



Advent Through the Eyes of Those Who Waited

SESSION 1

The Hebrew Prophets, especially Second and Third Isaiah, introduce us to the season of Advent.

Introduction

Happy New Year! This Sunday, the first Sunday of Advent, begins the church year, a cycle that takes us through the life of Jesus the Christ annually. The lectionary readings begin with this season of Advent too. During Advent, the Hebrew Scriptures, or Old Testament texts, come from the Prophets. The Prophets introduce us to waiting and to preparing for the Messiah, our work for these weeks of Advent. This is not a simple task as our culture (both the church and the community) pushes us to prepare in bigger ways each year, even though the preparation often takes us away from the waiting and preparing for the Messiah. So look at your calendar now and set aside time to experience Advent differently this year by meeting figures prominent in the lectionary readings.

During these weeks, the people of the Advent texts will guide us on our way to the coming of the Messiah. First we meet with the Hebrew prophet Isaiah (actually two Isaiahs will be with us). Then we go to the Jordan to encounter the Jewish prophet John the Baptist. During the last two weeks, we sit in the company of Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist. These two women, one very young and the other beyond child-bearing years, encourage us to slow down and attend to the wonders of the coming Messiah.

The prophets quoted in the Revised Common Lectionary during the three years for Advent are Isaiah, 2 Samuel, Jeremiah, Malachi, Zephaniah, and Micah. Isaiah is the most prominent with a selection for each Sunday



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during Advent in Year A¹ and three of the four Sundays in Advent for Year B.² Perhaps this is not surprising, given the length of the book of Isaiah with its 66 chapters. And if you look up these texts, many phrases in them will be as familiar to you as nursery rhymes from your childhood. The words are sung in Handel's *Messiah* and more contemporary music, they have been

lectionary—lec' shun ary—is a selection of four readings from the Bible for each Sunday to be used in worship and proclamation. The Jews in antiquity created a system of readings to be read on the Sabbath from the Torah. Early Christians adopted these readings and later expanded them to include writings of the apostles and evangelists. Today, many Christians use the Revised Common Lectionary. Each year of the three-year cycle begins on the first Sunday of Advent and the years are called simply Year A, B, and C since they repeat themselves over and over. Advent Sunday of 2007 began year A which ends late November 2008.

interpreted in art throughout the ages, and they are emblazoned on Christmas cards each year. Isaiah is also the prophet most quoted or alluded to in the New Testament. Therefore, the book of Isaiah will represent our prophet figure for Advent.

Not One, But Three Isaiahs

As we read Isaiah, it is helpful to be alert to the setting and people to whom the words are addressed. The prophets spoke to a people in a particular situation. They kept the covenant with God before them as they dealt with powerful kings and conquering armies. God gave each prophet a message specific to the time and situation. In his commentary on Isaiah, Paul Hanson writes:

The prophets viewed the welfare and destiny of their people firmly within the context of world events. God's deliverance of Hebrew slaves from Egypt was a call to historical existence as a family within the family of the nations. The covenant that God concluded with the people entailed living in accord with divine commands amidst the day-to-day business of society and affairs of state. The welfare of Israel was thus tied up with economics, law, and international relations as well as with more explicitly religious matters.³

When we read the ancient words of the Hebrew Prophets, we are obliged to search for the context in which they were first spoken. Therefore, we will not immediately connect their words to a baby named Jesus, although ignoring that will not be easy as we begin the season of Advent.

Careful reading of the book of Isaiah in its earliest manuscripts has led most biblical scholars to conclude that these words come from not one prophet, but from at least three, and in different eras. Therefore, when reading these passages, keep in mind the context of each one. Below is a common way of dividing the book of Isaiah.

First Isaiah—Chapters 1–39

This Isaiah, the son of Amoz, spoke for God during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah—the kings of Judah (1:1)—from about 742 to 687 BCE. These were years of revolt and turmoil for the nation of Judah. Isaiah of Jerusalem records his call from God in chapter 6, one of the most vivid descriptions of God's majesty in Scripture. His message, though, is strongly flavored with God's judgment for the sin of the people, some-

Brief Chronology of Biblical Israel

1250–1020 BCE After the exodus from Egypt and wandering in the wilderness for many years, Moses dies and Joshua leads the Israelites to conquer the land and inhabit it. The twelve tribes form a loose federation and judges unite them in times of disruption or crisis. Thus, this is the time of judges.

1020–932 BCE Under constant threat from the Philistines, whose land they had occupied, the twelve tribes drop the loose federation and choose a king named Saul. During the reigns of Saul, David, and Solomon, the country prospers.

932–722 BCE The ten northern tribes rebel against Saul's heir to the throne and the kingdom divides in two. The northern ten tribes belonged to Israel, the two southern tribes (where Jerusalem and the temple are) to Judah. These stories are found in Samuel, Kings and Chronicles.

722 BCE After Amos and Hosea warn the northern tribes of their doom, they are indeed conquered by the Assyrians, who exile and disperse them.

587 BCE Isaiah and Jeremiah write to Judah, which is soon conquered by the Babylonians, who exile the upper classes to Babylonia.

*Dates are approximate

times expressed in the form of a parable (see the parable of the vineyard in chapter 5). The readings for Advent, Year A, are all from this Isaiah of Jerusalem.

Second Isaiah—Chapters 40–55

Second Isaiah is a compilation by one or more prophets who were taken into exile with the Israelite captives by the Babylonian army. His "call" opens chapter 40, but is tame in comparison to the call of Isaiah of Jerusalem. It is also thought that chapters 34 and 35 can be attributed to Second Isaiah. These speeches are approximately forty-five years after the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple, placing them about 540 BCE. A distinct change from the message and tone of

MAIN MESSAGE OF THE THREE ISAIAHS

- 1st Isaiah (742-687 BCE) God's judgment for the sin of the people
- 2nd Isaiah (540 BCE) Consolation for a destroyed and exiled people
- 3rd Isaiah (537 BCE) Lament for reality found upon the return from exile in Babylon.

