
**DISCIPLES WOMEN
GENERAL PROGRAMS**

Date: Christmas 2010

By: Beth Rupe

Magnify the Lord, Oh My Soul . . .



Purpose:

The purpose of this session is to remind participants that the hope of God's justice for the world was assured through the coming of Jesus Christ; it is the promise of Christmas. It will challenge participants to reclaim that hope and to live into it as they strive to be agents of God's justice in light of tragedy of human trafficking that overshadows the lives of many women and children in our world.

Suggestions for Leader:

- Two weeks before the meeting read Luke 1:46 – 55 and Luke 6: 12 - 26. Dwell in these scripture for several days. Read them both silently and aloud. If possible read them in several translations including the one that you read most frequently. *Crosswalk.com* is a good online resource for different Bible translations. Write down your thoughts, questions, and emotions as you read the scriptures. Note if they remain the same or are different as you read on several occasions. What similarities do you find in these scriptures from chapter 1 and chapter 6? How do they support and reinforce one another? What promises do you hear in these scriptures?
- Now read the introduction and familiarize yourself with the lesson materials. Visit the Disciples Women website, www.disciplewomen.org, and review the information provided regarding the issue of human trafficking. Check out the websites to familiarize yourself with what other women in other congregations are doing to put an end to modern day slavery. Make sure that you have a copy of a song based on the Magnificat. Bach, Vivaldi and Rutter all have composed pieces that would be suitable. Three of my favorite contemporary pieces are *Magnificat* by Eden's Bridge on *Celtic Christmas*, *Magnificat* by Todd Agnew on *Do You See What I See?* and *Magnificat* by David Haas on *Blest are They, The Best of David of Haas, vol. 1*. Eden's Bridge speaks of "the shock waves that echo through your soul." Todd Agnew's version lifts us in praise of "the almighty God who does great things for us... whose mercy is free for those who feel his justice." David Haas' composition praises "A God who brings new life to all things." There are many musical compositions from which to choose, so enjoy listening to several and choose your favorite.
- One week before your meeting recruit two women who are comfortable reading in group settings to read the scriptures during your meeting. Ask them to read the

passages in the NRSV and in their favorite translation. Ask them to bring both translations to the group meeting. Recruit a worship leader, or you may choose to lead this yourself. Gather materials that will be needed for the worship setting: a table, a white table cloth, a pillar candle, and a piece of linked chain. You may use a child's toy that is plastic links or a dog's leash or similar middle size linked chain. Prior to the meeting make sure that one of the links is opened slightly so the chain can be broken. Finally, contact all the members of your group and remind them of the meeting.

- On the day of the meeting, create a comfortable space in which your group can gather. It is best if everyone can sit in a circle where they may see the faces of everyone present. In the center of the meeting space place a table. Cover the table with a white cloth. In the center place a single white candle and a strand of linked chain.

Introduction:

The birth of any child may be surrounded by a wide range of emotions ranging from joy to anxiety and fear. For the family who has spent hours in prayer and consultation with physicians and fertility experts, hope and relief mingle with the joy. For the family who is struggling with paying the rent and keeping food on the table, fear and uncertainty mingle with anticipation of what might be. For some women who live where human slavery is still a reality and who face the possibility that their children may be abducted or forced into labor against their wills, learning that they are pregnant can be a moment of fear and sorrow. For many, the emotions surrounding a pregnancy might be like a roller coaster ride of ups and downs - joy and fear.

The time leading up to the birth of Jesus Christ was no different. What must it have been like for Mary, a young woman bound by the traditions and expectations of her culture, to discover that she was going to have a child? Consider what it must have been like to know that this pregnancy could lead to death. Would Joseph reject her and demand that she be stoned? Would Joseph and her family reject her and set her aside, an unprotected woman with no one to provide for her and her child's basic needs? What must it have been like for Mary, a young woman living in an occupied land where subsistence living was the norm for most, to discover that she was going to have a child? How soon would this child be

exposed to the horrors of Roman society, horrors such as crucifixions and the tears of families forced to sell members into slavery to pay taxes? Would her son grow up to be a rebel or a collaborator? Would he have an itinerant worker wondering from day to day if he would have money for food? What must it have been like for Mary to hear the words of an angel, “Do not fear” and to know that as God-bearer the child of her womb would bring God’s mercy and salvation to this broken world around her.

