

Poor, Young, and Pregnant: Mary's Advent



An Advent Devotion and Mission Project
Healthy Families, Healthy Planet Project
United Methodist General Board of Church & Society

2012



Introduction

Thank you for joining this unique venture in bible study and advocacy. You are now part of Healthy Families, Healthy Planet, a United Methodist initiative to ensure every birth is planned, healthy, and a cause for celebration. Started in 2010 through a generous grant from the United Nations Foundation, Healthy Families, Healthy Planet works to educate and mobilize people of faith on the importance of improving global maternal health and ensuring universal access to family planning. The project is housed in the United Methodist General Board of Church & Society.

The goal of this single-session study is to connect our the stories of our biblical mothers, focusing specifically on Mary the mother of Jesus, with the realities that mothers around the world continue to face today. The study is composed of prayers, Scripture, facts about maternal health, questions for discussion, and a birthing kit project. Together these elements will engage your heads, hearts, and hands in reflecting on the season of Advent in what I hope will be a new way.

Thank you for taking part in this important work. At any time, feel free to contact me with questions, comments, and requests.

With gratitude and blessings for a hope-filled Advent.

Katey Zeh, M.Div
Project Director, Healthy Families, Healthy Planet
kzeh@umc-gbcs.org

Mary's Advent

Opening Prayer

God of all hope, we come to you with expectant hearts, inquiring minds, and open hands. Guide us through this time of reflection on Advent and Mary, the mother of Jesus. May our time together deepen our awareness of the difficulties that the mothers of our past encountered and that the mothers of today continue to face. Remind us of your call to be partners with you in creating a more just world. In the name of Christ's Advent, we pray. Amen.

Scripture Reading—"A Double Miracle: Healthy Mom, Healthy Baby"

Luke 2:1-20

Reflection

For as much as the season of Advent is about expectation, waiting, and preparation for the birth of the Christ child, we know very little about Mary's labor and delivery of him. Our biblical tradition leaves many narrative gaps to be filled. The nativity story found in the first two chapters of Luke begins with the annunciation and skips straight to the birth. How easily we can forget Mary's own Advent season—her nine months of pregnancy.

Isn't it strange, that in the celebration of the child, we so often have forgotten the mother?

While we cannot know all of her circumstances, we do know that Mary was young, poor, and resourceless. Her pregnancy could not have been an easy one. We know from other stories in our biblical tradition, like those of Rachel (Genesis 31) and Phinehas's wife (1 Samuel 4) who die in childbirth, that giving birth to new life could cost a woman her own.

But these stories aren't just ancient history. Many women today are suffering in very much the same way that our biblical mothers did. Every two minutes somewhere in the world a woman dies from complications during pregnancy or childbirth. Many of these mothers are just like Mary—young, living in poverty, and lacking a clean place to give birth.

In rejoicing over the miracle of God incarnate, we have overlooked the Christmas miracle of Mary's safe labor and delivery.

This Advent season I challenge us all to remember Mary, and to reflect on the risks of her call by God. May we remember all of the mothers throughout history whose labors and births prepared the way for the coming of the Christ. And may we also remember the Marys of today—the women who face great challenges in bringing new life safely into this world. Let us work together for a world where no woman loses her life giving life.

(From “*Sex and the Church—Mary’s Advent*,” Katey Zeh, *Faith in Action*, December 12, 2011.)

Quick Facts about Maternal Health

- Globally, **every two minutes** complications during pregnancy or childbirth.
- Nearly all of the **287,000 maternal deaths** each year occur in the developing world.
- Annually **4 million infants die within a month of being born**. When a mother dies, it dramatically increases the risk of death for her baby.
- **Women account for nearly half of all people living with HIV** and are disproportionately affected by new infections. This could be reduced if women and men had access to contraception.
- When a woman **delays pregnancy at least two years** after the birth of her last child, she is much more likely to have a healthy pregnancy and birth.
- **Healthy mothers have healthy babies**. Spacing children lowers the risk of infant mortality. Unmet need for family planning affects many women and families.
- Worldwide there are more than **222 million women** who would like to avoid pregnancy but lack a family planning method.
- As a result, there are more than **80 million unintended pregnancies each year**. More than half result in abortion, many of them under illegal and unsafe conditions.