Isaiah of Jerusalem, the major theme of Second Isaiah is consolation, evident in the beginning verses which are included in one of the readings for Advent, Year B.

Third Isaiah—Chapters 56–66

This prophet or prophets returned to Jerusalem with the people who chose to leave exile in Babylon, beginning about 537 BCE. They must rejoin those Israelites who were not deported. As we will discover later, memories of home and the temple were tarnished by reality upon their arrival. Some must have wondered why they left what was a pretty good life in Babylon, and we discover a return to hopelessness as we read this lament. Portions of it are in the readings for Advent, Year B, as well.

The focus of the rest of this session will be on the lectionary readings for year B from Second and Third Isaiah.

Second Isaiah

The reading from Second Isaiah for the Advent lectionary is Isaiah 40:1–11. These verses represent God's call to Second Isaiah. As noted above, a very different tone from Isaiah of Jerusalem begins Second Isaiah. This section of Isaiah may be best known for the Servant Songs (Isa. 42:1–9). The setting has changed too. The people to whom the prophet is to speak are in exile in Babylon as a result of their sin and turning away from God. The prophet doesn't have to travel to them for he is in exile with them.

Read Isaiah 40:1–2 with an ear to the emotional tone of these verses. No introduction to this prophet is provided, as found in Isaiah of Jerusalem, nor is the audience named. The twice-repeated "comfort" in verse 1 is plural in the Hebrew, indicating that it is addressed to a group, not one person. Generally, commentators see in

this opening section of Second Isaiah a meeting of God with the heavenly council, much as we find at the beginning of Job or Ezekiel. They are present for the commissioning of the prophet. In verse 2, the judgment against the Israelites, so strongly pronounced by Isaiah of Jerusalem, is lifted. The people have paid their dues, doubly. However, this double portion of judgment was nothing new; in Exodus 22:1, the penalty for thieves is that they pay double or more what they have stolen.

With the prophet commissioned, we hear a voice in the council speak additional words to the prophet. Read verses 3–5. Listen as though you are the prophet they are addressing. You probably recognized these words as John the Baptist's commission, found in all four Gospels. For the time being, try to read these words without referencing them to John. This directive, with its covenantal language ("our God"), repairs the breach in the covenant caused by the Israelites. The highway is to bring God to the people, rather than the people to God. In ancient times, a highway for easy travel was constructed for the conquering king or general to return home. The highway in Second Isaiah is God's highway.

In the final section, verses 6–11, still another voice urges the prophet, "Cry out!" Read these verses, and try to identify the speaker, paying attention to the text because the punctuation is of little assistance. In verses 6b–7, the prophet states his case for *not* providing comfort to the people. But the answer to this objection comes in

UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, announced in June 2008 that at the end of 2007 there were 11.4 million refugees outside their countries.⁴ An additional 26 million people were displaced internally by conflict or persecution. Among the latter, in the statistics for 2008, may well be the people in Georgia who fled their homes when Russian troops attacked in August 2008. One family, living in a single room, talked woefully of the brick home they left behind, a house they built themselves when their previous home was destroyed by an earthquake. Others left so quickly that they have no identification, making resettlement and assistance more difficult. However, none of these new refugees want to be like the woman who was forced out of her hometown by war 15 years ago and is still waiting resettlement. Some can only lament, while others hold fast to whatever hope they can find.

verses 8–11, which conclude with a dual image of God, a mighty warrior and a loving shepherd. This is the message the prophet is to give to God’s people in captivity. Thus they, and we, are faced with the sovereignty of God, a God who can do all things, a God who judges and forgives, a God who is both strong and gentle.

Third Isaiah

The texts from Third Isaiah used during Advent, Year B, are Isaiah 61:1–4, 8–11, and 64:1–9. The hopeful message about returning to Jerusalem is no longer a dream for the future. King Cyrus, in 538 BCE, issued an edict that permitted the Israelites to return to Jerusalem and to rebuild the temple. Some chose to return to their city, but many stayed in Babylon where they had established themselves and were satisfied with their lives. Perhaps they remembered the murmuring of the people during the exodus, when they longed for the life of slavery with its food in every kettle. But those who returned did not find things as they had left them. The people left behind weren’t all that hospitable and had changed their ways. The returnees discovered how hard it is to go home again after a long absence. Too many years had passed to pick up where they left off.

The other Third Isaiah text read in Advent, 64:1–9, is a lament, a continuation of the one in chapter 63. This passage is traditionally read on the first Sunday of Advent, a reminder of the need for the Messiah. The people, once so filled with hope at the return to Jerusalem, now question the presence of God. Throughout these verses, the prophet decries the status of the people, of Jerusalem, and even of the temple. The people who returned have lost their way. Now they wonder if God is silent and punishing them forever. The prophet lists all that has gone wrong. As you read this passage, make note of the many ways the people have aggrieved God.

Isaiah 61:1–4 and 8–11 is the portion of the Isaiah scroll that Jesus read in his home synagogue in Nazareth, when he is basically run out of town, though perhaps not on a rail. In this account in Luke, we find another example of the difficulty of returning home, but for different reasons. If possible, stand and read these verses aloud. Imagine how you might hear them in Jerusalem where your high hopes upon return are dashed day after day. Hold the lament of chapter 64 in your heart as you read this passage.

The good news pronounced by Third Isaiah in chapter 61 turns everything upside down. God favors the

You Can’t Go Home Again

Wrongly incarcerated prisoners who have served years behind bars probably understand the difficulty of returning better than anyone else.

When Kerry Max Cook walked out of prison after more than 20 years, he knew his future was uncertain, although he had supportive friends to greet him. Once a paralegal, he must now decide what to do with his life.

