



On your marks

It is part of the mystery of the Christian story that God's eternal plan to send Jesus into our world rests on a simple 'yes' from ordinary people like you and me. When Luke sets out to relate what happens at the beginning of his story of Jesus, he tells us about two responses to what God was about to do. Both Zechariah's and Mary's replies are vital to the unfolding of the drama but Luke draws an important contrast between what they say to the angel. They both ask 'how will this happen?' (see Luke 1:18 and 34) but from quite different motives. Each of these Advent stories has a lot to teach us about how we too might respond to God's call upon our lives.

The following idea focuses on Mary's story in Luke 1:26 -56.

Get set

You will need:

- examples of different artwork depicting this story, possibly from old Christmas cards or from the Internet
- different versions of the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55) printed on paper with space for illustrations and artwork around the words
- coloured pens, pencils, art and collage materials
- some percussion instruments

Go!

Background to the story

When Luke opens his account of the life, death and 'life again' of Jesus Christ, dedicated to his friend in Rome, he focuses on the lives of an elderly couple in Jerusalem and a young unmarried teenager in Nazareth. When God stepped into time and space, he chose to use ordinary human beings with all their problems and possibilities, and of course Mary was just such an ordinary teenager. Yet without Mary's story, we wouldn't have the Christmas story. Christians believe that she was a very special girl, chosen by God to be the mother of God on earth.

I wonder what made Mary so special. God needed just the right person: someone who was unspoiled and full of faith; someone who was open to God and willing to say 'yes'. Mary's 'yes' to God was the one-word answer that made Christmas possible.

Opening up the story

1. Just imagine if Mary had said 'no'! Every day, each of us is presented with the choice of saying 'yes' or 'no' to the many requests that come our way. Some of those yeses and noes might be crucial. Explore with your group what they would say if they were asked the following

questions. Will it be 'yes' or 'no'?

- Will you go and fetch the first-aid kit please?
- Will you pop this letter in the postbox on your way to school?
- Will you help with the lunch?
- Will you please visit your nan who isn't feeling very well?
- Will you look after next door's hamster while they're away?
- Will you pray for my friend who is upset?

It can make all the difference in the world whether we say 'yes' or 'no'. For example:

- If you say 'no' to fetching the first-aid kit, it might cause a delay that brings more suffering to the person is injured.
- If you say 'no' to posting the letter, it might delay the arrival of some very important news.
- If you say 'no' to helping with the evening meal, it might mean that your mum or dad end up having too much to do.
- If you say 'no' to visiting your nan, you'll miss the chance to cheer her up, which will make her even more unhappy.
- If you say 'no' to looking after next door's pet, it might cause them a great deal of trouble trying to find someone else.
- If you say 'no' to praying for your friend, he or she might become even sadder.

But when we say 'yes' it can make all the difference. This was true for Mary too - in far more ways than she could have ever imagined.

2. Many people will acknowledge that our world is in a mess in so many ways. Invite your group to name quickly some of the things that aren't right with our world. Now ask them to imagine how they might go about 'rescuing the world', if they were God. Suggestions could include:

- doing a huge global miracle to rid the world of all that is bad in one go
- arriving with massive angel armies to sort everything out
- sending another flood
- speaking in a powerful voice from on high

Now ask them to come up with all the very good reasons why choosing to come as a baby to a poor teenager in a tiny village doesn't seem like a good idea. Suggestions might include:

- the huge risk it was
- Mary wasn't anybody special
- people wouldn't listen
- Mary comes only from Galilee, which was the poor part of Israel
- Mary wasn't even married
- Mary was far too young

What sort of risk was God taking by pinning the hope of rescuing the world on someone like Mary?

Telling the story

There are many famous pieces of art depicting the angel's visit to Mary (the annunciation). Look up some of these on the Internet and then show a few in different styles to your group, asking them which they like best and why.

Explore the pictures with key questions to help unpack the conversation between Gabriel and Mary in Luke 1:28-38:

- What was Mary doing when the angel appeared?
- What is it about how Gabriel is portrayed that illustrates a deep respect for Mary? (Luke 1:28)
- How does the picture capture Mary's confusion? (Luke 1:29)
- What sort of reactions do her face and the position of her body betray?
- How has the artist captured a sense of awe and mystery in the story?
- Is there anything in the picture that conveys Gabriel's message that God is sending his Holy Spirit to Mary and that a special baby will be born? (Luke 1:35)
- What is there about the picture that reflects the truth that Mary willingly is saying 'yes' to God's choice of her as the mother of his son? (Luke 1:38)
- What special symbols, colours and effects have the artists used?

Mary is now in great danger. She is pregnant outside of marriage. The Jewish laws of the day condemned such a person to death. So Mary has to go and 'hide' with her relative Elizabeth in the south.

Talking about the story

Luke places the story of Gabriel's visit to Mary straight after that of his visit to Zechariah. He is inviting a comparison of how they both responded to the good news they were told: the priest wants some proof and his question (Luke 1:18) betrays his disbelief, while the young girl is curious to know how God will do this (not whether God will) and her final words reveal a very deep faith indeed (Luke 1:38).

- What is it about Mary that made her react in a different way to Zechariah?
- What more does Mary learn about God after she asks her question in Luke 1:34?
- Both Zechariah and Mary had been brought up with stories of a God who does miracles, so why is Mary more ready to believe that he was?
- Gabriel does give Mary 'a sign' that all this is true by telling her about her relative Elizabeth (Luke 1:36). Do you think Mary needed this assurance, or would she have believed anyway?

Playing with the story

When Mary did go to visit Elizabeth, she burst into song. This sung poem – known from the Latin of its first words as the Magnificat – is still a regular part of traditional worship in our churches today. Read this song together in different Bible versions (go to <http://www.biblegateway.com/>). Here is a simple rhyming version:



*With all my heart, to God I sing.
He's chosen me; He's my everything.
The world will say that I'm the one
God wants as mother to his Son.
God is great and God is good;
He's given us what he said he would.
He cares for people, just like me;
The ones who think they're secondary.
The big names, he has just by-passed
The rich are not the ones he asks.
The poor he helps - the forgotten ones;
Abram said they'd be God's sons.
With all my heart, to God I sing.
He's chosen me; he's my everything.*

Print off various versions of Mary's song - one copy for each member of the group - and invite them to illustrate the words with appropriate images and/or to decorate the text with a collage that captures something of the meaning of the words. Some might like to work out a tune for the words and then choose suitable percussion instruments to perform a finished version.

Reflecting on the story

Just like Mary, we are all faced with big choices in life. God didn't force Mary to say 'yes'. And we don't have to say 'yes' to people who ask us to help them, or even say 'yes' to God. But Mary did say 'yes' and the world is different as a result. Our 'yes' can make a world of difference too.

While playing a musical version of the Magnificat, ask your group to think about what things God is asking them to do this week and what their answer will be.

- Am I ready and willing to say 'yes' to doing good today?
- How can I, like Mary, say 'yes' to God this Christmas?

The 'y' of 'yes' is in fact there in our praying hands ready to help us to remember like Mary to say 'yes' to God. Show them this by making a fist and then looking for the letter created by the finger nearest the thumb as it bends over.