The Heart of Jesus
Women in the Gospel of Luke
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**INTRODUCTION**

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Introduction

Christ’s coming to earth brought new life, sure hope and great joy to all believers—women included!

Although first century Judaism was much more supportive of women than most of the rest of the world, it was nevertheless what we would consider a chauvinistic society. Women were protected but without rights; respected but without autonomy.

Then Christ came, and the Light of the World turned the light on for women!

In a culture where women were not sent to school, Jesus encouraged them to learn. He included them in His special circle of followers—something totally unheard of at that time. He treated women with courtesy and respect, regardless of their social status, former sinful lifestyle, background, or place of residence. He touched them to heal them, and they touched Him, an act that, in the case of the woman with the flow of blood, made Him ritually unclean. Motivated by their need, He did some of those healings on the Sabbath, a practice that endangered His life. He honored mothers by providing for His own and performing the first recorded miracle in response to her request.

Jesus cared about widows, who often faced a life of poverty, and He restored the life of son of the Widow of Nain without her even asking. He prevented abuse of women and had compassion on one who was crippled. Before healing her, He brought her to the front of the synagogue, even though women were required to stay in the back.

Jesus spoke to women in public, and after His resurrection, He chose a woman, Mary Magdalene, to go and tell the others that He was alive! Women were the first to see Him after He rose from the dead, the first to touch Him, and the first to be commissioned as evangelists of this glorious news.
In His heart, words and actions, Jesus accepted, affirmed, encouraged, and elevated women as partners in sharing the Gospel and serving in His Name. Nowhere does this come through more clearly than in the Gospel of Luke where almost every incident or parable involving a man is balanced with one about a woman.

In The Heart of Jesus, we look at women in Luke’s Gospel to discover more about Jesus—to learn how He views us today, how He wants to relate to us, how He encourages and enables us to become all that He created us to be.

But this book does more than talk about Jesus and women—it delves into the background of Biblical women to understand what life was like for them. How did they live? How did they worship? What was it like for Elizabeth to be barren and then have a baby in her senior years? For Mary to become miraculously pregnant out of wedlock? For Anna to spend day and night in the Temple, waiting to see the Savior? For women to be healed, to have children restored to life, to accompany Jesus as He taught, to watch Him die an excruciating death, and then to be the first to see Him alive again?

What was it like to “go and tell” such marvelous news? That’s a directive that Christ gives to women (and men) today too, one for which He sends His Holy Spirit as our enabler.

What does this mean for us? To help and motivate us, The Heart of Jesus provides ideas for parenting, mentoring, dealing with loss, advocating for people with disabilities, sharing the Gospel in our community, and serving those in need in the name of our compassionate, forgiving, loving, amazing Lord and Savior!

May you be blessed and encouraged as you read it!

—Marlys Taege Moberg
Chapter ONE

Elizabeth

Family Member, Friend, and Mentor

And [Elizabeth and Zechariah] were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years. Luke 1:6–7

[Elizabeth to Mary:] “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy.” Luke 1:42–44

My son-in-law, Marshall, was born on my wedding day. Whenever I think of this, I marvel at how intimately God is at work in our lives. As I walked down the aisle to pledge my love to my waiting groom, the Lord was already providing a husband for our daughter Lauren, who would
not even be conceived for more than two years.

In college, Lauren met a young man named John, and they became engaged. His father was a highly respected Christian doctor whose specialty was developmental disabilities. By that time, I was working at Bethesda Lutheran Home in Watertown, Wisconsin, a residential training and care center for more than six hundred people with mental and physical disabilities. We were seeking a staff doctor.

After learning of the need through Lauren’s connection with their family, John’s father became Bethesda’s first full-time medical director, a position he filled admirably until his retirement and with great benefit to the residents. About the time he accepted Bethesda’s job offer, Lauren and John broke their engagement, and each went on to eventually marry someone else. In Lauren’s case, Marshall.

Although we may not recognize it at first when God is at work, His timing is always perfect and His will is accomplished. Through all the events of life, His purpose is ultimately and always achieved. The Creator’s action in the life of Elizabeth gives us a picture of that perfect planning.