Timothy Howard was fortunate that he could go to the home of his sister after spending 26 years on death row for a murder he did not commit. Once in her home, he was often puzzled and awed by the changes around him, including a cell phone.

Walter Lomax spent 39 years behind bars on death row. He has children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren to get to know.

Each of these men found freedom because of the work of Centurion Ministries in Princeton, NJ. Imagine both the joy and the difficulties they faced upon returning home.⁶

oppressed, the brokenhearted, the captives, the underclass, and those who are down and out. One commentator calls this preference for the poor “perhaps the most significant contribution of the Hebrew prophets to the moral tradition of Judaism and Christianity.”⁵

“The year of the Lord’s favor” refers to the jubilee year described in Exodus 21 and 23 and Deuteronomy 15. Every seven years debts are forgiven, help is given to those in need, slaves are set free, and fields are permitted to lie fallow. In this year of our Lord, all manner of things are freed; God’s covenant with all creation is renewed. This is the good news that Third Isaiah brought to the bereft and hopeless in Jerusalem, another acknowledgment of God’s sovereignty.

Advent and the Prophets

During Advent we remember that we are waiting, just as the exiles did in Babylon, for the arrival of the Messiah. The Prophets, Second and Third Isaiah, beckon us to begin our Advent experience with their messages. They have been called to keep hope alive in bad times as well

as good times. Third Isaiah's recitation of the grievances against God push us to make our own list and remember that Advent waiting is not passive, but active. Second Isaiah's comforting words help us look at our lives honestly.

As we light the first candle of the Advent wreath, may this candle of hope lead you into the season with the Prophets' message of abiding hope.

About the Writer

Carol Wehrheim is a freelance educator, writer, and editor. She lives in Princeton, New Jersey, where she teaches sixth-grade church school and is clerk of session at Nassau Presbyterian Church.

Endnotes

1. Isaiah 2:1-5; 11:1-10; 35:1-10; 7:10-16.
2. Isaiah 64:1-9; 40:1-11; 61:1-4, 8-11.
3. Paul D. Hanson, *Isaiah 40-66* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1995), 2.
4. For more information about refugees, go to www.who.int/globalatlas/dataQuery/default.asp
5. Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 56-66* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 223.
6. For information about Centurion Ministries, go to www.centurionministries.org



Advent Through the Eyes of Those Who Waited

SESSION 2

| *John the Baptist heralds the coming of the Messiah, Jesus.*

Introduction

On the first week of Advent the prophet Isaiah, in all his manifestations, was center stage. As a new prophet is introduced, Isaiah moves just off-stage, but Second Isaiah departs more slowly than the others, lingering to introduce this new messenger. John the Baptist, included in all four Gospels, is this singular human being. He is perhaps the only person in the Bible who is regularly named with an explanation of his work (John the Baptist or Baptizer). And no matter what you have heard or assumed, he is Jewish, not Baptist. His fame is affirmed with the report of his activities and death in the writings of the Jewish historian Josephus.

John the Baptist will be introduced through his family ties and unique personality before his call and message are considered. As you read, pay attention to John's unique relationship with Jesus.

The Family of John (Luke 1:5–24, 57–66)

To learn about the family and birth of John, we step outside the lectionary passages for Year B and turn to the Gospel of Luke. In Luke 1:5–24, the angel Gabriel appears to Zechariah and announces the impending birth of a son to his wife Elizabeth. Luke's account of his encounter will be examined more fully in the next session. For now, what do we learn from this story about the family into which John was born?

We discover in verse 5 that Zechariah is a priest in the order of Abijah and that Elizabeth is descended from



John the Baptist's message was to alert people of the coming Messiah. He preached and baptized, the people repented, and God forgave.

the house of Aaron, another priestly family. We know that they are a righteous couple who follow God's commandments and regulations, such as celebrating Passover. However, they are an older couple and childless. In their culture, a barren woman was assumed to have displeased God in some way or she would be blessed with children. All this family information is found in just two verses, Luke's way of setting the stage quickly for the arrival of the angel Gabriel.

Thus John, named not for his father as was the custom of the day and to the surprise of the neighbors, is born into a Jewish family, faithful in its worship and ritual life. Given the age of his parents, we can safely assume that he is an only child. We know nothing about John's childhood except that he grew "strong in spirit" (1:80). We don't meet him again until he is about 30, and, according to Luke, "he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel." Only Mark notes that John dressed in garments of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, not totally unknown as proper attire for a prophet, given that Elijah also wore

a leather belt and seems to have been known for that article of clothing (2 Kings 1:8).

Not only was John's wardrobe noteworthy in Mark, but his diet of locusts and honey is also included. Perhaps neither is surprising given that we have already learned from Luke that John stayed in the wilderness until it was time for his preparation of the people. But what must Zechariah and Elizabeth have thought of the unusual behavior of their son? His brief biographical statement might read something like this:

He was an only child, born to God-fearing parents. He had only a basic education. He never left his hometown. He had a unique diet and wore unfashionable clothing. He was loathed by some and loved by others. He died before the age of thirty-five by decapitation. Still he managed to leave an indelible imprint on history.¹

However, John's ministry was far more than these few sentences about him indicate. Leave an indelible imprint on history? You better believe it. As Gabriel predicted to Zechariah, John would prepare the people for the Lord.

The Call of John

Now we beckon Second Isaiah to come forward for a moment as words from chapter 40 introduce John in the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke). In the Gospel of John, however, John introduces himself with the words from Isaiah 40:3 when the Levites and priests come from Jerusalem to question him, wanting to know if he is the Messiah. A careful comparison of Isaiah and any of the Gospels shows that the Gospel writers adapted Isaiah's words to suggest that the voice is crying in the wilderness rather than a voice that is crying, "In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord." What a difference punctuation makes.

