



Gifted to Serve!

This year's Women's Ministry theme will capture us all as we think about and reflect upon the many gifts with which God has blessed us. We will learn that we have been gifted to serve others! The Bible Study this year is in the format of a one-page monologue with reflection questions and activities. The Rev. Tiffany Hall McClung, Chaplain for Memphis Theological Seminary, writes the monologues for this resource. She graduated from MTS in December 1999 and was ordained by Nashville Presbytery of the Cumberland

Presbyterian Church in February 2000. She has served as youth minister, associate pastor, and pastor to congregations in Tennessee and Alabama. She holds the distinction of being the final president of the Cumberland Presbyterian General Assembly Council. She is married to the Rev. Dr. Andy McClung, also an ordained C.P. minister and they have two children, Ian and Maggie. They live in Midtown Memphis, Tennessee. You can contact her at tmclung@memphisseminary.edu. Mrs. Michelle Rackley writes the reflection activities. Michelle is a graduate of Emory & Henry College with a degree in Early Childhood Education and English. She went on to attend Union Theological Seminary and the Presbyterian School of Christian Education receiving her Master's of Divinity and her Master's of Arts in Christian Education. She is married to the Reverend Mark Rackley, who pastors the Bartow Cumberland Presbyterian Church in Rydal, Georgia. They are the proud parents of Sarah Catherine, Paul William, and Anna Rene. You may contact Michelle at mandmrackley@gmail.com.

In preparing for these studies, you will want to read all the text beforehand (and maybe even research more of the characters in order to give a fuller, richer presentation). It will be best if you can do these monologues in first person, even dressed as the woman being portrayed. The most effective way to facilitate these studies will be for one woman to give the presentation and another lead the discussion afterwards.

Included with these studies is a simple **calendar** that you might find helpful in your planning for the year. Please feel free to adjust and modify to fit our group's unique needs. There is also an **order form** at the back, which you can use to order additional resources related to the yearly theme and Women's Ministry.

Blessings as you hear once again, the stories of some amazing women of God who used their gifts to serve others, and who will challenge us to do the same.

Miriam is my name. I am sister to the great Moses, leader of the Israelites. He was born during a horrible time in our history. It is a miracle that he survived. God clearly had plans for him! Other brothers of ours were not so lucky.

My mother could not bear to lose him, so in order to save him; she gave him up to be raised by another woman. Her pain and heartbreak was more than I could take. After she put him into the reeds in the river, I watched and waited. I hid there waiting for an Egyptian to find him. We knew that Pharaoh's daughter bathed in that very spot. And, we had heard that she was a good person. For my mother, it seemed his only hope of survival. I was shocked when it actually worked.

I was only a girl at the time. I saw things that no girl of that age should witness. Pharaoh hated us. I don't know why. My father always told us it was simple - he was afraid of us. But, I didn't understand this. How could he be afraid of those whom were enslaved to him? To me, it seemed we had no power; in fact, we had no hope.

I offer you the gift of courage. I wish I could think of a better word for it. I do not want you to misunderstand. I was terrified. While I had heard that Pharaoh's daughter was kind, I had never had the opportunity to find out for myself. I should not have been near her and her maids as she prepared to bathe. She could have just as easily taken me to her father and had me killed.

As I stood in the bushes thinking of what to do and say and trying to decide if I would run instead, I imagined the tears streaming down my mother's face when she placed Moses in that basket. Any courage I was able to muster came from my desire to help her. And, I did. After Pharaoh's daughter found him, I took a deep breath and I came out of hiding. I came up with the only thing I could think of that would reunite my mother and her son. When the princess agreed, I ran! I was elated, but still frightened. What if it is was a trap? What if I had not only endangered myself, but now my mother as well? For all I knew while I was gone, they were drowning Moses to follow Pharaoh's commands to kill every Hebrew boy.

But, she didn't do that. The stories of her kindness had been right. And, my mother was able to nurse her own son while knowing that he would be safe right under the nose of the king who wanted to kill his kind.

That night she and I sat by the fire as she rocked Moses. Mother laughed and cried and cried and laughed. She told me that she should be angry with me for doing such a crazy thing, that she had never had courage like she saw in me, and that she was thankful that God had protected all of us.

I've never really thought of myself as courageous. But, I suppose when a girl can face her fears to put the needs of others first, there must be courage involved. And, I know that any such courage is a gift straight from God. If God had not been helping me, I would have stayed in those bushes!

Discussion Suggestions - The Child Miriam

We have all had to be courageous at one time or another. Courage is a gift that each of us possesses, but we aren't always successful at letting it shine. Sometimes fear gets the best of us and wins out over our courage. That is simply part of being human.

In our monologue, we have the privilege of meeting the young child, Miriam. Miriam was the older sister of Moses. Early in her life, her gift of courage was apparent. She would go on to use that gift many times in her lifetime, and by doing so would ultimately help her people reach the beloved Promise Land.

Miriam's story begins with her being a part of God's plan from the beginning. As she watched her baby brother, Moses, float in the waters of the Nile, she knew she was in great danger. But she stayed, and courageously approached Pharaoh's daughter with a plan that would set a string of God-purposed events in action. She was terrified, to be sure, but as she knew, we can be terrified and courageous at the same time.

- ✦ God has a plan for each of us too. Reflect on your own life. In looking back, where is it now apparent that the hand of God was upon a situation while you were unaware of what God was doing?
- ✦ How can we become more aware of God's hand in everything that happens?
- ✦ Where does our courage come from in trying times?
- ✦ Share together about a time or times when you had to find courage to do something that you knew was important and right.
- ✦ Miriam states in her monologue, "...when a girl can face her fears to put the needs of others first, there must be courage involved." How good are we at putting the needs of others before ourselves? Is this an area in which we need to focus?

Courage comes from within. It is a true gift of God. Sometimes it is hard to muster the courage we feel we need to accomplish certain things. But we must remember whose Almighty hand is protecting us, encouraging us, and loving us. It is there within each of us. All we need to do is trust and move forward.

PRAYER:

Close in prayer, asking God to strengthen our courage to do what is right in His eyes and according to His plan.