Investing in family planning reduces unintended pregnancy and increases health for women and children.

Questions for Discussion

1. We know very little about Mary's labor and delivery of Jesus. What are some of the significant details that were not included in the nativity story?
2. While we do not know the exact circumstances of Mary's birth, we know that she did not have access to an ideal environment for her labor. How might this have made her delivery more difficult and even dangerous?
3. Every two minutes somewhere in the world a woman dies during childbirth. Nearly all of these deaths occur in the developing world. What connections can we make between the biblical story of Mary and the stories of women today who struggle to have healthy births and pregnancy?
4. How do we honor the lineage of women who have birthed us, not only as individuals but also as a community of faith?

Closing Prayer

Creator God, you are our source of hope in what often feels like a hopeless world. Make your desires—for justice, health and well-being for all of your children—our desires. Empower us to work for healthy mothers, healthy children, and healthy families around the world. Amen.

Mission Activity: UMCOR Birthing Kit Assembly

Birthing kits provide the essential items to promote a safe, clean delivery and to encourage good aftercare. Using a birthing kit can **double a woman's chance of surviving the birth**. The United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR) distributes these kits to communities around the world, helping to create a safer world for women and their children.

On the next two pages, you will find the exact materials to be included, instructions for assembly, and instructions for delivering the kits to UMCOR.

UMCOR Birthing Kit Assembly Instructions

Birthing Kit Items to Include

Value: \$8 per kit

- **1 small bar soap 1 oz. to 2 oz. size**
Do not remove from original packaging
Small bars such as those found in hotels are acceptable
- **1 pair latex, surgical or thin rubber gloves**
Gloves are not required to be sterile
- **1 square yard of clear plastic sheeting**
Must be 4 mil thick
Plastic trash bags and shower curtains are not acceptable.
- **3 - 12 inch long pieces of cotton string**
Must be clean
Secure the pieces of string by bundling and tying them together.
No yarn please
- **1 single edge razor blade**
Must be covered in paper or cardboard to keep it from causing injury.
Regular shaving razors are not acceptable
- **2 receiving blankets 30"x 30" or 32"x 32" size**
No thermal or fleece blankets please
- **1 plastic bag one gallon size sealable bags only**

Assembly Directions

Fold the plastic sheeting and blankets so they will fit easily into the plastic bag. Lay the loose items on top of the blankets and plastic sheeting. Slide all items into the plastic bag. Squeeze as much air out of the bag and then seal it.

Important Notes

- All items must be new.
- Do not wash any of the items as they will be considered used.
- All emergency kits are carefully planned to make them usable in the greatest number of

situations. Since strict rules often govern product entry into international countries, it is important that kits contain only the requested items – nothing more.

- **DO NOT** include any personal notes, money or additional material in the kits. These things must be painstakingly removed and will delay the shipment.

Packing Kits

- **Box Weight.** Each packed box cannot exceed 66 pounds.

Shipping Kits

1. Complete 2 packing lists—one for your records and one to put on the shipping box.
2. Paste the shipping label/ packing list on the outside of each box you send. The shipping list helps the depot to quickly process kits.
3. **Processing & Shipping Costs:** Please enclose an envelope containing at least \$1
4. Send to either UMCOR depot below—they supply shipments from both locations.

UMCOR Sager Brown Depot

P.O Box 850 131 Sager Brown Road

Baldwin, LA 70514-0850

Contact For Help 1-800-814-8765

UMCOR West Office and Depot

1479 South 700 West

Salt Lake City, UT 84104-1605

Contact For Help 1-801-973-7250