However, John the Baptist is crystal clear about his call from God and that he is the one to *announce* the coming of the Messiah. Read John 1:6–8, where an absolute distinction is made between John, the forerunner, and Jesus, the Messiah. Luke makes a similar distinction when Zechariah calls John "prophet of the Most High" (1:76) and Gabriel calls Jesus "the Son of the Most High" (1:32).

In this brief exchange with the religious officials, John is closely questioned about his identity. The first question, "Who are you?" (John 1:19) brings an immediate

PERSISTENT COURAGE

William Wilberforce (1759-1833) was born into wealth, and lived the life of a rich young man until he became an evangelical Christian. His friendship with the abolitionist Thomas Clarkson and the former slave ship captain and author of the lyrics to the hymn "Amazing Grace," John Newton, involved him in the mission of abolishing slave trafficking between Africa and the West Indies on British ships. Once he was convinced of the evils of slavery and the horrendous conditions on the ships, this cause took over his life. For 18 years, he introduced bills into parliament to stop British ships from transporting black slaves, and suffered much abuse for championing this cause. His health suffered too, but he finally prevailed. In 1807, the slave trade was abolished. However, this did not free those persons already enslaved in the British Empire. Not until 1833, just a few days before Wilberforce died, was a bill passed that freed all slaves in the British Empire.²

response from John about whom he is not. John senses their real concern and says, "I am not the Messiah" (1:20). More than one idea of the Messiah existed among the people. The questions that follow illuminate some of them.

"Are you Elijah?" (1:21) comes next. One common belief of the time was that the prophet Elijah, who was whisked up to God in a whirlwind (2 Kings 2:1–12), would return. This is based on the words of the prophet Malachi: "Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse" (4:5–6). Notice too that the reference to parents and children is similar to what Gabriel told Zechariah about John.

Then they ask, "Are you the prophet?" (John 1:21). Another question that brings a denial from John. Moses is assumed to be the reference here, hearkening back to his words to the people in Deuteronomy 18:15, admonishing them to heed "a prophet like me from among your own people."

Part of what is behind these questions is the general assumption among the Jewish people of this time that the Spirit of God left Israel after the last Prophets

(Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi) and would return only to announce the last days. Consequently, some urgency accompanies these questions. Is John the harbinger of the last days? Or, as the questioners repeat, "Who are you? . . . What do you say about yourself?" (John 1:22).

John the Baptist wastes no time and answers with the words of Second Isaiah, words they surely know: "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord'" (John 1:23). Just in case they don't recognize these words, he adds, "as the prophet Isaiah said."

But the questioners are not quite satisfied. Now they want to know why John is baptizing if he cannot answer "yes" to one of their questions about his identity. In his answer, John reveals the clarity of his call. He turns their attention to the one who will come after him, Jesus. He further makes it clear that he is not even on a par with the awaited one. The servant would untie the sandal thongs of the master, but John, to further delineate himself from Jesus, says he is not worthy to do this servant's task. With that, the exchange is complete, but John, over the next two days, continues to attest to Jesus as the Christ.

The Message and Ministry of John

With a clear sense of who he was, John the Baptist carried out the ministry described by the angel Gabriel prior to his birth and by his father Zechariah after his birth. In the Gospel of John, the emphasis is on John's identification of Jesus as the Messiah. John points Jesus out to John's followers the next day when he also tells them of Jesus' baptism. John continues to point to Jesus, calling him the Lamb of God, on the third day as well. Two of John's disciples spend the rest of the day with Jesus. Then one of them, Andrew, goes to his brother Simon Peter to report that he has seen the Messiah. The brothers immediately become disciples of Jesus.

In Mark, nothing more is heard about John the Baptist until his death is reported to Jesus. Yet a closer examination of Mark 1:1-8 reveals the essence of his mission. We can see from these few verses the basic plan of John's call: he preaches and baptizes, the people repent, and God forgives. John's baptism is open to everyone; no ritual cleansing is needed to enter the "temple" where he preaches and baptizes. His baptism is not a rite that washes away one's sins, but a recognition that the per-



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son has turned around and seeks to live life according to God's ways. All that is required is repentance, but according to Lamar Williamson, the nuances of this word bring much richness to John's message. He suggests that the Greek understanding of repentance as changing one's mind and the Hebrew understanding of turning around be combined to help us gain a richer understanding of John's call to the people.³

Advent and John the Baptist

If Advent is a time of preparation, how does John the Baptist help us to prepare for the coming of the Messiah? John calls us to repentance, just as he preached to the people who came to the banks of the Jordan River. His singleness of purpose prompts us to consider how we approach the waiting and preparation of Advent or whether our efforts are scattered, without focus.

On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry
Announces that the Lord is nigh;
Awake and hearken, for he brings
Glad tidings of the King of kings!

Then cleansed be every life from sin;
Make straight the way for God within,
And let us all our hearts prepare
For Christ to come and enter there.

We hail You as our Savior, Lord,
Our refuge, and our great reward;
O let Your face upon us shine
And fill the world with love divine.

All praise to You, eternal Son,
Whose advent has our freedom won,
Whom with the Father we adore,
And Holy Spirit, evermore.⁴

As we light the second candle of the Advent wreath, may this candle of peace set aflame in our hearts the peace that John proclaimed in the name of the heralded Messiah.

About the Writer

Carol Wehrheim is a freelance educator, writer, and editor. She was the Association of Presbyterian Church Educators "Educator of the Year" in 2001. She lives in Princeton, New Jersey, where she teaches sixth-grade church school and is clerk of session at Nassau Presbyterian Church.

Endnotes

1. Joseph Robinson Jr., *7 Leadership Imperatives from a Wild Man* (Judson Press, 2008), xiii.
2. Based on biographical information about Wilberforce at www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/wilberforce_william.shtml and www.britannia.com/bios/wilberforce.html
3. Lamar Williamson, *Luke* (John Knox Press, 1983), 31.
4. Charles Coffin, 1736, trans. John Chandler, 1837, alt. "On Jordan's Bank the Baptist's Cry" in *The Presbyterian Hymnal*, #10.