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The Calamity of Childlessness

Elizabeth’s life beautifully demonstrates our Lord’s intimate love and care, but that care wasn’t always so apparent early in her marriage. In those days, most women’s sphere of influence was limited to the home. A woman’s primary vocations were wife and mother. Children were then, just as they are today, a blessing of God (Genesis 49:25, Deuteronomy 30:9). God “opened the womb” so a woman could conceive (Genesis 29:31). Because barrenness could result as a consequence of sin, childlessness carried a stigma, regardless of the circumstances (compare Leviticus 20:20–21; Deuteronomy 28:15, 18). Bearing children was so
critical to maintaining the family heritage that barren wives like Sarah and, later, Rachel (Genesis 16:1–16; 30:3–7) gave their maidservants to their husbands in order to conceive an heir. As Rachel said to Jacob, “Give me children, or I shall die!” (Genesis 30:1).

With all that in mind, imagine Elizabeth’s sorrow over the years. Both she and her husband, Zechariah, were members of the tribe of Levi, the tribe charged by God to lead His people in matters of faith. She was the daughter of a priest, and her husband was a priest. Moreover, both were “righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord” (Luke 1:6). Through their early years together, they must have held hopes for God’s blessing. But as the years passed and they remained childless, they may have begun to wonder if the Lord might be punishing them instead.

How easily God’s children forget that God’s timing is not our timing. The apostle Peter reminds us, “With the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day” (2 Peter 3:8). When days lengthen into years, we can rest on God’s promise: “In the time of my favor I will answer you” (Isaiah 49:8 NIV).

When Luke introduces us to Zechariah and Elizabeth, they are senior citizens, “advanced in years” (Luke 1:7). In light of their long wait for “the time of [His] favor,” it’s interesting to note that Zechariah means “Yahweh remembers,” while Elizabeth means “the oath of God.” They are about to learn that God has chosen them for a high honor indeed! Their son, the son of their old age, will be the forerunner of His Son.
Priestly Duties and Blessings

Both Zechariah and Elizabeth descended from Aaron, the priestly division of the tribe of Levi. God charged Aaron and the priests who followed him with teaching the people His will and law. They were also to be mediators, interceding for the people:

Aaron was set apart to dedicate the most holy things, that he and his sons forever should make offerings before the LORD and minister to Him and pronounce blessings in His name forever. 1 Chronicles 23:13

When Israel took possession of the Promised Land, the other eleven tribes received parcels of land as their inheritance. The tribe of Levi received no land. Instead, the Lord Himself was their inheritance (Deuteronomy 18:1; Joshua 13:14; 18:19–24). They received tithes of the produce and cattle the other Israelites brought to the Lord, and they also relied on the offerings (bulls, goats, lambs, doves, pigeons, and grain) brought to the central sanctuary in worship. The Levites also received forty-eight towns with pasturelands scattered throughout the land; thirteen of these towns were set aside specifically for Aaron’s descendants. This made it possible for many Levites to live among the other eleven tribes, teaching the Scriptures and resolving disputes that arose. This explains why Zechariah and Elizabeth lived in the “hill country” of Judah (Luke 1:39).

At the time of King David, the tribe of Levi included thirty-eight thousand men (1 Chronicles 23:3). David organized the tribe, assigning each family a specific role. The descendants of Aaron served as priests; the other Levites assisted the priests. They also served as singers, musicians, and preparers of the holy oils used in worship. They gathered wood and took care of the shewbread (cakes or loaves offered to God and always present in the temple). They
became gatekeepers, guards, keepers of the treasury, and cleaners of the temple (1 Chronicles 23).¹

The priests, all descended from Aaron, were divided into twenty-four groups, taking turns serving in the temple, week by week. Each group thus served only one week in twenty-four. All of the priests shared duties during the four weeks in which the nation celebrated the major festivals.

The details of the nation’s worship had not always been so formalized. Early in the history of God’s chosen people, it focused on sacrifices offered on outdoor altars. Then came more formal worship in the tabernacle (a portable tent) in the wilderness. Solomon built the first temple in Jerusalem. The Babylonian army destroyed it and carried the Jewish people into captivity in Babylon in 587 BC. There, the people worshiped in synagogues. When God brought His people home to Jerusalem in 538 BC, Zerubbabel led construction of a second temple.