I'll leave the preaching to Priscilla. You've met her already. Or if not, I'm sure you will meet her soon. And what a story it will be because you see, she is blessed with the gift of gab, or in technical terms, exhortation. The thought of public speaking terrifies me. Don't be surprised if I faint just trying to get through this.

I do have an offering to give. I am here to offer the gift of helpfulness. Some people look at me and say, "I don't know how you do all you do for others when most of them never even say 'thank you.'"

Well, the answer to that is easy. I am a disciple of a man named Jesus. He helped so many; he served ALL people, never expecting a thank you. I'm just doing the best I can to follow in his footsteps.

I live in between worlds. Some of you may even know me as Tabitha. That is what my Jewish friends call me. My Greek friends call me Dorcas. There are one or two in each of those groups who don't understand how I am able to be friends with and, in fact, help people from such different backgrounds. Again, I'm just trying to be a good disciple. It is a small thing to perform acts of charity, but that is my gift.

No, I'll leave the preaching to Priscilla. I prefer the "behind the scenes" kind of work. That is why the biggest blessing in my life was also the biggest curse. I had lived a good life. I was able to help widows, children, and people of all sorts. Yes, I helped in small ways, quiet ways, but I felt that I was making a difference. Then I died. I know that may sound dramatic, but I did. I died.

I'm standing here with you, so you know what happened. I was raised, raised from the dead, by Peter himself. And, while that may seem the big miracle, what amazed me was that all of those people cared so much about me that they made sure Peter helped me. I am truly grateful for that.

But, suddenly, I was a superstar – "the woman come back from the dead." That felt like a curse to me - people staring at me all the time, strangers wanting to touch me. Every time I tried to take a pot of soup to one of the widows, people were pointing and talking about it. I just can't stand to be the center of attention.

Please don't misunderstand. I'm incredibly thankful for my life being returned to me, for so many diverse people reaching out to me, but I do prefer the quiet, "behind the scenes" kinds of help. That is my offering. That is what I bring. Because I am a disciple of Jesus, I help others. There really isn't a need to make a big deal about it.

Discussion Suggestions - Dorcas

In Biblical times, one of the worst things that could happen to a woman was to become a widow. Widows were often the poorest of poor, without anyone to represent them or protect them. Too often, they were abandoned by society and left to fend for themselves without access to any resources that would help them survive.

The acts of charity and compassionate deeds from Dorcas to the widows of Joppa ensured that they could live their life with their basic needs met. So we can understand, then, why her death caused great grief not just to the widows, but also to the whole community in Joppa.

In her monologue, Dorcas stated that she preferred the “behind the scenes” kind of work, and that “it is a small thing to perform acts of charity” claiming that that is her gift.

- ✦ Ask your group how they see God calling them to use their collective gifts to perform “acts of charity” within your community.

- ✦ Brainstorm together ways your group can help make the lives of those less fortunate in your community better. Is there a women and children’s shelter to which you can minister either in person or by donations? Do the children of your local schools have their basic needs met as far as school supplies go (remember, supplies need refreshing year round)? Is there a clothes closet in your community for which your group can organize a clothes drive? Does your local food pantry need extra support and donations? Are there people (widows, homebound, etc.) in your church and community that could use a meal or a visit on a regular basis? If so, set up a rotation schedule for members of your group to take them something simple and visit with them each week. The ideas and the needs to fulfill are endless. Consider committing together as a group to adopt one or more of these needs as your project for a year (or more!).

Group Activity:

Make an announcement prior to the meeting date that each lady is to bring with her to the meeting one yard of fleece and a pair of scissors. You will be making fleece blankets together to distribute to those in need (shut-ins, nursing homes, new moms, etc.). Have each lady pair up with a partner. Each pair will place their fleece back to back. Cut out a square from each of the four corners of the paired up fleece. Then proceed to cut about three inch long strips around the perimeter of the paired up fleece. Tie the strips of the paired up fleece together in knots to make a blanket.

While they work in pairs, invite the ladies to offer sentence prayers related to the needs of those less fortunate in your community and your opportunities to respond to those needs. When all the blankets are completed, close with the prayer below or one of your own wording.

PRAYER:

Thank you, God for calling us to join with you in serving our neighbors in need. Help us to always show your love and goodness to others. Amen.”

Miracles. I've seen miracles. And, I'm here to offer the gift of encouragement. Mary came to me because she felt like I was the only person who could truly understand what she was experiencing. In no way do I claim that my miracle, my son John, was of the magnitude of her giving birth to the Messiah; however, I do claim him as a miracle!

We were old. For years I had tried to have a child. Years had passed and I felt like a complete failure. I understand that I was not a failure for this, but I *felt* like one anyway. Then, my husband stopped speaking. I didn't know what was wrong with him until, until I realized I was pregnant. **A miracle!** I should not have been able to be pregnant and yet I was.

So Mary came to see me after she knew that she had conceived the Son of God – an impossibility! **A miracle!** The moment I saw her, my heart leapt within me. Something had changed in her. She was no longer the little girl I remembered. She was a woman and she had this peace surrounding her that was contagious.

My heart was not the only thing in my body to leap. John leapt as well. As if he knew before he ever saw the light of day that he was in the presence of holiness. Once he started leaping, he never stopped!

As I said, Mary had a peace about her, but the young girl was scared at the same time. Others did not believe her. And, you wouldn't believe the things that were said to her during those days. People can be so cruel. There were times she even questioned herself. There were times she felt like she had gone insane.

But, as soon as I saw her, I knew. If a miracle like John could happen to me, there was no way I would deny that Mary could be a mother to God's son. I was honored that she chose to come to me when she felt so alone. I was happy to share with her my story and to assure her that she was indeed "the mother of my Lord."

Miracles! Don't you see? Don't you believe? If this could happen to me, then I know miracles are in your future as well. If this could happen to Mary, don't you think the Lord will use you? We were nothing special. I was just an old barren woman. Mary – just a young and silly girl. We each had made mistakes and no one would have ever guessed that God would work miracles through us.

