



Related articles:

Living in Mary's time
(page 16)

Living Lutheran,
December 2020

Reprints:

Permission is granted for individuals, small groups and congregations to reproduce this study guide for local use.

Tell us:

Do you find this guide helpful? Send comments and suggestions to rcblezard@embarqmail.com

Study guide

Living in Mary's time

By Robert C. Blezard

Every mother who experiences the nine-month miracle of childbirth knows about waiting, wondering, hoping, dreaming and praying. Imagine how those emotions and experiences were for the mother of God incarnate. Told by the angel Gabriel that she, while still a virgin, would bring to birth the Son of God who would save the world, Mary lived in the tension between “How can this be?” and “Nothing is impossible with God.” As COVID-19 disrupts our lives and our faith practices, many of us find ourselves in this middle ground between “already” and “not yet.” What can we learn in this state, and how can we grow?

Exercise 1: The Annunciation

The angel Gabriel came to Mary with the news that God had chosen her to be the mother of God's son, the messiah. That encounter, known in tradition as the Annunciation, set Mary's ordinary life on an amazing, extraordinary course. Let's explore. Read Luke 1:26-37 carefully and discuss:

- By our standards, women married very early in New Testament times, so Mary was probably just a teenager when Gabriel visited. Think of a teenage girl you know well. How might she have responded if she had received Gabriel's message?
- For you, what part of Gabriel's message to Mary stands out the most? Why? What thoughts and questions come to mind?
- How does Mary's question in verse 34 (“How can this be?”) set the tone for her whole life as the mother of Jesus?
- Does Gabriel's reply, culminating with verse 37 (“For nothing will be impossible with God”) answer Mary's question fully? Explain.
- Consider verse 38, Mary's assent to God's plan. What stands out to you, and why?
- Did Mary really understand what saying “yes” would get her into? Imagine: What kind of hope must she have possessed? What kind of trust did she place in God?
- How does our own faith journey parallel with Mary's experience of saying “yes” to God, trusting that God would be with her, and then relying on God through the ups and downs of life?
- What can we learn from Mary's example?



Contact us:

Living
Lutheran

8765 W. Higgins Rd.
Chicago, IL 60631
(800) 638-3522, ext. 2540
livinglutheran@elca.org
livinglutheran.org

Living Lutheran is the
magazine of the Evangelical
Lutheran Church in America.



**Evangelical Lutheran
Church in America**
God's work. Our hands.

Study guide: **Living in Mary's time** *continued*

Exercise 2: The Magnificat

From beginning to end, Mary's song in Luke 1:46-55 describes a world turned upside down by the power of God, as God achieves divine objectives and purposes. The Magnificat, as it is known, has been called countercultural in its implicit critique of the world and its power sources of violence, politics and money. Read the Magnificat and discuss:

- What verses, images or ideas stand out to you, and why?
- How would you characterize the Magnificat's overall tone? Overall message?
- Mary starts out with her own experience of God's grace (verses 48-49). How would you summarize it?
- Then Mary segues to generalizations about God's power working in the world. How would you summarize or characterize them?
- What are the similarities between Mary's experience of God's favor and her generalizations about God's power in the world?
- God's favor rests with Mary, but where else does it lie as described in the Magnificat?
- What are God's priorities as Mary expresses them? Are they still God's priorities? In what ways are they countercultural?
- When Mary utters the words of the Magnificat, she is full of hope and expectation of what God has promised to do in her life with the birth of Jesus. In what way are we today full of hope and expectation for what God promises to accomplish in our lives?
- How can we recapture for our lives of faith the kind of hopeful expectancy that Mary expresses? How might that enrich our faith lives?
- Do we still share Mary's vision that God wants to renew the world and turn things upside down? If so, how is that evident? If not, why not? What new vision has taken hold?
- How might we embrace and "sing" Mary's song, taking it into our hearts and minds? How might that enrich our faith lives and that of our congregation?

Exercise 3: COVID time

The coronavirus pandemic has upended all of our lives in ways that we could not have imagined when it began in early 2020. And since the pandemic's end is not quite known, we are experiencing time differently than in normal circumstances. We'll call it COVID time—when we are living between the "already" and the "not yet." Discuss:

- How has the pandemic affected your life? What has been the hardest part? The easiest? The most unsettling? The most surprising?
- As we wait for the "not yet" of the pandemic's ending, how has your experience of time's passage changed?