Advent Through the Eyes of Those Who Waited

SESSION 3

The annunciation of Jesus' birth to a small-town girl tells us much about God's desires for the world.

The Favored One

Halfway through Advent we meet the woman God has chosen to bear the Messiah. Mary will be the central figure in this and the next session. This is sure to be a lot of attention on this young woman for Protestants, but perhaps it's about time. On the whole, Protestants have ignored Mary, except for dressing her in blue for the Christmas pageant. We have shied away from paying any special attention to her, turning aside from statues depicting her and avoiding praying to her. After all, this was one way to differentiate between Protestants and Catholics. We don't do Mary. However, in recent years Protestant scholars have encouraged us to take a closer look at this astonishing young woman. Two such scholars state that "The absence of Mary not only cuts Protestants off from Catholic and Orthodox Christians; it cuts us off from the fullness of our own tradition. We have neither blessed Mary nor allowed her to bless us."¹ Over these two sessions, that loss to Protestants will be addressed.

The Annunciations of Two Births

In the previous session John the Baptist was introduced, with a short nod to the annunciation of his birth to Zechariah. The story following it is the annunciation of Jesus' birth to Mary. These annunciation stories are found only in the Gospel of Luke. Although we usually read them as individual stories, they, along with the rest of chapters 1 and 2, form a whole. Read Luke 1:5-38, without pausing between the two accounts. Notice



We know very little about Mary; not even her parents' names are recorded in the Bible.

how the two annunciations share a common structure as well:

Each begins by setting the story in a historical moment.

Gabriel breaks in on the scene without notice or fanfare.

Zechariah and Mary are assured by Gabriel's words, "Do not be afraid."

The annunciation of the birth is proclaimed.

Each responds with a question.

Gabriel concludes the conversation.

Even with this common structure and theme of announcing a special birth, a host of differences separate the events (see the chart "Comparing the Annunciations of Two Births"). Luke takes care to give a historical note at the beginning of the annunciation of John's birth. Yet when the writer turns to the annunciation of Jesus' birth, the historical marker is Elizabeth's sixth month of pregnancy. We are told of the families of Zechariah and Elizabeth, which place them in the order of priests established generations ago, but we know nothing about Mary; not even her parents' names are recorded

Mary, the Favored One

Just who is this Mary in the out-of-the-way village of Nazareth? To begin with, she was probably about twelve years old, the common betrothal age for a girl at the time. (This information stops the sixth-graders in my church school class cold as they realize she wasn't

When the stories are read as one, we see how they neatly fit together as a continuous narrative. It is also clearer that the message Gabriel brings to each person is connected through God's grace and blessing. The response of Gabriel to their questions (the silencing of John and the words to Mary "For nothing will be impossible with God") points us once more to the sovereignty of God. It might also be noted that Gabriel's greeting to Mary in verse 28 is more than a casual "hello" or something akin to passing the peace at Sunday morning worship. "The Lord is with you" lets her know right from the start that she has been chosen by God. Zechariah gets no such warning.

and Joachim. Gabriel comes to Zechariah (the father-to-be) in the temple in Jerusalem, a holy place; the angel comes to Mary (the mother-to-be) at home in a town of no special prominence.

Gabriel's message for Zechariah is about a son who will carry on the tradition of prophets like Elijah, preparing the people for the arrival of the Messiah. As we discovered in the previous session, his son John will be the forerunner. The message for Mary is that the child she will bear is the Messiah, the "Son of the Most High" (Luke 1:32) The question that each asks upon hearing Gabriel's announcement further marks the difference in the stories. Zechariah, a priest, asks, "How will I know that this is so?" (Luke 1:18). His question suggests unbelief and doesn't seem like such an outrageous question. After all, his wife is beyond childbearing years and they probably gave up any hope of a family long ago. However, Gabriel sentences John to silence until John is born. In Luke 1:34 Mary too has a question for Gabriel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" (or "How can this be, since I do not know a man?"). Mary's question is interpreted as one of belief and, perhaps, some puzzlement. When Zechariah asks for a sign, he is not given one; but when Mary does not ask for a sign, she is given one and told that aged and previously barren Elizabeth is now with child.

Looking just at this brief passage, we find that Mary is favored because God is with her (v. 28). This is reinforced by Elizabeth, as we will see in the next session. She is thoughtful: she ponders Gabriel's greeting without responding to it (v. 29). After she takes in this astonishing message, Mary is obedient (v. 38). Favored of God, thoughtful, obedient. Jan L. Richardson comments that "Often persons have interpreted Mary's response to the angel Gabriel's invitation as unquestioning obedience and humility. Often they lift up Mary as a model of passivity

We assume that her family lineage is of no consequence or Luke would have recorded it as was done for Joseph, being of the house of David, in the birth narrative (2:4). So Mary is young and betrothed. But what else might we discern from the way Mary conducts herself in this meeting with an angel, a messenger from God? Surely her mother had not prepared her for such an occasion.

Looking just at this brief passage, we find that Mary is favored because God is with her (v. 28). This is reinforced by Elizabeth, as we will see in the next session. She is thoughtful: she ponders Gabriel's greeting without responding to it (v. 29). After she takes in this astonishing message, Mary is obedient (v. 38). Favored of God, thoughtful, obedient. Jan L. Richardson comments that "Often persons have interpreted Mary's response to the angel Gabriel's invitation as unquestioning obedience and humility. Often they lift up Mary as a model of passivity

much older than they are.) According to Jewish custom, the man and woman would be betrothed, but not married until she moved into his home. Thus, Mary was rightly concerned about how it would be that she could be pregnant for she had not yet known a man or lived with Joseph, to whom she was betrothed. Not to mention that the punishment for adultery was severe.