It may be easier for you to believe this about your neighbor than yourself. I'm here to tell you that there is no one more suited than you. Be encouraged. Be open. And, you will be used in performing miracles – the miracles of The Most High Lord.

Discussion Suggestions - Elizabeth

Recall our theme for the year, "Gifted to Serve." We all possess the gift of encouragement. The word, *encourage* is defined as: "to inspire with courage, spirit, or hope; to fill with courage or strength of purpose; the raising of one's confidence." (Webster)

Anyone can encourage another person. All it takes is a can-do, uplifting attitude, compassion, and a spirit of giving. Everyone **needs** encouragement at various points in their lives. I dare say that everyone has been on the giving and the receiving end of encouragement within their lifetimes.

When Mary went to see Elizabeth at her home, each of them had a miracle story to share with the other. Elizabeth, who had been married many years, was past childbearing age and had little hope that she would ever experience motherhood. Yet here she was half way through her pregnancy with not just any child, but a divinely appointed child who was to prepare the way for the Messiah! Mary, nearly still a child herself, was engaged (or betrothed) to Joseph, and had been visited by an angel announcing her divinely appointed pregnancy. She would carry THE Messiah, the Savior of the world, God's Son. Elizabeth and Mary were there for each other, supporting and encouraging one another, sharing their miraculous stories together.

It is never easy to go through something new alone. We need the encouragement and support of one another. We need to know that we have someone on the sidelines cheering us on, believing in us.

- ✦ Think of a time when you needed encouragement. What were the circumstances of the situation? Who did you turn to? Who reached out to you? What was the outcome?
- ✦ Who are people around us now that could use our support and encouragement? How can we reach out to them and share in their journey by offering encouragement and strength to them?

As a group, brainstorm ways your Women's Ministry group can be encouraging to those in your church family, community, and even abroad. Maybe you could adopt a group of soldiers who are serving their country and send them words of encouragement on a regular basis. How about adopting a cottage at our children's home in Denton, Texas? Let those children know that people they are likely to never meet are offering prayers and encouragement for them, but by people who care and want to share in their journey. Have you considered volunteering as a mentor at your local elementary and middle schools? So many of our young people need to know that it matters to others how they choose to live their lives. What about letting our missionaries know that they are not forgotten? Let them know that you are praying for them and their work on a regular basis.

PRAYER:

Close by praising God for the miracles He performs each day. Thank God for sending those who are encouragement to you. Pray for guidance in encouraging others.

I am Queen Esther. I am here to offer the gift of political savvy. I doubt that is what you had in mind, but I want to be completely honest with you. My life has been a strange series of events that led me to places I never dreamed I would be. Certainly, as a little girl, I never dreamed that I would someday be Queen.

I am going to tell you, though, that when I found myself in the King's harem awaiting his decision on who would be the next queen, I decided that I could change my life forever by being as smart as I could be. We had all seen what happened to poor Vashti just because she refused to allow all those men to stare upon her body as if she were an object. She was the king's wife and one night when he and his friends had been drinking, he called her into court. She refused, so he banished her.

As sad as it is there are certain things we have to do in order to get what we want. The laws were clear. Disobeying the king meant certain death. And, I wasn't clear on what would happen to all those girls who were in the harem and not chosen to be queen, either.

It took patience and endurance. For a whole year, we underwent what they called "cosmetic treatments." I know this sounds nice, but it got old after a while – people scrubbing me with oils, pulling on my hair to straighten it, pouring perfume all over me – I was ready to be outside running in a field! But, I knew if I could remain patient and use that time to get to know those closest to the king that I could position myself in such a place to be favored. It's not what you know, but whom you know!

Is this making you uncomfortable? I understand that there may be some of you who wonder how someone like me can speak of politics in such a way. Using my position, my charm, even my beauty to get what I wanted may seem wrong to you. I don't think that I can argue the point except to say that I never did anything that I believe was wrong. I followed the laws of the land as best I could and used my savvy for the rest.

Had I not worked to be in the position that I was, I would not have been able to use the same political savvy to save my people. I'm sure my king was shocked when I finally revealed that I was Jewish, but I had waited until the right time, knowing just when that information would be the best use to me and to all of the Jews in the area. My cousin, Mordecai, was my sounding board. He offered a lot of advice and helped me to see what I could accomplish.

Imagine a woman like me even thinking she could do such things! But, somehow I did. I could see the vision of what could be. And, so, I worked in the places that I found myself to get what would do me and my people the most good. In fact, I choose to believe that it did the most good for all people. After all, that is what politics should be about, right?

Discussion Suggestions - Esther

Keeping in mind the theme for this year, “Gifted To Serve,” consider how God prepares us to serve others in our lives.

In her monologue, Esther speaks about the year of preparation that she and the other women had to go through in order to become candidates for the next queen. A yearlong beauty treatment may sound like heaven to some of us, but think of how monotonous that was bound to become. Surely the thought, “Why go through all of this when the outcome is so uncertain?” crossed not only Esther’s mind, but all the other women as well.

Invite the women to respond to these questions:

- ✦ What preparations does God take us through so that we are prepared and ready to serve where we are called?
- ✦ What is the importance of God’s timing in our lives?
- ✦ What hinders people from walking in God’s plan for their life?
- ✦ What are some situations around you at this time (in the world, nation, community, church, family, job, etc.) in which you feel God is calling you to serve? What do you feel your purpose is in the midst of these situations? How has God, or how is God, preparing you to serve in those situations?

PRAYER:

Esther’s story shows us that remaining respectful and humble, even in difficult, if not humanly impossible, circumstances often sets us up to be the vessel of untold blessing for both ourselves and others. Have each person take a few moments to write a prayer or a poem expressing their desire to trust God more in the situations of day-to-day life. Invite several women to share their prayer in closing time. (*Leader: make sure that you provide pens or pencils and paper for this closing activity*)

After the Session:

Consider going together for pedicures or manicures. OR – get together at a member’s home and do that spa treatment for each other. This will make a nice, memorable fellowship activity. You could also include teen girls in the activity, which they would LOVE! It would also provide a wonderful opportunity for you to invite neighbors and friends who are searching for meaning in their lives.

