Sea of Galilee and the region around Jerusalem. (See the map on page 32.)

The village associated for many centuries with the visitation is known today as Ein Kerem and is located just a few miles southwest of the capital city of Jerusalem. In the lower portion of the town pilgrims today can visit the Church of St. John the Baptist, which encloses a grotto venerated as the spot of John's birth. The walls of the surrounding courtyard contain tiles of the Canticle of Zechariah in many languages. This same canticle, upholding God's power to save all through Jesus Christ, is prayed across the world for Morning Prayer as part of the Liturgy of the Hours.



Church of the Visitation

Just above the town itself, the Church of the Visitation is perched on a picturesque hillside, commemorating the site where two women, chosen by God, greeted one another with joyful news that would change the world. From this vantage point the roughly terraced hillsides give

evidence of the ingenuity of ancient farmers who found ways to use a somewhat daunting terrain for their most basic needs.

Understanding the Scene Itself

The entire passage will be considered a few verses at a time. The occasional questions in the margin may be used in group discussion or for your own personal reflection.

³⁹During those days Mary set out and traveled to the hill country in haste to a town of Judah, ⁴⁰where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.

The “haste” of Mary’s journey to be with Elizabeth was more a matter of spiritual urgency than a matter of fact. Such a journey would not have been undertaken without some planning. A young girl in first-century Palestine would not have traveled by herself even to a nearby location, and certainly not a distance of ninety miles, without an escort and some planning for safe travel. Saying she went in haste is perhaps more a reflection on Mary’s swift reaction to share the news. She doesn’t linger in doubt or confusion but moves forward, confident that she is part of a larger sacred mystery.

In this simple scene of the two women coming together, there are a number of suggestions to help modern Bible readers see the scene in its richness. Beyond the mere improbability of these two bearing children without God’s intervention, there are other layers of meaning to be uncovered here.

It could be said that Elizabeth represents the former covenant and Mary the new covenant,

embracing here, their wombs between them carrying John and Jesus. It is as if two times of God's pronounced presence have come together and the lynchpin is Jesus, bringing God's covenant to fullness.

It also has been observed that in Luke's writings he sometimes brings together two people whose individual religious experiences may not yet be fully understood. Their actual time together often reveals more fully how God is at work within them. For example, in the Acts of the Apostles, also written by Luke, consider these scenes:

When has sharing a religious experience with someone else helped you to understand and embrace it more fully?

Did this sharing come about by unplanned circumstances or by your desire and design?

- Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-40) meet while traveling through Samaria. In their sharing Philip sees that God has plans beyond the mission to Israel, while the Ethiopian moves from godly devotion to the full faith of baptism.
- Saul and Ananias (Acts 9:1-19) meet after Saul has experienced the risen Christ and has been blinded. Through their meeting, Ananias learns the surprising result of obedience to God's promptings, while Saul receives the gift of restored sight and the Holy Spirit to guide him on an unexpected mission to the Gentiles.
- Peter and the Roman centurion Cornelius (Acts 10:1-49) are brought together after both men receive visions and have to be willing to pursue a plan that might have seemed unlikely. In the end, Peter discovers that God shows no partiality and Cornelius and his

household receive the faith through an outpouring of the Holy Spirit and baptism.

⁴¹When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the infant leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth, filled with the holy Spirit, ⁴²cried out in a loud voice and said, "Most blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³And how does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴For at the moment the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for joy."



This scene is permeated with joy and a sense of presence. The women are totally present to one another and to this moment of God's intervention in their lives. This is not a gathering of shame or embarrassment, not a time of worry or confusion, but a time of expectation, literally and figuratively.

What does it mean to be called blessed? In the Hebrew tradition a blessing is a share in God's life. In the creation story of Genesis 1, God blessed the humans made in his image, giving them power to fill the earth (1:28). Made in the image of the Creator God, humans share in the creative process. Also in Genesis, God tells Abram that he will "be a blessing" (12:1-3), that

Pope Francis reminds us that the Gospel invites us to "run the risk of face-to-face encounters with others" partly to hear their pain and partly to be infected with joy from each other (The Joy of the Gospel, #88). Mary and Elizabeth share just such a moment. How does this very human encounter speak to you?

in and through him God's covenant will spread throughout the earth.

