

A Cycle of Living

A prayer reflection on the life cycle of a woman

For this prayer, you will need one narrator, one reader for the scriptural passages, and five readers for the life cycle stories. Try to get readers of various ages to correspond approximately to the five stages of life described in the reflection. However, the reflection is also effective using readers who are all the same age.

To use this reflection effectively within a context of prayer, create a simple prayer space using brightly colored cloth, a plant or flowers, an icon, a candle, and whatever else will create a prayerful atmosphere. The following are some suggestions for enhancing the prayer reflection:

- Ask people who are gifted in drama to memorize and act out each of the five stories.
- Accompany the readings in each section with slides or video footage of girls and women of various ethnicities and cultures.
- After each of the five readers of the life cycle stories has finished, have her add a symbol of that stage of life to the prayer space. For example, the reader of the girl child's story might add a jump rope or balloons to the prayer space; the reader of the teen girl's story might add a diary or a backpack, and so forth.
- Conclude the prayer with an individual blessing for each girl and woman present, such as "Blessed are you among women!" or "Your soul magnifies the Lord." Lead the group in saying the "Hail Mary" to close the time of prayer.

The following are some ideas for using this reflection in various settings:

- Use the reflection as a prayer during a day of reflection for mothers and daughters.
- Do a class project on the status of women and girls in various cultures in the world, including your own. Explore the injustices that they face because of their gender: physical and emotional abuse, artificial limitations, unfair employment practices, limited rights, media exploitation, and so forth. Use this reflection to conclude the project.
- Ask the girls to rewrite in modern language the words to the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55). They can do this together or in small groups. Conclude the reflection by having the girls read their versions of the biblical prayer.
- Follow each section with a discussion about the struggles that girls and women face at the age described in that section. Brainstorm ways that

the group can support girls and women. For example, they might brainstorm ideas like the following:

- Lead a day for younger girls that explores the beauty, joys, and even the struggles of being female. Tell stories of girls who have made a difference. Do a prayer that celebrates the feminine in all of humanity.
- Adopt an elder and meet with that person regularly for purposes of sharing faith and learning from each other.
- Shadow a young adult woman for a day or two, learning as much as possible about that person's ideals, motivations, and commitments to justice.

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Created for The Voices Project by Carole Goodwin, Louisville, Kentucky

Narrator: My being proclaims the greatness of the Lord,
My spirit finds joy in God my savior,
For God has looked upon me, a lowly servant, and
All ages to come shall call me blessed.

(Adapted from Luke 1:46-48.)

Reader 1: People were bringing their little children to Jesus to have him touch them, but the disciples were scolding them for this. Jesus became indignant when he noticed it and said to them: "Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them. It is just to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. I assure you, whoever does not accept the reign of God like a little child shall not take part in it."

(Adapted from Mark 10:13-16.)

Reader 2: A young girl's story:

I am a girl child. I am lovely and confident, giggly and carefree, and very, very vulnerable. I am your daughter, granddaughter, niece, and neighbor. I love life and find great joy in colors and fabrics and music and dance. But beware, I need you. I need protection. I am in danger of exploitation, oppression, disease, and poverty. I am filled with hope. I am an innocent and a faithful child.

Narrator: We must pay attention and be filled with care for the children in our lives. We know that in our world little girls are far more at risk of danger than their brothers are. May we never forget to pray for them and to advocate for their needs in our complex society.

Reader 1: On the third day they came upon their child sitting in the midst of the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. All who heard the comments of this young person were amazed. So intelligent! Great answers!

The child's mother came forward and said: "Why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been searching for you in sorrow!" "Why did you search for me? Did you not know that I had to be about this business?"

The child followed them to Nazareth and was obedient to them. Mary kept all this in her heart, and Jesus progressed steadily in wisdom and age and grace before God and others.

(Adapted from Luke 2:46-52.)

Reader 3: A teen girl's story:

I am half woman, half child. I believe I am on my way to great things. I often do my own thing. I don't ask permission; I just do it! I am filled with enthusiasm and sadness, energy and gloominess, smiles and tears. I am a living contradiction. I am not comfortable in my body, so look into my eyes. They express all my confusion and pain and happiness and excitement! I may try to push you away (or run away), but do not give up on me. I need you. I am on my search for God, for authority, for identity. Please celebrate my age—most people just hope I will grow out of it! There is a time for my sadness and my joy. Help me to see that. There is a season for everything, and I am ready to grow!