Have you ever been married to someone who did not love you? This was my plight. It is true that your idea of marriage may be very different from ours back then. All marriages were arranged marriages for us. My father, Laban, saw something in Jacob that pleased him. He knew it would benefit him financially to have Jacob in the family.

The problem was that Jacob actually fell in love with my sister, Rachel. He loved her so much, in fact, that he broke the rules and asked my father for Rachel's hand in marriage even though she was younger than I. The deal was made, but my father did not live up to his end of the bargain. Rather than sending Rachel to Jacob's bed, he sent me. I did not want to go. I knew Jacob loved Rachel, but my father insisted I obey him. There was part of me that hoped that Jacob could learn to love me in the same way he loved my sister. It did not happen.

So, our father was able to get two daughters off his hands with one action. By tricking Jacob, I became a wife to him. But, that was not good enough. Jacob insisted on having Rachel as his wife. He loved her so much. And, so Laban rid his responsibilities for us by handing us both over to Jacob. In the process, he forced Jacob to work 14 years in his service.

I bring to you the gift of longsuffering. It may not sound like much of a gift; however, I was able to endure great strain, pressure, and heartache with this gift of my spirit. I poured myself into my children. I was so blessed with children. Poor Rachel – it took her forever before she was able to conceive a child for Jacob. Not me. I began conceiving right away. I continued to think this would be enough, that Jacob would so pleased with the many sons I bore him, that he would begin to feel true love for me. It did not happen.

He was a fine husband. He always took care of my children and me. He could have left me with my father, I suppose, but when he decided to leave Laban's service and set out on his own, he took all of us with him. He was kind enough. But, he never looked into my eyes the way he did hers. There were times that it was excruciating.

Have you ever been married to someone who did not love you? I have. And, I offer the gift of longsuffering to you. May you be blessed by this valuable gift.

Discussion Suggestions - Leah

Our monologue by Leah speaks of the gift of long-suffering. Leah was in an arranged marriage to Jacob, unloved by him, and not liked by her sister, who was Jacob's other wife and true love. With each son that Leah bore Jacob, she fervently hoped that he would begin to love her. She even named each son a name that she hoped would open Jacob's eyes and cause him to love her (Reuben = "See, a son"; Simeon = "hears" 'the Lord has heard I am hated' and has given her this son to lessen the hate; Levi = "now my husband will be joined to me"; and Judah = "This time I will praise the Lord").

Long-suffering can be defined as a patient endurance and steadfastness under ill will that has no thought of retaliation. It is the opposite of anger, it is associated with mercy and it does not surrender to the circumstances. It is just as it sounds, *long suffering*.

As hard as it is for us to go through times of long-suffering, we, like Leah, must be able to trust and rely on God. To possess the gift of long-suffering, we must be able to accept whatever our situation may be even though we cannot fully understand it. Here is the tough one: To possess the gift of long-suffering, we must no longer be troubled by whatever the situation is that is causing us grief. In other words, we need to be able to trust and rely on God so completely that we can lay this burden at the cross and know that there *will* be blessings when we get through what we need to get through.

- ✦ Discuss together times when members of the group have had a season of long-suffering. (Examples: An unexpected death of a loved one; caring for an aging loved one whose memory is fading; a failing marriage; loving a child who is making unwise decisions in life; a co-worker who makes the work environment miserable, etc.)
- ✦ How did this season of long-suffering strengthen your faith?
- ✦ What were your emotions towards God in the midst of it all?
- ✦ What blessings came from your season of long-suffering?

PRAYER:

Close with a prayer thanking God for the seasons of long-suffering, for they strengthen our faith, our trust, and our love for God. Pray for those who are currently in a season of long-suffering. Pray for their faith in God to be strengthened tenfold so that they might receive God's blessings. In all things, praise God!

- Lois:** My name is Lois. I am the mother of Eunice, grandmother to Timothy. Maybe you have heard of him. He is a disciple of Jesus, follower of the Apostle Paul. Oh, what a wonderful boy.
- Eunice:** *Mother, they know who Timothy is. They want to know why we are here.*
- Lois:** Eunice dear, we are here to share our offering.
- Eunice:** *I know that, Mother. We need to tell them.*
- Lois:** Well, go ahead dear.
- Eunice:** *We are here to offer our gift of nurture. I have to give my mother the credit for that, though. Any nurturing that I learned to give to Timothy, I first learned from her. She helped me raise him.*
- Lois:** Thank you, Eunice. That is just how we did things back then. Yes, we offer to you the gift of nurture. And, we have been trying to discern how to explain what nurture means.
- Eunice:** *It seemed simple until we really started thinking about it. I'm not sure it is something you can teach.*
- Lois:** Of course you can teach it! I taught you, didn't I?
- Eunice:** *Well, I don't know, Mother. Maybe I inherited it.*
- Lois:** Nurture is an attention to detail. It is sharing our stories with our children and grandchildren. It is teaching them the ways of Christ, showing them that love of God and love of others is what is expected. Timothy learned very well.
- Eunice:** *Yes he did. It must have impressed Paul. I was in shock when he mentioned us by name in that letter to Timothy.*
- Lois:** He saw who had done the hard work in the family! Nurturing is no easy task.
- Eunice:** *That is true. Do you think we made a difference in spreading Christianity?*
- Lois:** You mean, you and I?
- Eunice:** *Yes.*
- Lois:** Well – Yes! Yes, I do. I really do. Timothy would not have been able to do all he did had it not been for his upbringing. You did a good job.
- Eunice:** *Thank you. WE did a good job. I'm sorry. I think we got off the subject. Like I said, explaining the gift of nurture is not easy.*
- Lois:** Giving nurture is no easy task either.
- Eunice:** *You said that already, Mother.*
- Lois:** Sorry. I'm sure I've said this too, but it is worth repeating - tell your stories, teach your children and grandchildren to love God and love others, pay attention to the details.
- Eunice:** *And you will be pleasantly surprised where that will lead them . . .*
- Lois:** and their children and many others whose lives they touch.
- Eunice:** *Good job, Mother. I think we are finished now.*
- Lois:** All right then.