COMPARING THE ANNUNCIATIONS OF TWO BIRTHS	
John	To a man, Zechariah
Jesus	To a woman, Mary
In the days of King Herod of Judea	In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy
John and Elizabeth of priestly families	No word of Mary's parentage
Child will prepare the people	Child is Son of the Most High
Takes place in temple	Takes place at home
Puts John in line with Elijah	Puts Jesus in the line of David
To an older, barren couple	To a young woman, betrothed
In Jerusalem, the royal city	In Nazareth, a town of no import



Mary is favored of God, thoughtful, obedient, but not passive. She actively questioned Gabriel.

for all women. Yet when we listen closely, we can hear the voice of a strong, active woman—a woman who dared to question Gabriel, a woman whom Gabriel did not leave until she had spoken her words of acceptance.”²

So let’s look more closely at Mary’s response to this strange turn of events. Many artists have illustrated the meeting of Gabriel and Mary. One of the most arresting is *Annunciation* by Henry Osawa Tanner. This large painting takes your breath away by its size, but even in a smaller reproduction one is drawn to Mary, seated on a bed looking uncertain perhaps, but clearly not frightened at the bright light representing Gabriel. She is not cowering in the corner, but, with hands folded in her lap, is looking directly at the light. A more playful illustration of this moment is found in the children’s book *The Nativity* illustrated by Julie Vivas with excerpts from the King James Version of the Bible. Gabriel, with his spiky red hair, work boots, tattered green robe, and gigantic tie-dyed pastel wings, approaches Mary outdoors as she is hanging clothes on a clothesline. Turn the page and they are seated indoors for a cup of tea. We might expect Gabriel to be talking seriously to Mary, but the illustration shows Mary speaking and Gabriel listening ever so intently. Two different artistic approaches, and there are many more, but in neither does Mary appear to be unquestioningly obedient. These two artists did not envision a passive image from Luke’s account.

Mary’s response, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word,” is often the reason for assigning the trait of humble obedience to her. Her words have also been a rationale for describing the appropriate, even ideal, response by women to God’s call. When this response is used to make Mary into the ideal, especially the ideal woman, we lose sight of the value of this story for all Christians. As Nancy Duff writes, “Scripture describes Mary, like all those called to

be prophets or disciples, as a human being with a unique calling and exemplary faithfulness in obedience, not as an image of perfection. We are called in this world to real tasks, not ideal ones. When Mary is understood as the perfect model, we who are not perfect are doomed to endless striving toward that which we cannot achieve.”³ The biblical image of Mary can be a model of faithfulness for anyone, male or female, young or old.

Joel Green would have us think of Mary as “accessible exemplar.” Through her, we are encouraged to see beyond the world we know, that we take for granted, and to search for new and fresh approaches to making sense of our lives and our relatedness to God and one another.⁴ To help us in this search for how to approach Mary, how to bless her and allow her to bless us, we probably need to be certain about why Mary is the Blessed One. Nothing about Mary, not her family, her piety, or her station in life is the reason for Gabriel’s visit to her. She is blessed because she has answered God’s call, and God’s call results not from what we have already done.

When we recognize that Mary was not extraordinary in any way, then we too can see in her a model for our faith, male or female. When we observe that Mary had no time to prepare for this visit from Gabriel, we too can recognize that God’s call can come to us in the most ordinary of moments. When we spend more time on pondering Mary’s virginity and less on God coming into this world, we lose the power of God’s grace among us in this astonishing event. So let us bless Mary for who she was and how she answered her call from God. Let us allow her example of faithfulness to bless us and show us the way to God’s grace and love.

Advent and Mary, Favored One

If Advent is a time of waiting, how do we wait with Mary through her nine months of pregnancy? Perhaps

A friend who had spent a sabbatical working with refugees in Southeast Asia once sent me a homemade Christmas card that put the more colorful cards to shame; it consisted of a black-and-white snapshot of a Cambodian mother holding her infant in her arms. What struck me most was the youth of the mother and the fact that this unposed photograph was instantly recognizable as a madonna and child: the mother beholding the child in love and wonder.⁵

we take a clue from her thoughtful approach to this surprise visit from Gabriel. We ponder the word of God as we ponder the world around us. We take note of all that we see and we listen intently as well.

As we light the third candle of the Advent wreath, the candle of joy, we can surely continue in this season joyfully, as we wait and continue to move toward the arrival of the One sent from God.

About the Writer

Carol Wehrheim is a freelance educator, writer, and editor. She was the Association of Presbyterian Church Educators "Educator of the Year" in 2001. She lives in Princeton, New Jersey, where she

Endnotes

1. Beverly Roberts Gaventa and Cynthia L. Rigby, *Blessed One: Protestant Perspectives on Mary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 3.
2. Jan L. Richardson, *Sacred Journeys* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 1995), 23.
3. Nancy J. Duff, "Mary, the Servant of the Lord," in Gaventa and Rigby, 66.
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5. Kathleen Norris, "Foreword," in Gaventa and Rigby, ix.



Advent Through the Eyes of Those Who Waited

SESSION 4

The prophetic tradition continues with Elizabeth's greeting of Mary and Mary's song of praise to God.

Two New Prophets

Advent began with words from the ancient prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures, specifically Isaiah. Then we moved to the New Testament to get acquainted with the prophet John the Baptist, who was the herald of the Messiah. Following that wrinkle in time, we ventured back to ponder with Mary the announcement of the angel Gabriel. We return to Mary on this last week of Advent and we meet Elizabeth, the mother of John. These two women, chosen by God to bear amazing babies, take us by the hand as we draw close to Christmas Day. Moving to the next story in Luke's Gospel, Fred Craddock invites us to imagine the annunciations of John and Jesus as two panels of material united in the meeting of Mary and Elizabeth told only by Luke.¹ Think of these stories as a triptych, with the annunciation stories on the right and left sides and a picture of Elizabeth greeting Mary in the center. These two women encourage us to slow down during this last week of Advent and join them in conversation as they and we wait for God to come among us.