Theologian, Jürgen Moltmann in his book, *In the End, the Beginning; The Life of Hope*, suggests that the birth of every child represents the birth of hope. Our session today reminds us of the sure hope born with the coming of Jesus Christ. Living in the now and the not yet that was ushered in with the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, it will encourage us to look at what God has done, is doing, and will do to restore and recreate our broken world. It will remind us through Christ, God’s redeeming work is assured. It will encourage us to consider how we are called to be a part of God’s justice. It will challenge us to be a part of living the hope that is ours through God so that we, and others, like Mary may sing “my soul magnifies the Lord.”

Lesson:

Lesson Overview:

Begin the meeting by playing the *Magnificat*. Follow the suggestions provided in the lesson. In your own words, present background information and the information on human trafficking that you found when you went to the Disciples Women website. As you facilitate the discussion, allow time for silent reflection so participants have time to process information before responding. Discuss potential service projects and ask for group members to generate additional suggestions. Conclude with worship.

Biblical Background:

Most scholars agree that the Gospel of Luke was written anonymously. Tradition attributes the book, and its companion volume The Acts of the Apostles, to Luke, who has been identified as a physician and traveling companion of Paul. Indeed, the oldest Greek manuscript from circa 200 CE and writers of the early church during the patristic age refer to the book as “Gospel according to Luke.” Written between 70 CE and 100 CE, the book draws on the gospel of Mark, the Q- source, and the oral tradition of the Lukan community as its sources. The writer is well aware of the fall of Jerusalem to Rome and the destruction that followed. Most scholars agree that the gospel originated in Ephesus and was intended

for an audience of gentile Christians.

In the first chapter, the gospel writer states the purpose for the gospel. The evangelist writes, “I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write and orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed,” Luke 1: 3. It should be noted that Theophilus means friend of God. Therefore, this gospel may be considered to be directed to the friends of God throughout the ages wanting to grow in the life of discipleship. It should also be noted that the writer of the gospel in the first verse indicates an awareness of other accounts of Jesus’ life and ministry, death, and resurrection. The author assures the recipients that this account is one that can withstand scrutiny as it has been carefully investigated.

True to his word to investigate everything from the start, the writer begins his narrative with a story that predates the birth announcement of Jesus. He begins with the announcement of John, the one who early Christians identify as the returning Elijah, forerunner and messenger for the coming Messiah. Very quickly this coming Messiah, eclipses John and the spotlight shifts to the announcement of the birth of Jesus the Christ. In telling of both John’s and Jesus’ births, the gospel writer introduces us to two strong women.

Today’s lesson will focus on the words of one of these strong women, the Magnificat of Mary. Found in Luke 1: 46 – 55, this hymn of praise gets its traditional name, the Magnificat from the first word of the Latin translation of “my soul magnifies the Lord.” The form of the hymn follows that of hymnody of the First Testament beginning with a first person declaration of praise followed by substantiation of the reasons for engaging in praise. Mary declares that God is worthy of praise based on God’s saving acts as seen in what God has done for Mary and in turn what God will do for the world. Most scholars agree that the Magnificat was an early Jewish Christian hymn. These words have served as inspiration for lyricists and composers through the centuries. These words are heard in many worship services during the Advent season in all three years of the lectionary cycle of readings. Mary’s speech stands in the tradition of Hellenistic historical writings which have significant persons speaking the truth of a situation. The truth that Mary speaks is that God’s redeeming work is already been accomplished as seen in her life and in the reversals in society that reestablish God’s justice and shalom for all people.

Luke 1: 46 – 55 may be divided as follows:

Verses

46 – 49	God's mercy and saving purpose in the life of Mary
50	General statement of God's mercy.
51 – 55	God's mercy and saving purpose in society – these verses suggests that what God has done in Mary's life, God will now do for all of society
54 – 55	are specific signs of God's saving purpose seen in social reversals and in the fulfillment of God's promises to Abraham.