Discussion Suggestions - Lois and Eunice

Oh, the volumes many of us could write on how the nurturing faith of our mothers and grandmothers influenced our own faith story! The handing down of scriptural knowledge from one generation to the next is a cornerstone of our faith. For all of my growing up years, my grandmother made sure that our two week long visits in the summer coincided with her church's Vacation Bible School. We surely learned a lot at VBS, but where we learned the most was in watching our grandmother include God in her most trivial daily activities. In the garden she would thank God not only for her bountiful harvest, but also for the chance to see a beautiful butterfly on her tomatoes. As she would wash her vegetables from the garden, she would thank God for the water in her well with which to do so. As we gathered around the table, she would thank God not only for the food that He so graciously provided, but also for us, her grandchildren to be there to share it with her. Before bed, we would watch her study her Sunday School lesson for the week at her kitchen table, faithfully every night. As we climbed into our beds, we knew that a prayer would be said for our safekeeping. God was with us at Amma's house, there was no doubt about that, and when our two weeks time at Amma's house was up in the summer, our faith and knowledge of God went home with us larger than it had been when we'd arrived.

Our children, grandchildren and church children need us more than ever to nurture them in their faith and knowledge of the Scriptures. In today's fast-paced society, it is so very important that they see strong spiritual influences from within their family and church family alike. Now more than ever, we need to heed God's call to train up our children.

- ✦ Are you taking advantage of the many opportunities you have to be a spiritual mentor in children's lives? Invite the women to name all the relationships with children and youth they can think of where they serve as a witness to God's love and grace. Write all the names up on newsprint. (*Leader: make sure that you provide newsprint and markers for this activity*)

Encourage your group to become more active in the lives of the children within your church. Visit their Sunday School classes; read their Bible lesson for the day; share with them what Sunday School was like when you were a child; encourage them to read their Bibles daily. Really get to know them and develop a relationship with them. Your presence with them will not go unnoticed by them. By loving them and teaching them about Christ now, you are not only increasing their faith, but you are giving them an example to follow when they are the adults and the children in their lives need nurturing in their faith.

- ✦ Provide note cards and pens and encourage the women to write a note of encouragement to one of the young people they named. Even provide the stamp to ensure the notes of nurture get mailed!

PRAYER:

Thank you, nurturing God, for all the children in our lives with whom we have the opportunity to reach out and share our faith and knowledge of Christ and His love for us. Give us guidance and direction so that we can be effective in our ministry with them. Thank you especially for those in our lives who served to nurture us in our faith as we grew and matured into the women we are today. Amen.

St. Benedict writes, “all guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ, for he himself will say: ‘I was a stranger and you welcomed me.’” I am here to offer the gift of hospitality.

I knew him, you know. I hate to drop names, but I love him so much. It is an honor to be considered his friend. The Christ himself ate at my dinner table. But, what I’m most proud of is that I can honestly say that he was given no more special treatment than any other guest in my home, at least not by me.

My sister and I are as different as night and day. There was that one visit that she made the twelve gasp when she poured that very expensive oil on his feet. She has always been the kind to do things like this. She is a bit dramatic. And, she doesn’t want to miss a thing that the men may be saying, so she was going to sit right there to make sure she heard it all. She has her own gifts.

Mine is hospitality. I may miss the best joke of the evening, but when you leave my home you will have no doubt that you were welcomed there. And, I can cook! My mother taught me well. Mary was never interested, but I took to it right away. I’m known throughout our town for my potluck dishes!

You may find this to be an overstatement, but I really believe that the gift of hospitality is a bit of an art. I work on my home to make it as warm and inviting as it can be. I wouldn’t want anyone to enter it and feel out of place – no matter what his or her circumstances. It is incredibly important to me to provide an atmosphere of openness, a place where a person feels free to share as much or as little about him or herself as they desire, and, of course, a place where good food and drink help to warm our insides as well.

My home became a regular stop, not just for Jesus, but also for many of his followers on their travels. They knew that my door would be open to them whether I knew they were coming or not. I would have a warm bath and a soft bed ready just in case someone came through town. I let Mary handle the conversation. I am content to be in the kitchen or cleaning our friends’ clothes for them, anything I can do to make their lives easier. Jesus laughed at me sometimes, telling me to stop and smell the roses! But, I am. This is how I smell the roses – by making others welcome and happy.

Well, that is my gift to you. I’m much better at doing it than talking about it.

I am so glad you are here. Welcome!

Discussion Suggestions - Martha

We all know that Martha certainly did have a gift for hospitality. But, like many of us, she also had the knack for letting the details of that gift get in the way of serving with her whole heart.

In our Scripture passage from Luke, we see that Martha “was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made” (Luke 10:40 NIV). She went to Jesus and let her frustrations be known about her sister, Mary, leaving all the work to her while Mary sat at Jesus’ feet. She wanted Jesus to tell Mary to get up and help her! The response Martha got from Jesus was probably not at all what she expected: “Martha, Martha,” the Lord answered, “you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better and it will not be taken away from her.” (Luke 10:41-42) NIV.

Surely this caused Martha to take a step back and collect herself. Here she has been knocking herself out to serve her guests and make them feel welcome while her sister has done none of the work. How can Mary have chosen “what was better?”

When we complain about what we are doing, our heart is not in it. It is not *what* we do in His name; it is *how* we go about doing it--with conviction and joy. Otherwise it is not a ministry but rather it is just a duty.

Sometimes we get distracted by all of the demands we feel are being placed on us. It is easy to forget *why* we are serving and *whom* we are serving. It is crucial that we find a balance somewhere between the *Mary* in us, who wants to sit at Jesus’ feet, and the *Martha* in us, who gets caught up in all of the details of our service.

- ✦ Invite the women in your group recall a time in which they were hosting people in their homes (or church, such as a shower or a Presbytery meeting). Talk about the details of the preparations. Was it a calm, joyous event? Did the work and planning seem overwhelming? What did they do to change their circumstances so that they were able to show hospitality with conviction and joy?
- ✦ Consider the **20/80 Rule**. 20% of the people do 80% of the work. Is this true in your church? How does this make you feel? How do your feelings and attitudes reflect the gift of hospitality?