Study guide: **Living in Mary's time** *continued*

- How well do you “wait”? How has COVID-19 challenged your waiting skills? Sharpened them? How has it tested your patience, for the better and for the worse?

Exercise 4: Church amid COVID

The pandemic has changed how we “do” church. Many of our buildings have been closed for in-person worship, and we have been forced to dial down many of the fellowship activities that are the foundation of what we do together. Advent, Christmas and Epiphany are especially hard as we are forced to forego some of our most treasured traditions. Amid the loss, might there also be opportunity for learning new ways to be church and reimagine what it means to be a faith community?

- For you, what has been the hardest disruption in “normal” church life? Why?
- What do you miss the most? Explain.
- How have the changes mandated by COVID-19 challenged your faith in God? How have you coped?
- Do you still believe in God as strongly? Trust God as strongly? Hope in God as strongly? Can you say more?
- As the pandemic continues for much longer than expected, which aspects in church and faith life have you and your congregation let go? Has it been all bad?
- What new paradigms of being and experiencing church are emerging? What is good about them?
- Can you envision a “new normal” that promises to be as good as the “old normal”?
- How can we as a church, your congregation and you as a person of faith “lean into” the new things that God is doing in our midst?

Contact us:

Living
Lutheran

8765 W. Higgins Rd.
Chicago, IL 60631
(800) 638-3522, ext. 2540
livinglutheran@elca.org
livinglutheran.org

Living Lutheran is the
magazine of the Evangelical
Lutheran Church in America.



**Evangelical Lutheran
Church in America**
God's work. Our hands.

Exercise 5: “Tame” Christianity?

The article's author, Karoline Lewis, asserts that Christians have lost Mary's rich, expectant experience of time, “as Christianity became mainstream and even popular, as it became a kind of tame, feel-good spirituality regularized by denominational affiliations and marked by doctrinal warring.”

- What do you think of her assessment?
- What rings true to you about her critique of mainstream Christianity? What rings untrue? Explain.
- Do you long for, hope for, desire a richer faith experience? What words would characterize what you long for?
- In addition to losing a rich experience of time, what else have we missed?



About the study guide author:

Rob Blezard

is pastor of St. Paul Lutheran Church in Aberdeen, Md. He holds degrees from the Boston University School of Theology and the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg (Pa), now called United Lutheran Seminary.



Contact us:

Living
Lutheran

8765 W. Higgins Rd.
Chicago, IL 60631
(800) 638-3522, ext. 2540
livinglutheran@elca.org
livinglutheran.org

Living Lutheran is the magazine of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.



**Evangelical Lutheran
Church in America**
God's work. Our hands.

Study guide: **Living in Mary's time** *continued*

- How might Mary's example of experiencing time in hope, trust and expectancy serve as a paradigm for modern Christians to energize their faith and life?