Sacrifices were a primary focus of worship at the tabernacle and both temples, but they were never a feature of synagogue worship. In the synagogues, the people prayed, confessed their belief in the one true God, and received the Lord’s blessing. The synagogue leader—or sometimes, a guest speaker—would read from Old Testament scrolls and then explain the meaning of the day’s text while sitting up front, in the “Seat of Moses.” Then the people discussed what the passage of the day meant for them at that time. Men sat in the front and women at the back (or in the balcony in larger synagogues).

While Zechariah’s division was taking its turn at the temple, he was chosen by lot to burn incense on the altar designated especially for that purpose. This was a very special honor that normally happened only once in a lifetime. He must have thought again and again of how pleased and
joyous Elizabeth would be when he told her!

Incense was burned twice a day, morning and night, on the altar located in the Holy Place, just in front of the curtain that separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies. Incense consisted of a mixture of perfumes, spices (gum resin and aromatic mollusk shells), frankincense, and salt, all ground into a powder. It was treated as holy and never used by individuals for personal purposes (Exodus 30:34–38).

While the incense burned, the crowd of worshipers prayed outside in the temple court. The smoke of the incense pictured the prayers of God’s people ascending heavenward. It may also have served a secondary purpose of masking the odors of the burning flesh of sacrifices on the huge main altar. The bronze altar in Solomon’s temple was thirty feet square and fifteen feet high (2 Chronicles 4:1).

For four hundred years there had been only silence from the Lord. Not since the days of Malachi, Ezra, Haggai, and Nehemiah had the Israelites received a prophetic message. Although the Jews had prayed often for the promised Messiah to come, it is unlikely that anyone expected an answer on this particular day. After all, Zechariah, not the high priest, was on duty. A simple, rugged man from a rural town, he was not part of the Jerusalem elite.

Moreover, the second temple was undergoing remodeling by King Herod. This building, constructed by Zerubbabel, in no way compared with Solomon’s temple. Herod’s goal was to enlarge both the site and the building, to “bring it to perfection.” Seeking to gain popularity with the Jews, he wanted the bigger and better structure to be the “most glorious of all his actions.”

In the midst of this reconstruction, which began about 19 BC and took more than eighty years to complete, the
The angel brought startling news to the elderly Zechariah. The aged man and his wife would have a son, who was to be named John (meaning “God is gracious”). It’s a wonder the priest (and later, the postmenopausal Elizabeth) didn’t laugh in unbelief like Sarah. Their son was to be a Nazirite, dedicated to the Lord like Samson. Nazirites never drank fermented beverages or cut their hair, and they avoided corpses and graves. The angel also gave Zechariah this reassurance: “You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before the Lord” (Luke 1:14–15).

The angel also said he would be “filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before [the Messiah] in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just” (Luke 1:15b–17).

Wow! That was more than Zechariah could believe! Wondering if he was dreaming, he reminded Gabriel of how old he and Elizabeth were. A baby was almost impossible at their age! “How can I be sure of this?” he asked. Yet, Zechariah’s unbelief couldn’t stop God’s holy purpose. Neither can our own lack of faith derail God’s purposes of love in our lives.

Zechariah forgot, as we often do, too, that with God, nothing is impossible. Because of his unbelief, Zechariah lost his ability to speak until his son was born. How would he deal with it? How would we react if our husband lost his voice for nine months, especially when he’d had an amazing experience? We’d want to hear every last detail!
Apparently Zechariah did manage to communicate by signing and writing. What would he have used for his messages? For permanent manuscripts, clay tablets, papyrus, and expensive parchment were used. More likely, Zechariah used the same implements schoolboys used: small, wax-coated wooden tablets with a pointed stylus made of metal or bone. One end of the stylus was blunt for erasures and the other, sharp for writing.

When his time of service in the temple was completed, Zechariah returned home, and soon, just as the angel had said, Elizabeth became pregnant.