An Urgent Visit

Read Luke 1:39–56, the story of the visitation of Mary and Elizabeth. Mary went with haste, wasting no time after the visit of Gabriel, to go to Elizabeth. Wait, a young woman setting off by herself for a lengthy visit? What is going on? Joel B. Green interjects, "Within her social world, Mary has a script to follow. This script would involve her relative seclusion, not a journey of some seventy miles (no chaperone or traveling companions



These two women, Mary and Elizabeth, encourage us to slow down during this last week of Advent and join them in conversation as they and we wait for God to come among us.

are mentioned in Luke!).² And did she confer with her family or tell Joseph? What an impetuous act!

Some suppose that Mary took this bold step because she wanted to see if the news of Elizabeth's pregnancy was true. However, given that she seemed to accept the rest of Gabriel's message without hesitation, why would she feel the need to check on Elizabeth's condition? Most commentators on this passage, especially women, point out the overwhelming desire for pregnant women to find other pregnant women, to share their experiences and their dreams for their babies. And wouldn't two women, blessed by God with special babies in their wombs, have a lot to talk about? This three-month visit began with a theological exchange, both women speaking of God and God's wondrous acts. Imagine the conversations that must have followed as they cooked, washed clothing, and cared for one another.

Returning to Luke 1:24 we recall that Elizabeth, once pregnant, went into seclusion for five months. This older woman (how old we really don't know) had grown used to her barrenness, but now she is having a baby, a son, a son so important that he was announced

by a messenger of God. Imagine all the months, even years, when Elizabeth prayed to God, asking what she had done to be denied motherhood, pleading for a child, bargaining with God as Hannah did until she had Samuel (1 Sam. 1). Each time a woman conceived and a child was born, Elizabeth must have sighed deeply, longing for her own baby. But now she has a husband who can't speak and she is pregnant! What a blessing, but what a suddenly upside-down world for her. She needs to talk with another woman who might understand. As Renita Weems points out, Elizabeth's blessing brings with it a lesson: learning how to accept a blessing so long in coming that it is no longer expected. Mary, however, is faced with receiving a blessing that may bring more problems for her than it solves.³

Luke lets us know that Gabriel appeared before Mary in the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy (1:26). Surely, of all women, Mary can appreciate Elizabeth's situation, given the unusual circumstances of their pregnancies. Yet their social circumstances were quite the opposite. Mary, an unmarried girl, has not been longing for a baby, well, certainly not yet. As she walked all those miles, what was she thinking? Did she wonder if Elizabeth would believe her story? Would Elizabeth welcome her visit? She certainly couldn't turn around and go back home immediately. Did she leave home because when she told Joseph about the angel's message, he needed some time to think about and get used to this strange story? Did her family encourage her to go away for a while? Yes, these two women had much on their minds and plenty to talk about. Where would they begin?

We are not left wondering whether Elizabeth will welcome Mary for long. As soon as Mary enters the house, Elizabeth's baby kicks in her womb, and the Holy Spirit comes upon her. She responds to Mary's arrival with joy and praise. The rest of the story is overtaken by the prophetic voices of the two women, the first to speak God's message of good news in Luke's narrative. After their greeting and recognition of God's work in their lives, the women settle down for a three-month visit. What joy, laughter, and tears they must have shared. Elizabeth's baby would have been due at the end of the three months, so perhaps Mary stayed with her until John was born. However, Mary is not mentioned anywhere in the story of his birth, so we can only deduce she attended his birth by Luke's careful attention to her time of departure.

BARRENNESS—AN UNWELCOME STATUS

Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, women plead with God for children. The childless family was nothing short of a disgrace, surely cursed by God. The story of Abraham and Sarah, who waited and waited for God's promise of many heirs to come true, is well known. The story of Hannah, whose praise to God is a model for the Magnificat, has already been mentioned. The stigma was always attached to the woman, as she is the one who gives birth.

While one child might take away the burden of barrenness, many children was truly a sign of God's blessing. The psalmist desired many children, and especially sons:

Sons are indeed a heritage from the LORD,
the fruit of the womb a reward.
Like arrows in the hand of a warrior
are the sons of one's youth.
Happy is the man who has
his quiver full of them.

Psalm 127:3-5

Two Women Prophets

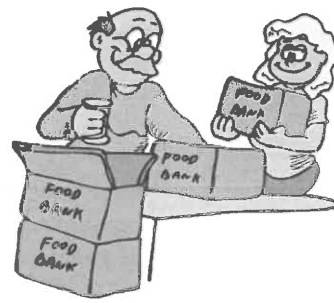
Elizabeth, now filled with the Holy Spirit, immediately acknowledges Mary as one who is faithful and blessed by God to be the bearer of the Lord. (Luke regularly uses Lord to refer to the Messiah.) Here, according to Jane Schaberg, "Elizabeth makes the first and only christological confession by a woman in this Gospel."⁴

Mary responds to Elizabeth's bold prophecy with the Magnificat (called that from the word that begins this song of praise in the Latin Vulgate). This speech, the only one of such length attributed to a woman in Luke, sets Mary apart as a prophet too. She may even be considered the first theologian in the New Testament. Her silence before Gabriel and her pondering on the journey brought her to a song of praise and liberation equal to none.⁵ In it we find a thread that is woven throughout Luke from this moment to Simeon's words to Mary in the temple to the words Jesus reads in the synagogue in Nazareth and throughout the teachings of Jesus, especially the parables with their upside-down view of life with God.

The Magnificat begins with Mary's praise to God for calling her to this special task, one for which generations to come will call her blessed. Then she describes what God will do, but she is so certain of this message that she speaks of it in the past tense. In other words, God has already done what God will do. Finally, she links her song to the covenant made so many generations before with Abraham and Sarah.