Discussion questions

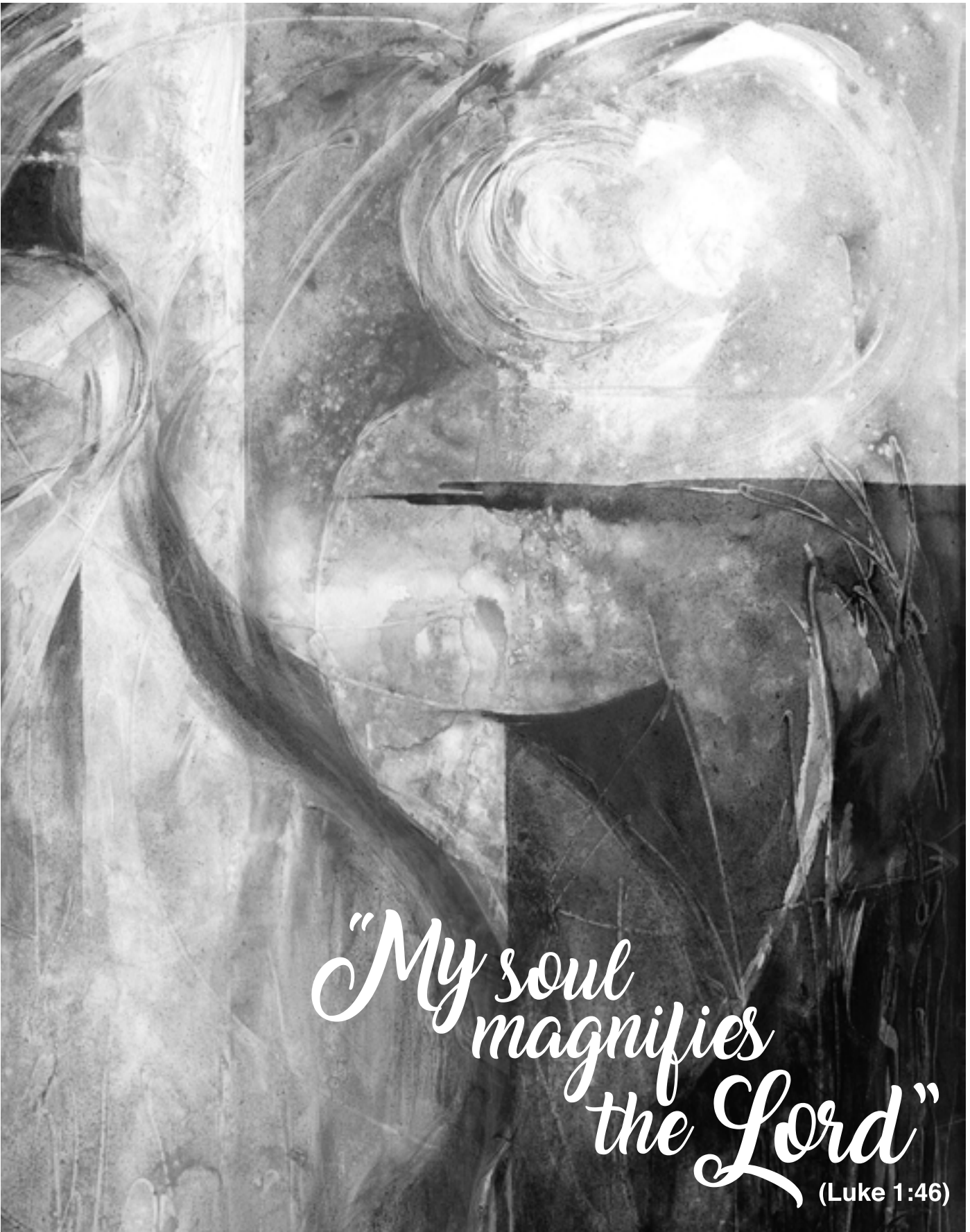
- How would you characterize Mary's courage? Her faith? Her hope in God? Her trust in God? What other characteristics mark her life? Rank these qualities by importance to her faith journey. Which do you share in your faith life? Which are most important to you? What can you learn from Mary's example?
- How have you coped with the changes that COVID-19 has caused? How has it affected your church and faith life? How have you coped in order to stay spiritually grounded and connected with God? Remembering that the pandemic will end someday, how do you sustain yourself physically, emotionally and spiritually.
- Karoline Lewis writes: "When the church is at its best, it embodies the Jesus movement by truly contesting for the kingdom of God. At its worst, the church settles into complacency and complicity, a kind of denominational satisfaction or competition." With what parts of this assertion do you agree, and why? What parts do you disagree with, and why? How does your congregation fare?
- Lewis writes: "In times like these, theology is no longer a given, if it ever was. We are constructing and reconstructing, deliberating and dialoguing about meaning. For Christians, finding meaning always involves asking, 'What is God up to in all this?'" Why is it good for faithful people to continually discern afresh God's meaning and purposes? What are the dangers of not wrestling or wrestling insufficiently? How does a person engage in healthy discernment?
- Considering the pandemic and the other issues facing our world, what is God up to in all of this? What challenges do we face? How is God equipping and leading us to meet them? What opportunities may arise?



Living in Mary's time

Text by Karoline M. Lewis

Illustration: "Magnificat" by Robyn Sand Anderson, an artist and ELCA member (robysandanderson.com).