PRAYER:

Thank you, loving God, for the gift of hospitality. We ask that you lead, guide and direct us so that we keep Christ first in all we do, so that the *details* of your servanthood do not get in the way of the *purpose* of our servanthood. Amen.

As You Depart:

Challenge your group to find an area in their life to practice hospitality this week.

The Great Flood was the worst thing that I had ever experienced. I was incredibly thankful for Noah and so glad that my family was saved, but the destruction – the death – it was overwhelming. It is difficult to speak about even now.

I offer you the gift of patience. I doubt my patience looked much like patience at the time. It was hard staying in that ark for so long. In the years since then, there have been many questions about how we did it. People always want to know why I went along with a plan that seemed so insane. I don't know how to answer that because I don't know what choice I had.

Of course, I found it difficult, but Noah was my husband. My duty was beside him. I trusted him with my life – literally. I know that there are some who have said that I first refused to climb aboard. That just is not true. I have theories about why such a rumor began and believe that there have been those who have wanted to make women look bad, but my patience with Noah was simply a given. He told me this was what needed to be done and I helped him.

As I've already hinted, it sounds much simpler than it was. I was worried for my family. I was concerned about how Noah looked in our community. I had my own questions, but outwardly I felt my job was to be supportive and loving for him and my family.

I had no way of knowing what was going to happen. And, then the rain began. I can't really describe how it felt for us to be inside. We were scared, but felt safe. The sound of trees cracking, homes being washed away, and the screams, the screams were hard to take. What a very strange feeling to be glad to be someplace and to feel guilty and sad all at the same time.

I had asked Noah if some of our friends, at least, could come, but he said that wasn't allowed. And, patiently I went in and patiently I waited. Okay, there were days that I yelled a bit, but for the most part, there was nothing else we could do. So, we waited. If I get to be known for patience for that, I guess I can accept it.

I don't think that patience is simply sitting by and waiting, though. I think it is an active gift. I helped my husband, I educated my children, and I grieved for my friends and in fact the world. When it was all over, there was nothing that could rattle me. I patiently endured all the rebuilding and all the struggles that came our way. Patience begets patience.

Discussion Suggestions - Noah's Wife

For most of us it is never easy to be patient, but it is probably more difficult now than ever before in our history. We live in a world where communication is instant with email and text messaging, etc. We can cook an entire meal in a matter of minutes with the help of a microwave, or better yet, call ahead to our favorite restaurant and have our order hot and ready for us to pick up on our way home from work. But what happens when our computers and cell phones malfunction, our microwaves are cooked out, and our drive through meal is not ready when we are? We are plagued with expecting instant gratification in today's society. But we must remember that patience *is* a virtue and a very important tool in our lives. Patience can help us endure any trial, no matter how long it lasts or how rough it may become. It is a gift we are given, but it is a gift that we must nurture daily and allow it to blossom in our lives.

Noah's wife must have had a remarkably strong faith, and a very healthy dose of patience, to endure what she did. Not only did she have to be cooped up on the ark with her family and literally a pair of *all* of the animals and creepy crawlies of the earth, but also she had to help maintain it all as well! Can you imagine the ark-cleaning chores that had to be done on a daily basis? With all of those animals?

How can we develop and nurture such faith and patience in our lives? In her monologue, Noah's wife states that she doesn't think that "patience is simply sitting by and waiting...I think it is an active gift."

- ✦ How is being patient different from "sitting and waiting?"
- ✦ Describe how being patient is an active gift.
- ✦ Invite the group to share times that they have had to be very intentional about remaining patient. What did they find difficult about it? What helped make that time in their lives easier? What did they learn about the gift of patience?

PRAYER:

Have the women in your group pair up. Instruct each woman to share with their partner something in their lives with which they have to exercise the gift of patience. Close with the pairs praying for one another, asking God to strengthen their faith, and their gift of patience.

I bring you greetings from the Church at Cenchreae near Corinth. My name is Phoebe; I am a deacon in that congregation. I believe deacon is the correct word in your language. For me, the word is *diakonos*, which translated literally means “servant.”

I offer to you my gift of service. It is a gift that God has allowed me to share in many ways and with many people. As a partner to the Apostle Paul, I served by delivering his letter to the Romans. That letter seemed to change things. The Church really took off after hearing Paul’s instructions.

I praise the Lord because I have been blessed in so many ways. Because of my personal financial blessings, I have served as benefactor to Paul. Many of his travels, preaching, and church plants never would have happened had it not been for my service in this way.

I feel a bit self-conscious, though. I don’t mean to sound arrogant. I truly give all the glory to God and am simply amazed by the opportunities that God has afforded to me. Paul is not the only minister I’ve been able to help. I’ve had a part in many other ministries and each one has spiritually enriched my life in ways that I find it difficult to describe.

I know that I am lucky. I was given the ability and resources to address needs where I saw them. Not everyone’s way of serving will look like mine. However, I believe that Christ has called each of us to service in one way or another. The key is to keep our eyes open to see when there is a need to be filled, to keep our ears listening for the subtle cries for help, and to keep our hearts reaching out to those for whom we can be the hands and feet of Jesus.

Do you remember that story that he told while he still walked the earth? My grandmother would tell it to me. She said that he once looked at all those disciples who followed him around the countryside and he told them that when he came into his glory he would separate them into those who had served him on earth and those who had not. How did it go? “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me. Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

I am Phoebe and I count it an honor to serve Christ and Christ’s family. Thank you.

Discussion Suggestions - Phoebe

We know very little about Phoebe. She has very little mention in the Bible, but what is spoken about her speaks volumes as to who she was as a person and a follower of Jesus Christ.

In his letter, Paul names Phoebe as a deaconess, or servant; one who actually *serves* the needs of others. Phoebe was likely to have been a wealthy woman, she certainly had enough funds to be a significant benefactor to Paul, and she intended to be generous to the Romans as well.