Narrator: In adolescence a girl can become an endangered species. She stands on the precipice of adulthood and is eager to join adults in their world of independence and autonomy. She could, and some do, falter and fall, plummeting into oblivion. We must walk with her, not for her, and accompany her growing years, despite their tumultuous threat to our own tranquility.

Reader 1: Let no one look down upon you because of your youth, but be a continuing example of love, faith, and purity to believers. Devote yourselves to the reading of Scripture, preaching, and teaching. Do not neglect the gifts you have received as a result of prophecy. Attend to your duties; let them absorb you. Persevere and bring salvation to yourself and to all who hear you.

(Adapted from 1 Timothy 4:12-16.)

Reader 4: A young adult woman's story:

I am woman! I have come into my own! I am competent and capable. I have so much to give and feel compelled to give it all constantly. The church needs me desperately! I have the desire to reach out! I feel the call of God to use my gifts for others. So I will give! I will serve!

And I will also challenge! The Gospel has become my soapbox. I have the courage to protest the School of the Americas. I have

the energy to build houses for Habitat for Humanity. I have the tenderness to rock and lullaby my first-born.

I do not need your protection; I need your companionship. I know the dangers. They are ever present as I weep with my sisters who experience domestic abuse and as I stand beside those who are hungry and homeless. I am ready to do the leading, so be ready to step aside. I choose to love and to serve in the name of Jesus.

Narrator: In young adulthood the search for spiritual connectedness is at its peak. A young woman examines the images of God, prayer ways, and institutionalized doctrine that have formed her beliefs. A young adult hungers for someone to mentor her into a deepening faith life. May the adult women among us take up that challenge.

Reader 1: Listen to me. Do not put God to the test, setting yourselves in the place of God. You cannot understand the depths of the human heart or grasp the workings of the human mind; how then can you fathom the depths of God?

A new hymn I will sing to God. O Lord, great are you and glorious, wonderful in power. Let your every creature serve you, for you spoke and they were made. You sent forth your spirit, and they were created.

So sing to God a new song, exalt and acclaim God's name.
(Adapted from Judith 8:11-12, 20; 16:13-14.)

Reader 5: An adult woman's story:

I look out among you and I see the fruits of my labor, my children, my convictions, my life of faith. I am proud to be a woman. I am glad to have been born female. I honor my gender. I am valuable and precious in God's sight and in the sight of this assembly. I love my family, my country, my church even though there are times when I am disappointed in their actions or behaviors or policies.

I believe in hope and in the greatness of our God. I believe there is a power in goodness that can overcome evil. I believe we never stand alone, because I believe that God walks beside us through the bad times and dances with us in celebration of our good times. I belong to God, and I have signed up for the long haul.

I am a woman of commitment, and I believe that God has called me, by name, to do God's work on this earth. I am here because I

am special to God and am needed to do jubilee justice. I am woman, and I am proud of it!

Narrator: An adult woman needs her sisters, other adult women, those younger and older. She needs them to companion her journey of faith and living. May we always extend an obvious sign of care-filled presence for those women who grace our circle of sisterhood.

Reader 1: Blest are you among women!

Naomi said to Ruth, her daughter-in-law, "Go back. Why should you stay with me? I am too old!" Another said to Naomi, "Blessed is the Lord who has not abandoned you, who has not failed you. God has provided. Do you not know there is one who will comfort and support you in your old age?"

Blest is she who trusts that the Lord's words to her will be fulfilled. Blest are you, Woman of God.

(Adapted from Ruth 1:11-12, 14-15; and Luke 1:42, 45)

Reader 6: An elder woman's story:

I am blessed. I am a woman of God. I have seen it all . . . the vulnerability of childhood, the contradictions and excitement of adolescence, the joys and convictions of young adulthood, and the commitment of adulthood. I am considered an elder, but I remember my yesterdays as if they were a minute ago. God has been so very good.

I am still very concerned with the world and how we as a society treat the oppressed, the marginalized, the "other." We must move toward non-violence in our homes, our communities, and our world. I believe the adage: "War is not healthy for children or any living creatures," because I believe in life, not death. I want my granddaughters to see the goodness of God in the goodness of others. So I join their march for a better world.

I feel the shadows growing as I face the winter years of my life. It is a good time, even though it is sometimes lonely and sometimes painful and sometimes fearful. I am still able to march and sing and dance, even though it is a bit more slowly than before. I love to join other women in the march of life. I know that I will soon see God face-to-face, and I am as giggly about that as a child. I know that the mark I leave will be held in esteem, because I am important to this world now and forever. I will march out of this

world loving God and all God's people. I am woman, and I am proud of it!