*"My soul
magnifies
the Lord"*
(Luke 1:46)

Timing is everything, but often the truth of this adage is seen only in hindsight. While we're in the moment, the purpose of the time in which we find ourselves is hard to adjust into view.

Time has taken on a different kind of meaning these past 11 months. Months seem like years and days like minutes. We can't tell one day from the next, as the boundaries that mark hours are blurred by homebound life and the upheaval of our rhythms.

Everything we have counted on to give life purpose and meaning—the rituals of life and death, the ways we go about relationships and maintain community, the security of jobs and the satisfaction of outside pursuits—has been taken away by something we can't even see and by a reality we didn't want to see. Add a hard-to-swallow dose of political machinations and it's enough to believe that we've been thrust into a different time zone altogether.

We know all of this, but that doesn't make it easier to accept, especially when we face yet one more holiday that won't be as it once was. We long for that "once was" time—the pre-pandemic way of life and the pre-George Floyd way of looking at life.

Nostalgia is hard to let go of, particularly when the transitions are abrupt and leave us feeling out of control. And denial is hard to give up when it has worked so well for so many years.

The time in which we find ourselves—as individuals, communities, a nation, a world and a church—is much more than unprecedented. It's unnerving, unsettling. Upending and upheaving—suspended in that in-between space caused by pandemic and protest, by disbelief and dystopia, by resistance and revolution.

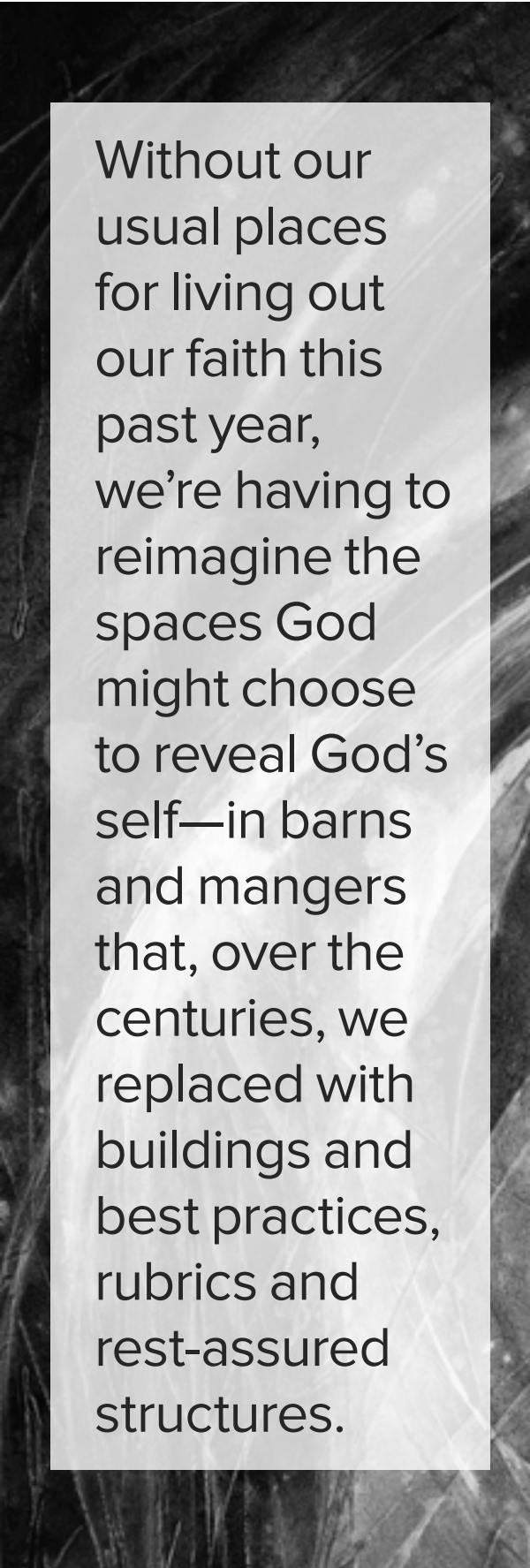
But as Christians, we know this time well—the time between the *already* and the *not yet* of the kingdom of heaven. The time between *God so loved the world* and waiting for it to come true. The kind of time that Mary understood. The kind of time coiled with the tension between "How can this be?" and "Nothing will be impossible with God" (Luke 1:34, 37).