Nevertheless, the happy couple waited to share their good news. They were past the normal years of childbearing. A premature announcement could bring on unwelcome laughter and gossip from family and friends. Perhaps for other reasons, too, Elizabeth remained in seclusion for five months. Was she troubled with morning sickness? Was she caring for Zechariah, who might not have wanted to venture out in his speechless condition? Did she simply need extra rest because of her age? (Some Bible scholars think she was at least sixty years old, possibly seventy or more. Scripture does not tell us.) Perhaps in the early months, Elizabeth did not want to face the ridicule and pity of her neighbors who may have thought her delusional to believe she was expecting a baby so late in life.

We cannot know, but whatever the case, Elizabeth demonstrated her faith during this time by praising God and exclaiming, “How kind the Lord is! ... He has taken away my disgrace of having no children” (Luke 1:25 NLT). It would have been so easy for her initially to doubt Gabriel’s message, as Zechariah had. Instead, she trusted and acknowledged: “The Lord done this for me” (Luke 1:25 NIV).
Noting the various translations of Luke 1:25 gives us a deeper understanding of what Elizabeth endured in her childlessness. She praised God who took away “my reproach among men” (KJV), “my shame among the people” (NIRV), and “my disgrace” (NLT). Now at last she could rejoice!

No doubt her happiness increased when Mary came to visit. During the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, the angel Gabriel made another appearance, this time to a younger woman, with an even more amazing piece of news. Mary, a virgin, was to become the mother of the Son of God! The angel’s message included the fact that Elizabeth also was expecting a child.

Despite her thrilled acceptance of her new role, Mary was just a teenager with many questions and no experience in mothering. In that society, girls could be married as young as age 12, but most were probably 15 or 16. A girl’s immediate family could ostracize her if the baby in her womb was not fathered by her betrothed, and Joseph could legally have had her stoned to death. Stoning was not uncommon in those days. Yes, in time, the angel did inform Joseph, but no angel spoke to her parents or the rest of the family. We can imagine that many people would have gossiped about the “story Mary cooked up” to cover her immorality!

**Mentoring Needed**

Mary must have been bursting to discuss all this with someone who would understand, someone who could advise and encourage and rejoice with her. Elizabeth, with the wisdom of years and also miraculously expecting for the first time, was a logical mentor.

Mary quickly prepared and hurried to Elizabeth’s
home. Scholars believe that Zechariah and Elizabeth lived in Hebron, the only city given to the tribe of Levi in Judea. Hebron was twenty-five miles south of Jerusalem and about one hundred miles from Nazareth, where Mary lived—a journey of three to five days.

How did she travel? We don’t know. Most people walked. Some rode donkeys. It would have been unsafe for her to travel alone, so she may have joined a caravan journeying in the same direction. Today we don’t arrive for a three-month visit unannounced, but in Bible times (before the advent of the telephone, E-mail capabilities, or even postal service), relatives and other visitors were usually welcomed whenever they arrived. Family mattered, and extra space would always be found for anyone related by blood.

For Elizabeth at this time, Mary’s arrival would have been an unexpected blessing. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth felt the baby in her womb joyously leap in greeting and recognition of the presence of the unborn Son of God. In a loud voice she exclaimed: “Blessed are you among women and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored that the mother of my Lord should come to me?” (Luke 1:42–43 NIV).

Feeling the movement of an unborn child is always so exciting and reassuring during pregnancy, but the baby’s leap had even deeper meaning. It indicated not only the life of her own baby, but the presence of the long-awaited Savior Himself in Mary’s womb! For Mary, Elizabeth’s exclamation was the first recognition, the first confession by another human being, that her baby was the Son of God! What a reassurance Elizabeth’s words must have provided for the pregnant virgin!

Here was a relative (either a cousin or an aunt; translations vary), a family member who understood. Here was
another mother-to-be who also recognized and rejoiced in the miracle that was occurring and who trusted the message of the angel. Here was a friend with whom she could discuss the changes taking place in her body, the forthcoming birth process, how to deal with the comments and advice of neighbors, as well as all the doubts and uncertainties human beings encounter as they face an unknown and unexpected God-ordained future.