- ✦ Using newsprint or a white board, write the word “Servant” at the top. Have the members of your group brainstorm anything that comes to mind dealing with that word. It can be their definition of what a servant is, a name of someone they have known that was a true servant, etc. Take about five minutes for this activity. When the group is done brainstorming, discuss what was discovered using the following questions:
- ✦ What does it mean to be a servant of Christ?
- ✦ What is true servanthood like? What is hard about it? What is easy about it?
- ✦ Does all service look alike?
- ✦ How can we affirm/uphold one another in our life of servanthood?
- ✦ How has this group been called to serve?
- ✦ How have you as individual women been called to serve? How can your gifts be brought together for a greater service?

- ✦ Discuss as a group the ways your Women’s Ministry group has been called to serve both locally and in a wider sense. What steps are you taking to nurture that call to service? How have you “kept your eyes open” to see where other needs can be fulfilled by you as Phoebe suggests in her monologue?

- ✦ Brainstorm again ways to enhance the service you are already fulfilling, as well as other ways in which your group and individual women within your group can further serve Christ in the world.

PRAYER:

Close in prayer, thanking God for allowing us to be His hands and His feet. Ask for God’s help and guidance in seeking opportunities to serve both as individual women and as a Women’s Ministry group.

Why did Paul tell Timothy to take *just a little* wine for the sake of his stomach? [*Pause for effect.*] Because it was *Paul's* bottle.

Trust me. Paul would think that is funny. I know he would. My name is Priscilla, and Paul and I are dear friends.

I could offer to teach you how to make tents, but I've chosen instead to bring my offering of exhortation.

I hear that most of you have less fear of dying than of public speaking. I do not pretend to stand before you as confident as I may seem. I am always nervous speaking before a group - always. But, I also love it. Aquila was shocked when he first heard me preach a sermon. He had no idea that I could do such a thing. To be completely honest, I had no idea either. However, as I stood there talking about the love of Jesus Christ and salvation brought to us through him, I felt for the first time as if I were completely at home. I could never explain it. I only know that I am called to it. And, between you and me, I am a gifted preacher.

Apollos was a good student. It took him a while to get the meat of the message correct, but he was a great preacher. It also took him a while to have ears to hear what I was teaching him, but Aquila helped him to better understand that of the two of us, I am the one with this gift. Aquila keeps me on track; he helps to keep the church organized. We each have different gifts, you see.

So, Paul and I had a great deal of fun spreading the Gospel to as many people as we could. I'll share a little known fact with you. We were somewhat competitive about how often we were asked to speak. It was a friendly competition, but I so delighted in sending him a note every time I was invited to preach. Paul instead sent me letters with glowing reviews attached. Modesty was never one of his gifts!

So I'm an exhorter, a preacher, and a person willing to stand before others to proclaim the Good News of Jesus. I do not fall into the 75% of the population who are terrified to do such a thing. Neither do I fear death. I am a disciple of Jesus Christ, the Messiah, and because he died, was buried, and then resurrected, I know that my physical death is a mere passage from this life into the glorious life – a life that includes being in the very presence of my Creator for all of eternity. This is my true gift. If my speaking can help others to see this, then I am honored to have that opportunity. Thank you.

Discussion Suggestions - Priscilla

In her monologue, Priscilla states that she is an “exhorter, a preacher, a person willing to stand before others to proclaim the good news of Jesus.” She, and her husband, Aquila, were tentmakers by trade, but also were missionaries in the truest sense of the word. They, along with Paul, spread the Gospel of Christ both at home and abroad – teaching, nurturing, and guiding others in God’s truth, so that they in turn could also spread the Good News.

Consider for a moment your faith journey –

- ✦ Who were the “Priscilla’s” in your life?
- ✦ Who were the people who taught you about Christ and led you to a relationship with Him?
- ✦ Discuss how you have followed their example of service and teaching and helped others in their faith journey.
- ✦ Who needs you to be their “Priscilla,” to teach them the way of Christ so that they might become strong in their faith and share the Good News with others?

Teaching and sharing with others the Good News of Christ does not necessarily mean that we must participate in public speaking, something with which many of us are uncomfortable. Much of what we teach others is by our example, *how* we live our lives. Probably as you discussed the questions above, you named many people who taught you about Christ simply by the way they lived their lives. Our words are important. Telling others about Christ is a crucial aspect of living a Christian life. However *living* those words is just as, if not more than, important in spreading the Good News of Christ.

PRAYER:

Dear God, we give thanks for all those who have come before us as teachers, leaders, and nurturers in our faith. Please help us to have the heart of Priscilla. Fill us with the desire to teach and help others truly understand Your love and Your saving grace. Help us to live our lives so that what we do speaks volumes to others about Your love for us. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

Greetings to you from Samaria. I bring to you the gift of evangelism. It is a gift that came upon me suddenly without any plans of my own.

I met him. I met Jesus face to face. It was absolutely the most important moment of my life. Up until that point, my life had left a lot to be desired. I won't go into all the details, but I found myself caught in a system that kept me from being able to move forward. I believe this system to be evil, but no one seemed to know a way out.

Have you ever had anyone speak to you and look into your eyes in such a way that you are crying before you know it and you really don't know why? He did that. He knew me. I mean he really KNEW me. He saw all the pain of all the years, of all the men who had taken advantage of my situation. He saw into that pain and he showed me a way out. This Jewish rabbi who should not have even spoken to me was the one person in my life who showed me that I could get out of that evil system.

I don't know if he bestowed upon me at that moment this gift for evangelism or if I had it all along. Perhaps I did and he just helped me to see that it was there. Perhaps it was there and he provided me with just enough courage to use it for the first time. But, it felt as if suddenly I had been given this gift. I have no idea how I was able to do the things I did.

I felt this zeal for his message like nothing I had ever experienced before. I would have told a camel had I come upon one! I ran. I ran and I told. I told about him, all he had taught me, all he had seen in me, all he had given to me, and all the ways in which he loved me. I told it all.