A blessing is also a source of happiness. "Blessed are you" can be understood as "happy are you." Luke 6 clearly has this in mind by closing the beatitudes with "Rejoice and leap for joy on that day!" (6:23). In the scene with the two pregnant women it is the child in Elizabeth's womb who leaps for joy as he and his mother recognize God's blessing.

The double mention of Elizabeth's child leaping in the womb (1:41, 44) would have drawn a religiously significant parallel for Jews who knew their ancestral stories. Many scholars suggest that Luke wrote this in a way that would call to mind the story of the twins Esau and Jacob, who "jostled" in the womb of Rebekah (Gen 25:21-23). In that ancient scene God told Rebekah that "the older will serve the younger," explaining the reversal of roles between Esau and Jacob. Now the implication for Elizabeth and Mary is that the older of these two boys, John, will serve the younger, Jesus.

Elizabeth's words, "Most blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb," show that she is filling a prophetic role in the scene, recognizing and identifying what God is doing. She acknowledges Mary's chosen status as an instrument of God. And further, she proclaims the fruit of Mary's womb to be "my Lord."

Elizabeth is the first to proclaim Jesus' identity, even before his birth. Her son John will echo her words in his ministry, preparing the way of

the Lord with a baptism for repentance. When asked if he was the awaited Messiah, John replied, “one mightier than I is coming. I am not worthy to loosen the thongs of his sandals” (Luke 3:16). Both Elizabeth and John knew God’s action in their lives, but were humble enough to recognize that in Mary and Jesus something definitive was happening. God was breaking into the world in a new way.



⁴⁵“Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled.”

When we come right down to it, Elizabeth is acknowledging the powerful act of trust that brought Mary to say yes to God’s plan. It was not an act of the intellect to believe that God would be true to his word. It was an act of trusting that God was worthy of such surrender. It involved all that it is to be human—her body, mind, and soul. Elizabeth is also applauding the action of God in her young kinswoman.

There is, however, a larger picture here when speaking of the Lord’s word being fulfilled. This is not merely about God’s word to a young virgin in Nazareth, but in truth is about the word of salvation God promised throughout salvation history. In many ways, Mary represents the people of God who have waited expectantly for God’s continued, and now definitive, action on their behalf.

The root word for “humility” and “human” is *humus*, meaning “earth” or “ground.”

Humility does provide a grounding for our experience as humans. When have you witnessed the power of someone exhibiting true humility?

What things challenge your willingness to trust God?

What things have helped you to grow in trusting God?

God's covenant word to Abraham to provide an abundance of descendants (Gen 12:1-3; 15:1-6) prepared for this moment. In this new time those descendants would not be restricted to the clans and tribes of Israel but would include all peoples. God's word to Moses and the Hebrews to make them his people (Lev 26:12) would now extend to all the peoples of the earth. God's word to King David to establish an everlasting throne (2 Sam 7:16) will be realized in the offer of everlasting life. All made possible by God's word spoken to a young maiden and the birth of a child who will be revealed as Lord.

Praying the Word / Sacred Reading

Return to the full passage of the visitation in Luke 1:39-45. Read it slowly and prayerfully in full. What phrases or sentences speak to you? Linger with these phrases as you allow God to work within you.

Perhaps these words will assist you in further prayer:

Like Mary, may I create the opportunity to
share good news,
embrace a new thing God is doing even when
it seems impossible,
and receive God's word with joyful acceptance.

Like Elizabeth, may I recognize the presence of
God in and around me,
foster in my family the desire to proclaim
good news,

and humbly fulfill the plan of God in my own life.

Living the Word

Who might delight in a visit from you? How might your presence with someone at this time become a sign of God's presence and care? Consider some practical ways that you might share joy and good news with others, especially in a world where it seems so little good news occupies the headlines.