In these verses, the Greek word that is translated as “blessed” is *makaria* rather than the more commonly used *eulogoumenē*. It is the same word that the evangelist uses in the sixth chapter of the gospel in the passage that we know as the Sermon on the Plains, which includes the Beatitudes. Parallels can be seen in the Magnificat and the Beatitude as both speak to reversals and the establishment of God's justice that accompany God's kingdom. In the structure of the Beattitudes the outer statements found in verses 20 – 25, the outer statements reflect the reality of the world and the inner statements show the turnaround that will take place as God's justice is established.

While the gospel of Matthew also includes the Beatitudes, several differences should be noted. First, the Sermon on the Plains is significantly shorter than the Sermon on the Mount. Second, in Luke Jesus descends from the mountain to speak to the disciples and the people on the plains while in Matthew, Jesus speaks from the mountain. Last, the evangelist in Luke speaks to a social and political reality characterized by turnarounds in economic conditions and the end of suffering while the evangelist in Matthew tends to spiritualize these issues. This could also be stated of the evangelists understanding of the “lowly” that are referred to in the Magnificat. For the evangelist of Luke, lowliness is not merely an attitude of humility before God, it is an absolute social reality reflecting a social status of poverty and need.

The evangelist in Luke gives us some of Jesus' hard teachings, so hard in fact that at times the practicality of the Beatitudes as found in Luke was called into question. In the Middle Ages, it was suggested that Beatitudes were beyond how most people could live. Only monks and nuns were expected to follow these ‘counsels of perfection.’ Careful reading of

the gospel makes it clear that for the evangelist of Luke, Jesus is addressing his disciples as he pronounces these blessings and woes. These are words whose embodiment characterize a life of discipleship. They are words of prophetic warning and words for holy living.

Suggestions for Leading Lesson:

A. Play the *Magnificat* of your choice.

Explain to the group that the piece that they have just heard is based on Luke 1: 46 – 55 which has traditionally known as the Magnificat. Explain that the title Magnificat comes from the Latin translation of verse 46. Read verse 46.

Discuss the following:

What did you notice as you were listening to this hymn/song? What did you feel as you were listening? What does it mean for one's soul to magnify the Lord? How has your soul magnified the Lord? Are there other versions of the Magnificat that you enjoy?

B. Engaging the Scripture Together

1. Have preselected reader read Luke 1: 46 – 55. Present background information on the passage.

Discuss the following:

- Why does Mary sing this song of praise? How have you experienced the mercy of God in your life? How does Mary's words reflect the social reality of her situation? What is the reason for Mary's hope? How has this hope been realized in Mary's life?
- Mary's song suggests that God's mercy is not limited to individuals but will extend throughout society and the world. How does Mary's word reflect the social reality of first century Judea? What are the signs of God's mercy to the world?

2. Have preselected reader read Luke 6: 12 – 26. Present background information on this passage.

Discuss the following:

- What are the similarities that you see in these passages?

- Scholars have suggested that the outer structure of this passage reflects the social reality of the first century of first century Judea. What similarities does this social reality have with our world?
 - Both the Magnificat and the Beatitudes speak of reversals and turnarounds in society. What are these reversals and turnarounds? Where/ how do we see these reversals taking place today?
3. Present information on human trafficking and on what Disciples women are doing to live into the reversals that are spoken of in the Magnificat and the Beattitudes.

Discuss the following:

- Hebrews 11: 1 states, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Mary’s song reflects her faith that God will act as God with mercy and compassion as God’s justice is established for individuals and for society. The life of discipleship is about living as if the things we hope for are already the reality of life. How can we live the reality of what is hoped for in the Magnificat and the Beatitudes?
- How can your group embody the hope which is spoken of in these passages by participating in the projects that you found on the website? In other ways?

Worship

Light the candle on the worship table. Replay the *Magnificat* which was played at the beginning of the session.