This time can feel interminable.

Mary reminds us of this kind of time, gives voice to this kind of time. We have just forgotten it as Christianity became mainstream and even popular, as it became a kind of tame, feel-good spirituality, regularized by denominational affiliations and marked by doctrinal warring. Somewhere along the line we lost sight of the kind of time we are called to keep.

For such a time as this

Such a time as this is the kind of time we are supposed to keep this Christmas—the kind of time between "How can this be?" and "Nothing will be



Without our usual places for living out our faith this past year, we're having to reimagine the spaces God might choose to reveal God's self—in barns and mangers that, over the centuries, we replaced with buildings and best practices, rubrics and rest-assured structures.

impossible with God.” It’s the kind of time Mary felt in her very body.

You see, it’s a laboring time, one that hovers somewhere in the middle of questions and confidence, lived between fear and love, between doubt and hope. It’s a laboring time born out of a certain kind of love that is known in extraordinary effort and yet palpable apprehension. A love that is bloody and bold. A love that is resilient and fierce. A love that makes you feel as if you’re dying and yet is life-giving.

For Mary, Christmastime is but a microcosm of the time she will be asked to keep her whole life. In John 2:5, she pushes Jesus out the door (“Do whatever he tells you”), knowing who he is and what he has to do. And then she finds herself at the foot of the cross. She births the savior of the world, whose breath will be smothered by the world.

And so, Mary’s hope is an honest one. She hopes in the endless possibility of God, but she knew the truth of the cross long before we did—that empire silences the protesters, speaks lies for its own gain and crushes those who stand in the way of its privilege.

Maybe that’s why she asked “How can this be?” as she pondered the forces that stifle love with hate. Of course, we know the story Mary did not—where this Jesus movement would go.

When the church is at its best, it embodies the Jesus movement by truly contesting for the kingdom of God. At its worst, the church settles into complacency and complicity, a kind of denominational satisfaction or competition.

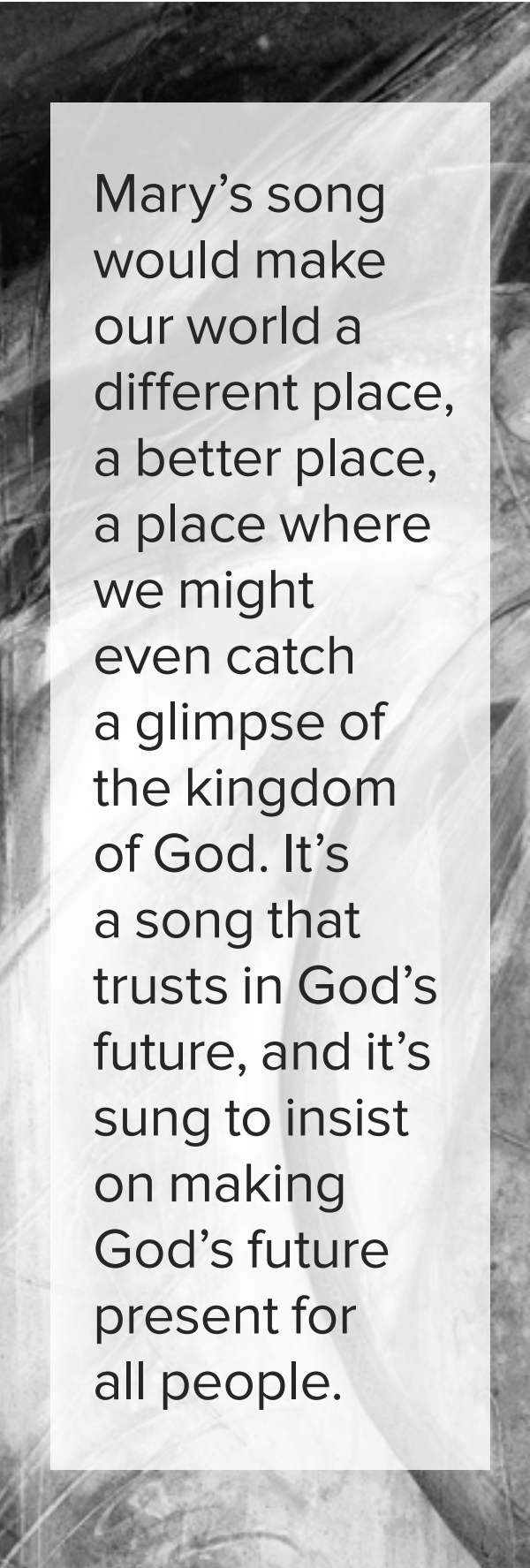
We need Mary’s reminder that we don’t know the whole story either. We cling to that honest hope. To do so is to lean into a kind of trust we haven’t had to count on in a long time. The kind of trust that is able to utter, “Nothing will be impossible with God.”