Scripture encourages older women to teach younger women (Titus 2:3–5). As the devout wife of a priest and an older member of the tribe entrusted with sharing God’s Word, Elizabeth was well prepared to mentor Mary. Certainly Mary’s trust in the Lord was an encouragement to Elizabeth too.

Mary’s visit lasted three months. Scripture gives no indication as to whether she returned home before or after Elizabeth gave birth to John. Maybe she left before the baby came to give Elizabeth more peace and privacy. Maybe she stayed until afterward to assist with the birth and be better prepared through personal experience for what lay ahead of her.

Whatever the case, her time in Judea was undoubtedly a blessing for both women. How Mary and Elizabeth must have talked and listened and shared and rejoiced and wondered about the miracles taking place. At last Elizabeth would have a baby, a son who would be “great before the Lord,” who would “be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb,” who would have the “spirit and power of Elijah,” and who would bring many people back to God (Luke 1:15–17). And at last, the long-expected Savior would be born!
Family Important Then, Now

How much we, like Elizabeth and Mary, need companionship and understanding as we face unanticipated challenges in life, even when they bring unexpected blessings. We need someone to listen, to react, to comfort and encourage us. We all need a home and family circle that provides a safe place where we are accepted for who God made us to be. In many cultures, close-knit families have met that need. In centuries past (and in some cultures today), people lived their entire life in the same community, often with three generations in the same house.

When I was a child, it was common for relatives to just drop in for a visit. Sunday afternoons especially were a time for going to Grandma’s house or stopping at the home of a relative or neighbor. Today, with many living in gated communities or high-rise apartments and condos, visits are infrequent and scheduled. Even children make play dates. Maintaining close relationships with relatives scattered around the globe is often difficult. We may not see some family members for years. In such situations, it’s important to make a special effort to remain in touch. Fortunately, paper is cheap, readily available, and easily mailed, unlike the expensive parchment of ancient times or the clumsiness of wax and clay tablets. Even better, we have the blessing of phones and E-mail. Whether our children, siblings, or parents are in Europe, Africa, India, or the Middle East, we can hear their voices, learn of their needs, and rejoice in their successes.

Although people in Bible times lacked the advantages of communication and transportation we enjoy, relatives and neighbors were usually involved at every stage of life. When Elizabeth’s son was born, Luke reports, her neighbors and relatives “rejoiced with her,” and “on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child” (Luke 1:58–59).
A healthy delivery to an older woman would have been cause for celebration indeed.

In the ceremony of circumcision, a flint knife was used to cut off the foreskin of a male’s penis. As the American Bible Society Web site explains, “Circumcision is first mentioned in the Bible in connection with God’s promise to make Abraham’s descendants a great nation and to give them a land they could call their own. In return, Abraham and his descendants were to obey God. To show that they were keeping their promise to God, every male descendant of Abraham was to be circumcised (Genesis 17:1–14).” For Jews at the time of Christ, circumcision carried as deep a significance as Baptism carries for Christians today.

In Jesus Christ, God’s covenant with Abraham was fulfilled. In Christ’s cross, our sins are forgiven. We are incorporated into the family of God by Baptism. Paul writes in Colossians: “In Him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with Him in baptism and raised with Him through your faith in the power of God, who raised Him from the dead” (2:11–12 NIV).

**His Name Is John**

Had they followed the custom of the day, Zechariah and Elizabeth would have named their first son after his father. All the neighbors assumed the baby would be called “Zechariah.” To their surprise, Elizabeth spoke up: “No; he shall be called John” (Luke 1:60). Obviously, Zechariah had communicated the angel’s message in detail to Elizabeth via his wax tablet. Obviously, too, Elizabeth believed her pregnancy was an amazing miracle as foretold by the angel, and not an accident or an anomaly.
The relatives persisted: “None of your relatives is called by this name” (v. 61). Not believing Elizabeth, they looked at the father and “made signs to [him]” (v. 62). But Zechariah wasn’t deaf! They didn’t need to make signs to him.