I don't pretend that it is easy. It requires opening myself up in ways that was once terrifying to me. Before he looked deep inside my spirit and still loved me, I would never have shared the things I now share with others. But, somehow through his love, I am able to tell others my story. That is what people want to hear. They want to hear about Jesus, but they want to know about my meeting him. They want to know MY story and where it intersects with HIS story. Sounds simple, but believe me, I know how difficult that can be.

All I can offer you is this assurance. You are not alone. Christ bestows this gift of evangelism, and Christ leads us in using it. Where has your story intersected with the story of Jesus? I've told you my story. Now, you go and tell yours.

Discussion Suggestions - Samaritan Woman

One can only imagine the Samaritan Woman's surprise when Jesus first asked her for a drink of water. In that time, it was uncommon practice for a Jew to even talk to a Samaritan, much less a male Jew to a female Samaritan! But, as always, it was a purpose-filled encounter on Jesus' part. He knew with whom he was dealing from the start.

The Samaritan Woman that encounters Jesus at Jacob's well was not a woman of prominence, nor was she special in any way. In fact, the Samaritan Woman had a personal history that could cause people to blush and led most to shun her from society. But she was chosen as the one who would spread the Good News to her people about this Messiah that she has just met.

This encounter between the Samaritan Woman and Jesus gives us hope and confirms to us that God will meet us where we are. God will seek us out as lost sheep and will restore us to the fold with no hint of condemnation. No matter what our personal histories may be, God comes to us with love, grace and redemption and gives us the overflowing living water. What is our response to be?

The Bible commands us to be witnesses of our faith. Discuss the following questions in your group:

- ✦ Do you find it difficult to share your faith with others? Why or why not?
- ✦ What encourages you to share your faith with those whom need to hear it?
- ✦ What are the obstacles you have faced in sharing the Gospel with others? How have you overcome those obstacles?
- ✦ When you hear the word *Evangelism* what comes to your mind? What emotion does it stir within you? Does it bring to mind an image of blindly knocking on doors with a prepared speech, or an image of teaching, guiding, and directing in a loving manner others in the way of Christ?

PRAYER:

In your closing prayer, thank God for giving each of us the gift of evangelism, in whatever manner it may be. Ask God to give us guidance so that we may effectively tell others about Christ's saving grace so that they may truly understand how much God loves them. Remember in your prayer our missionaries both at home and abroad and the work that God has set before them.

I am more accustomed to others making offerings to me, I must admit. Being the mother of a king does have its advantages. I wasn't sure I would even have anything to offer until I thought of Lemuel. That is my son's name.

He was schooled by the best of the best, of course. But even with the best education that money could buy, I found that there were things that only I could teach him. I wanted him to be a good *man*, not just a good king. I wanted him to learn how to serve with righteousness reaching out to those in poverty and distress. And, so I offer you what I gave to him – instruction.

I schooled him at home in the ways of wisdom. I helped him to know how to be a good king with a good wife, and how to be a good man. I am good at giving instruction. I even created an acrostic to help him remember what I taught – that is I wrote a poem that instructs him in the ways of the virtuous woman and each line begins with a letter following the order of the Hebrew alphabet. He picked it up so quickly that he began making his own acrostics to help him remember things.

You have probably heard my acrostic translated in many ways. My instructions for finding a wife have included words like “virtuous,” “capable,” “perfect,” and “good.” In my original language, I called her, “a woman of worth.”

Who among us is perfect? Who would be comfortable calling ourselves virtuous? Capable? Sometimes. Good? Yes, I hope. But, a woman of *worth*, that really means something to me.

And, that word, “worth,” generally is only applied to our male counterparts. I wanted Lemuel to understand that women are just as worthy as men. We may have different kinds of gifts, but we are just as worthy. I would like to instruct everyone on that point!

Did you know that the word for “woman” and “wife” is the same word in Hebrew? You can understand, then, that for me being a good wife was the same as being a good woman. I know not everyone is called to be a wife. I often wonder now if we should create a new word for woman – a word that truly recognizes the worth of half of God's human creation.

There were things that I shared with Lemuel that were private. These things would have gotten me into trouble had others known. I explained the ways of the world are not always the ways of wisdom, that women are not mere possessions of men to be placed on a bargaining table for kingdoms. My God did not create me for such as that. And, while I could not change the world, I believed I could change my son who then could make a difference. I instructed him as best I could. I leave the rest to God.

Discussion Suggestions - The Virtuous Woman

- ✦ When we think of someone who has the gift of instruction, who typically comes to mind? Invite the women to name these people out loud (Example: teachers, pastors, parents, doctors, etc.) Almost everyone at some point in their life instructs others in how to do something.

In our monologue today we hear from King Lemuel's mother about the ways she instructed her son to become a good and wise man and king. One of the areas in which she instructed him was what to look for when seeking a wife, a virtuous woman.

Many of us ladies read Proverbs 31:10-31 as a measure of what we should be as a wife and mother. I would venture to say that many of us feel inferior upon reading those verses for we probably fall short in some aspects of being this "virtuous woman."

Instead of reading it in terms of how we should be all the time, look at the words instead as encouragement to us as to how we could be if we were to place God above all else in all we do, to be "a woman who fears the Lord" (verse 30).

King Lemuel's mother writes these things to her son in the form of an acrostic poem, using each letter of the Hebrew alphabet at the beginning of each line. Have your group write an acrostic poem using one (or more!) of the ideas below:

- ✦ Using the alphabet or your group name (Joy Circle, First C.P. Church CPWM, etc) describe your group and how your group serves God. Publish it in the church newsletter, bulletin, post it on the bulletin board, etc.
- ✦ Collect the names of all the high school age (or graduating senior, etc) girls in your congregation. Using their names write an acrostic poem that encourages and instructs them in their walk with Christ. Make sure each girl receives a copy of the poem you've created for her.
- ✦ If you have women who are no longer able to come to Women's Ministry meetings due to health, write an acrostic poem of encouragement and appreciation for them using their names. Again, be sure to give them a copy.

PRAYER:

Close with a sentence prayer, inviting each woman to take a turn saying a short prayer of thanksgiving for the instructors in their lives who have taught them how to be the hands and feet of Christ.