If this were a musical production, the spotlight would be on Mary with Elizabeth in the shadows at the side of the stage. Known as a great song of justice and liberation, the Magnificat speaks the theology that was put into action when God chose Mary to be the mother of the Messiah. Remember the young woman living in a town of no consequence? The one for whom Luke lists no attributes that make her a likely candidate for this mother of the Son of the Most High, the motherhood role of all times. Indeed, she is even called the Mother of God. What a strange choice, but then when did God select the most pious or most honored person among the people for the most important tasks?

This form of praise is not new to the people of God. In every study Bible, Mary's song of praise is compared



Mary identifies herself with the poor and lowly at the beginning of the Magnificat. Given the life realities of many on this planet, are we really able to stand with her?

to the praise Hannah gave to God in 1 Samuel 2 when she had Samuel. Hannah's song was likely to have been written later given its reference to a king when there was no king of Israel at that time. However, in it the barren woman is graced with seven children. The stomachs of the hungry are filled. The rich are brought low and the poor exalted. The needy sit in seats of honor. The tables are turned and all this will happen at the instigation of God.

But how do we sing this song with Mary? Mary identifies herself with the poor and lowly at the beginning of the Magnificat. Given the life realities of many on this planet, are we really able to stand with her? True, this song is sung in services of worship and prayer daily, but how do we enter into the beauty of the music and stay alive to the power of the words? For it is the words, not the melody, that call us in the twenty-first century. Patrick D. Miller points out that "The political character of Mary's song is heard in the claim that the work of the Lord of Israel is literally a revolutionary one, turning things upside down in the most radical way possible, accomplishing the impossible in the socioeconomic world of that time, and, indeed, of any time, utterly changing the structure of power and domination and economic access."⁶ As the angel Gabriel reminds us, "For nothing will be impossible with God" (Luke 1:37).

Advent and Two More Prophets

If Advent is a time that ends with the arrival of the awaited Messiah, whether in a manger or on the banks of Jordan River, how do these two women prophets help us bring this season to a close? Elizabeth calls upon us to acknowledge the Messiah with great joy and praise. Mary sends us into the world to see what God has done and is doing, and to participate in this work.

As we light the last candle on the Advent wreath, the candle of love, let us be overwhelmed by the great love

THE MAGNIFICAT, LUKE 1:46-55

And Mary said,
 "My soul magnifies the Lord,
 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
 for he has looked with favor on the lowliness
 of his servant.
 Surely, from now on all generations will call
 me blessed;
 for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
 and holy is his name.
 His mercy is for those who fear him
 from generation to generation.
 He has shown strength with his arm;
 he has scattered the proud in the thoughts
 of their hearts.
 He has brought down the powerful from their
 thrones,
 and lifted up the lowly;
 he has filled the hungry with good things,
 and sent the rich away empty.
 He has helped his servant Israel,
 in remembrance of his mercy,
 according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
 to Abraham and to his descendants for ever."

THE GROWING GAP BETWEEN THE RICH AND THE POOR

In an op-ed article for the *New York Times* (May 20, 2007), Bob Herbert reported that the United Way of New York, in a study on America's urban agenda, said: "The greatest single challenge most American cities face lies in the increasing divide between the haves and the have-nots."⁷ He further noted that the number of families in homeless shelters in that city is the highest in twenty-five years. Others have reported increased use of homeless shelters and food pantries over the past two or three years, whether in small communities or densely populated urban areas.

A year after Herbert's piece was published, in an article about the consequences of the growing gap between the rich and the poor, we find these facts:

- In 1965, the average salary for a CEO of a major U.S. company was 25 times the salary of the average worker. Today, the average CEO's pay is more than 250 times the average worker.

- In 1975, the average college graduate's hourly wage was 24 percent higher than the average high-school graduate. By 2002, that number had risen to 43 percent.⁸

The Children's Defense Fund, a strong advocacy group for children and families, posts these statistics on its Web site:

Each day in America (based on calculations per school day, 180 days of seven hours each)

- 928 babies are born at low birthweight
- 2,145 babies are born without health insurance
- 2,483 babies are born into poverty
- 78 babies die before their first birthday
- 2,421 children are confirmed as abused or neglected⁹

that God has shown to each of these Advent figures and to us. May we respond as faithfully as they did.

About the Writer

Carol Wehrheim is a freelance educator, writer, and editor. She was the Association of Presbyterian Church Educators "Educator of the Year" in 2001. She lives in Princeton, New Jersey, where she teaches sixth-grade church school and is clerk of session at Nassau Presbyterian Church.

Endnotes

1. Fred B. Craddock, *Luke* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990), 24.
2. Joel B. Green, "Blessed Is She Who Believed," in Beverly Roberts Gaventa and Cynthia L. Rigby, *Blessed One* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 15.
3. Renita J. Weems, *Just a Sister Away* (San Diego, CA: Lura-Media Press, 1988), 114, 117.

4. Jane Schaberg, "Luke," in *The Women's Bible Commentary*, edited by Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 282.

5. Patrick D. Miller, "The Church's First Theologian," in *Theology Today*, October 1999. Miller also points out that Luke refers to Mary's theological pondering in 2:19 and 2:51. http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3664/is_199910

6. Ibid.

7. Bob Herbert, "American Cities and the Great Divide" in *The New York Times*, May 22, 2007. <http://select.nytimes.com/2007/05/22/opinion/22herbert.html>.

8. Elizabeth Gudrais, "Unequal America: Causes and Consequences of the Wide—and Growing—Gap Between the Rich and Poor," *Harvard Magazine*, July-August 2008. <http://harvardmagazine.com/2008/07/p-unequal-america.html>.

9. Children's Defense Fund, Washington, DC: <http://www.childrensdefense.org>.