In response, Zechariah asked for his tablet. In affirmation of Elizabeth and to everyone’s astonishment, he wrote, “His name is John.” Immediately, the priest could talk! Filled with the Holy Spirit, he began praising God and prophesying. The Redeemer was on His way! He would deliver His people from their enemies (v. 74). And Zechariah and Elizabeth would experience special, personal joy:

> And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare His ways, to give knowledge of salvation to His people in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace. Luke 1:76–79

The word spread quickly; soon everyone throughout the hill country of Judea was talking about this amazing event. The Savior King was coming. His forerunner was already here!

God gives His faith-filled women today the same privilege He gave Elizabeth—that of responding to God with complete trust in His Word, faith in His promises, patience in view of His timing, and praise for His blessings. Like Elizabeth, we are called to be caring family members, good friends, and helpful mentors. And like her, we do this as our Lord, by His Spirit, empowers us.
Family and mentor are old words that have taken on expanded meanings today. Family in the Old Testament usually means people related by birth, adoption, or marriage. In Genesis 7:1, God told Noah, “Go into the ark, you and all your household, for I have seen that you are righteous in this generation.” In Genesis 46:27, seventy members of Jacob’s family went to Egypt. In the wilderness (Numbers 2:2), the Israelites had to “camp each by his own standard, with the banners of their fathers’ houses. They shall camp facing the tent of meeting on every side.” Because of Joshua’s promise to Rahab, her entire family was saved when Jericho was destroyed by the Israelites (Joshua 6:23). Some families, like that of Izrahiah, were very large (1 Chronicles 7:4 NIV): “According to their family genealogy, they had 36,000 men ready for battle, for they had many wives and sons.”

The scriptural use of the word family clearly indicates the human, biological, adoptive, and spiritual definition. Today, however, “family” applies to many different situations. We recognize the “nuclear family,” consisting of parents and children. But “family” can also be used to describe students living in the same college dorm, employees in a work group, or residents in a senior living community. It may include radio personalities who “talk with us” as we drive, TV stars who “come into our homes” on a nightly basis, and members of Armed Forces units who grow closer than brothers and sisters as together they endure battlefield hardships and dangers.

“Family” may also include people we don’t know personally. For example, when Rick and Carol Bernstein raised more vegetables than they needed in their Maryland home garden, they took the extras to a homeless mission. Although Rick made many trips with garden donations, he
felt something was missing from his acts of generosity—God! Deciding to read through the Bible in its entirety, he was struck by Christ’s statement that “as you did it to one of the least of these My brothers, you did it to Me” (Matthew 25:40).

In the process, God led Rick to become a Christian, and his life took on a whole new meaning. Feeling the need to do more for the members of his homeless “family,” Rick and Carol bought a two-hundred-acre farm. When his new neighbors learned what the novice farmer was doing, they willingly became mentors. He received additional advice from leaders of the Maryland Food Bank and the Mid-Atlantic Gleaning Network. With the help of church members, youth groups, and adult volunteers, over a million pounds of fresh produce was harvested and given away between 2004 and 2007.5

“Family” can also include friends from the past. A woman I had not seen for more than thirty years approached me at a recent Christian women’s conference. She and her husband had moved to Arkansas when his health declined after retirement. When he died, she returned to Milwaukee to “be near family.” She explained, “My daughter is in New York, one son is in North Wisconsin, and the other is in Arkansas! Nevertheless, I have family here—my church and my friends!”

That fits what we see in the New Testament, which adds a significant dimension to the word. Galatians 6:10 urges us, “Let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.” In Ephesians 3:14–15, Paul states, “For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named.” Hebrews 2:11 tells us, “He who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one source. That is why [Jesus] is not ashamed to call them brothers.”
Through the waters of Baptism, all believers have become part of the family of God! We are brothers and sisters of Christ. We are sons and daughters of the King—princes and princesses!

As members of the royal family, we have important responsibilities. We need to “be there” for our church members and other Christians when they are hurting or in need. God expects us to pray with and for them, to listen, to sympathize, to encourage, to care, to provide, to offer hospitality just as Elizabeth welcomed Mary . . . to treat them as family.

About ten years ago, my husband was sent to the Gaza Strip for a month to teach an intensive introductory sociology course to thirty-five students seeking a college degree in various disability services. (Audiologists, speech therapists, and other healthcare professionals were especially needed there because of numerous disabilities resulting from intermarriage with close relatives and from conflict injuries in Gaza.)