Christmastime

We have to read ahead in Luke to Mary’s song, for it’s here that she sings of the trust on which she drew to move herself from “How can this be?” to “Nothing will be impossible with God.”

We hear Mary’s version of God, who looks with favor upon the lowly; who regards those we would overlook; who calls her blessed; who scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts, who brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; who has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty. Her God, who has helped servant Israel, in remembrance of mercy, because God keeps God’s promises (Luke 1:46-55).

And because God keeps God’s promises—and all of the promises Mary names—she can lean into God’s possibility while not fully understanding what



Mary’s song
would make
our world a
different place,
a better place,
a place where
we might
even catch
a glimpse of
the kingdom
of God. It’s
a song that
trusts in God’s
future, and it’s
sung to insist
on making
God’s future
present for
all people.

it means for her, her son or the world. That the birth of her son would upend the world—but not before it made sure to silence him. That the joy of parenting would also mean the suffering of watching her son die. That sometimes favor and regard will also call us to love fervently and relentlessly.

Maybe what will be born from these times in which we find ourselves are new possibilities for how we imagine God's presence—a presence that we made too predictable by ecclesial practices and expectations, by denominational smugness and theological sparring.

Without our usual places for living out our faith this past year, we're having to reimagine the spaces God might choose to reveal God's self—in barns and mangers that, over the centuries, we replaced with buildings and best practices, rubrics and rest-assured structures.

As a result, one unspoken aspect of grief in this time of protest, pandemic and partisanship is that the ways we've come to know God and embody belief have been taken. We find ourselves asking, "Is what I believe about God still true anymore? Is my faith strong enough to find other ways of expression?"

In times like these, theology is no longer a given, if it ever was. We are constructing and reconstructing, deliberating and dialoguing about meaning. For Christians, finding meaning always involves asking, "What is God up to in all this?"

The usual reason for Mary's question "How can this be?" is her incredulity about being pregnant. "How can I possibly be carrying a child when I am a virgin?"

But what if, behind her question, lurked a list of additional questions: "What am I supposed to tell my family?" Or "Who is going to be there during labor?" Or "How am I supposed to raise a baby by myself?" Or "Who am I for God to choose me?"

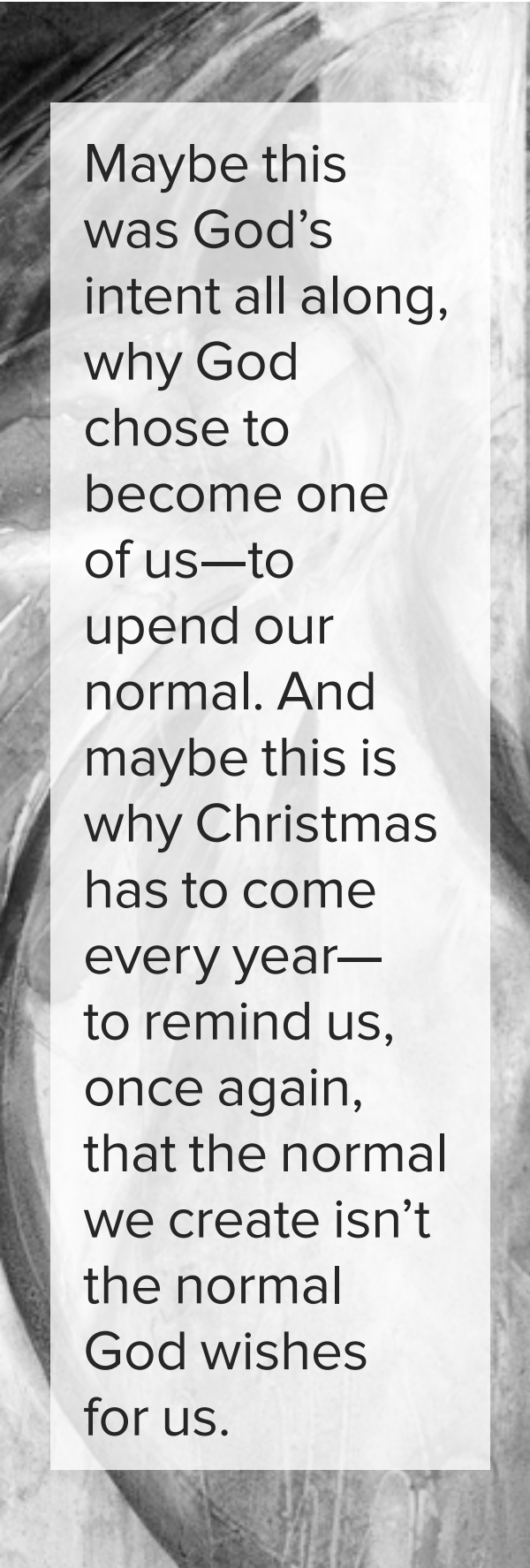
The angel Gabriel anticipates her layered fear: "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end" (Luke 1:30-33).