Call to worship:

Leader – All around us, we hear

The cries of Rachel weeping for her children
substandard education, street violence
joblessness, forced labor

People – O magnify the Lord, O my soul

For God’s mercy extends from generation to generation

Leader – All around us, we hear

The voice of Mary singing of the Lord our Savior

After school tutoring, vocational training,
Shelters, cottage industries,
Jobs, opportunities.

People - We rejoice in the Lord

Who raises up the lowly and sends the rich away empty.

Leader - All around us, we hear

People: Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come.

We will join with Mary, we will join in the comforting of Rachel.

Unison -Hope is born again.

Gathering Prayer

We come to you in the now and the not yet of the kingdom, confident in the good future that rests in your hand. We thank you for the gift of your Son, whose birth we remember this season, whose life, death, and resurrection we celebrate each day. Fill us with your Spirit so that we may remember your past mercies, may acknowledge your mighty presence, and may testify in word and deed to your blessings. In Jesus name, we pray. Amen.

Meditation

From *Homiletics on the Gospel of Luke* 8:6 -7 by Origen.

“And his mercy extends to generations of generations. God’s mercy is not for a generation, not for two, not for three. It is not for five. It stretches from generation to generation To those who fear him he has show strength in his arm. You may approach the Lord as weak [man]. If you fear him you will be able to hear the promise of the Lord makes to you on account of your fear of him.

So if you fear the Lord, he gives you courage or authority. He gives you the kingdom, so that you might be placed under the “king of kings” and possess the kingdom of heaven in Christ Jesus to whom is glory and power for ages of ages. Amen.”

Discuss the following:

What does it mean to you when Origen suggests that we can approach God as a weak person? How do we demonstrate “fear of the Lord?” What does the courage or authority that comes when we fear the Lord empower us to do?

At this time, invite participants to sit comfortably and to take several deep breaths.

Encourage them to sit quietly, breathing in and out through their nose. After a time of silence, read the following.

God, we know of your love and your mercy for we have received it in our own lives. We have felt your comforting presence when we have been alone and afraid. We have sensed your power when we were unsure and insecure. You have sent us companions who have helped us in our times of need. We have been the recipient of your grace and your mercy when.... *Allow a time of silence....*

God, we know of your love and your mercy for we have witnessed it in our society. We have seen your mercy in our ministries to prisoners in county jails and state prisons. We have seen your mercy in ministries that assist women to leave life of exploitation and prostitution. We have seen your mercy in ministries that welcomes the stranger as the rights of immigrants are defended. We have seen your mercy in ministries that establish cottage industries so that provide economic options and stability. We have seen your mercy when.... *Allow a time of silence....*

God, we give you thanks that we may approach you not out of our own strength but in our weakness. We give you thanks that you are our sure hope. We hear your promises and can trust that you are faithful, working with patience and diligence to bring them to fruition. God we give you thanks that your mercy extends from generation to generation.... *Allow a time of silence.*

Closing Hymn:

God's Love Made Visible

Service Projects:

Visit the Disciples Women website www.discipleswomen.org for a current list of projects in which your group can engage.

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Footnotes:

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All scripture references are from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.

Fred W. Dopps-Allsop in "Hymns, OT." In *The NewInterpreters Dictionary of the Bible, vol. 2,* Katharine Doob Sakenfield, gen ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007), p. 923. defines hymn as "a song containing praise of God."

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It has been suggested that all Lukan speeches are literary techniques which are common to Hellenistic historians. R. Alan Culpepper, :*Luke,:* *New Interpreters Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes. Luke and John, vol.IX,* Leander E. Keck, general editor, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1995), 56. He states hymns are the 'quintessential specimen of lyric verse that expresses passions of mind, love, joy, and admiration. A hymn enacts an 'effusion of praise' expressed with energy and evaluation."

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Van Voorst, 37.

Call to worship:

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People – O magnify the Lord, O my soul

For God’s mercy extends from generation to generation

Leader – All around us, we hear

The voice of Mary singing of the Lord our Savior
 After school tutoring, vocational training,
 Shelters, cottage industries,
 Jobs, opportunities.

People - We rejoice in the Lord

Who raises up the lowly and sends the rich away empty.

Leader - All around us, we hear

People: Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come.

We will join with Mary, we will join in the comforting of Rachel.

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