While there, he participated in a Christian Bible class. Noticing one of his students in attendance and seeing him struggle to read the Bible in English (a second language for him), my husband offered to get him an English-Arabic Bible so he could read it in his “heart” language. The young man declined: “No, because then my parents would know what I was reading.” His parents were Muslim, and they could murder him for leaving the family religion. Today, religiously divided families present a new challenge for us as mentors in the United States, where diversity of religions and cultures is rapidly increasing.
Mentoring Today

In years gone by, the term mentor evoked pictures of a learned man in a Roman toga counseling younger men. Today mentoring has gone modern. Mentors no longer need a toga or a title. Nor is mentoring restricted to men, as Elizabeth demonstrated.

Scripture identifies other female mentors. The wise woman of Abel (2 Samuel 20:18–22) mentored Sheba and the residents of Abel, thus saving her city and keeping the peace. Timothy’s mother and grandmother, Eunice and Lois, shared their faith with him (2 Timothy 1:5). In Titus 2:3–5, older women are urged to be an example to younger women, training them to be a good example of the Christian faith. Priscilla and Aquila mentored Apollos, a zealous missionary.

How are women doing it today? Their mentoring reaches beyond their nuclear families. A 2006 survey of Lutheran Women’s Missionary League (LWML) leaders in South Wisconsin discovered these examples:6

- One woman who works with confirmands, described her role as “loving, caring, encouraging, helping, agreeing and disagreeing, spending time with them, and crying and laughing with them.” Sometimes the tables are turned as teenagers teach parents and grandparents to master the Internet and computers or as young women with business experience help other women break the “glass ceiling” on the job.

- “Mentoring is helping someone develop an unutilized God-given talent,” said another survey respondent. “It means allowing them to fail and then helping them grow from that failure. Too many times we just do something for someone to make sure it gets done correctly and on time. Sometimes mentoring is
hard work because you have to nudge and encourage and then nudge and encourage some more, even when you know it would be so much easier just to do it yourself.”

• “A mentor is not a boss, but a friend,” added a third respondent. “Walking alongside, a mentor gently coaches when the need arises. She does not unload all [she knows] at one time and then sit back. She is available and makes contact when she hasn’t heard from her ‘mentee’ recently.”

• “Mentors recognize your interest in something, then water you like a plant so you develop and grow in your interest,” said a fourth woman. “They supply you with resources, materials and suggestions, advice and praise. They listen. They are patient. And, who knows, they might even love you!”

Elizabeth undoubtedly loved Mary. The older woman exercised the gift of hospitality and modeled trust and love in her Lord. Family mattered to her. So strong was her example that after the circumcision of her newborn son and the return of her husband’s voice, “The neighbors were all filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things” (Luke 1:65 NIV).

We may not realize every one of our hopes and dreams, but, like Elizabeth, we can nonetheless find comfort and joy by trusting in God’s promise of forgiveness and salvation. We may find ourselves surprised by the turn of events in our lives, but no matter where life takes us, we can be sure that our heavenly Father treasures each one of us as His precious daughters, sisters of His Son. He cares about our earthly cares and gives us life forever through faith in Jesus. His presence is sure; therefore, we can be sure we are forever secure.
When the circumstances of life cause us to doubt, we can encourage one another in the Lord who blessed and kept Elizabeth. When our circumstances catch us off guard, we can remind one another to remember all God did for Mary. God came to each of these women in His perfect time in His perfect way, to help and strengthen. And God comes to each of us as well—in His Word and in His Holy Supper. By the power of His Holy Spirit, our hearts leap for joy!

May our trust in our Savior, our sharing of the Good News, the example we set in our families, and our concern for the needs of the hurting people around us fill our towns, cities, and neighborhoods with awe. And may many come to Christ through our words and deeds of witness.

The Heart of Jesus as Shown in Elizabeth’s Life

Our all-powerful and merciful triune God, who created the earth, loves us and works through us so that His will is accomplished in His time and His way for the ultimate benefit of all.