Because Christmas is not just a day but a way of being.

Time for new

Every single year, the birth of Jesus upends the world as we know it, especially when the world needs it the most and specifically when the world persists in pretending that the status quo can continue.

What if, this Christmas, we sang Mary's song? A song to sing instead of talking of indifference and intolerance. A song to sing instead of speaking words



Maybe this
was God's
intent all along,
why God
chose to
become one
of us—to
upend our
normal. And
maybe this is
why Christmas
has to come
every year—
to remind us,
once again,
that the normal
we create isn't
the normal
God wishes
for us.

of hate and fear. A song to sing instead of closing our mouths, unwilling to speak up for or speak out against.

Mary's song would make our world a different place, a better place, a place where we might even catch a glimpse of the kingdom of God. It's a song that trusts in God's future, and it's sung to insist on making God's future present for all people.

How can we sing this song that both comforts the lowly and topples empires, that gives hope to the hopeless and speaks truth to unchecked power? Mary gets from "How can this be?" to "Nothing will be impossible with God" through the promise of the Spirit. We sing because the same Spirit has been promised to us.

That Spirit has been showing up week in and week out, no matter how or where we worship. No matter if it's by Zoom or in a parking lot. No matter if all we have to share at the Lord's Supper is ginger ale and a Ritz cracker.

We might not yet be able to say "Nothing will be impossible with God," and that's OK. We may need to occupy that in-between place a little longer—and we may have to.

There is no going back to normal. Mary knew that as well. She realized this truth as she found herself between who she thought God was and who God needed her to be. But isn't this the very heart of the gospel?

There was no going back to normal when the women found the tomb empty. There was no going back to normal when Jesus sent his disciples into all the nations. And there was no going back to normal once the Word became flesh.

Maybe this was God's intent all along, why God chose to become one of us—to upend our normal. And maybe this is why Christmas has to come every year—to remind us, once again, that the normal we create isn't the normal God wishes for us.

Christmas is this very promise and perhaps one that can be easy to forget. Before Christmas became presents and pageants, dinners and decorations, Jesus' birth was a threat to those in power. It was a threat to those who, in no uncertain terms, wouldn't allow their privilege to be taken away and to those who had become gods of their own making. Christmas was, if you will, unprecedented.

This Christmas won't be normal for any of us. But it just might be like that first Christmas, and we might find ourselves not at the inn but in the barn, sitting by the manger next to Mary. Waiting for her world, our world, to be changed, even to be reborn. Indeed, it's time for new. †

Download a study guide at livinglutheran.org by clicking on the "Spiritual practices & resources" tab.

This Christmas
won't be
normal for
any of us.
But it just
might be
like that
first Christmas,
and we
might find
ourselves not
at the inn
but in the barn,
sitting by the
manger next
to Mary.



Karoline M. Lewis is the Marbury E. Anderson Chair of Biblical Preaching at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minn.