

A study guide to accompany the video The Morning Star of Wittenburg

by Catherine I. H. Braasch

This study guide was made possible by a grant from Katie's Fund, the Katharina von Bora Luther Endowment, supporting ministries of global sharing, living theology and leadership development through Women of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. It is designed to be used in one or more sessions as an accompaniment to the video produced by MOSAIC, the video magazine of the ELCA.

Opening prayer

Good and gracious God, by your Holy Spirit your servant Katharina von Bora Luther heard the good news of grace alone and followed your call to ministry in daily life as spouse, parent, provider of hospitality, steward and theologian. Send your Holy Spirit on us afresh today, that we too might seek your will, follow your call, and witness to your grace in our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Setting the stage ...

What caused Katharina von Bora and her companions to flee their secure, clearly-defined future in an established, well-endowed monastery? To risk their futures, even their lives, by seeing and seeking the holy in daily life? These are important choices for people of the 21st Century, as well as for those of 16th Century Germany. Granted, options for service, particularly in the West, are greater now than 500 years ago, yet God's graceful call retains its power across the centuries. For Katharina von Bora and other women of the Reformation, life options were few and decisions were not usually theirs to make: Marriages would be arranged for many reasons, but romantic love was not generally among them. Entrance into religious orders – the dedicated life of prayer, study, chastity and obedience – might be arranged, sometimes with the young woman's consent, but at other times without it. Servitude could be the state of unmarried women as well as those whose husbands could or would not support them. Life as a beggar or in a brothel awaited those who did not have a husband or a religious community early in adulthood, personal wealth or family support in the event of abandonment, or financial means to enter a convent in widowhood.

As you meet Katharina von Bora Luther in the video, listen for themes that weave like strong threads through the tapestry of her life, from early childhood and convent school, to the cloister, servitude, marriage and widowhood.

Ask: 1. How did her early life experiences, and later the themes of the Reformation (grace alone, faith alone, scripture alone) shape her life? 2. What does this mean for women and girls today, in your context and around the world? 3. At what points does Katharina's story intersect with the Gospel story and with your own story?

Early childhood and education

Katharina was born into nobility, but not into wealth. Her early upbringing, beginning with birth and Baptism, would have been shaped by the church and social class into which she was born. Katharina's father was widowed and remarried when she was five years old. At that time Katharina was sent to the Benedictine nuns in Brehna to be raised and educated.

Ask: What strikes you about this time in Katharina's life?

For daughters of the nobility, convent schools prepared girls to be proper wives and mothers, or to become members of religious communities. At Brehna, a Benedictine house, the Rule of St. Benedict governed all aspects of daily life. Rigorous but not harsh in its daily discipline, the Rule was geared to giving direction, order, security and stability that would attract men (and later women) to choose Christ-centered lives in monastic community freely. Consider this portion of the Rule of St. Benedict:

Chapter 53.1: All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ, for he himself will say, "I was a stranger and you welcomed me." (Matthew 25:35)

Ask: 1. What does it mean to welcome all as Christ? For the one doing the welcoming? The one being welcomed? 2. How did welcoming become a key part of Katharina's later life as a woman of the Reformation?

The cloistered life

After five years with the Benedictines at Brehna, Katharina was sent to the Cistercian monastery at Nibschen. She stayed on the monastic path, took the veil of religion at age 16, and remained in the cloister for another eight years. Daughters of nobility who entered religious life led a disciplined life of prayer and study. The abbess, or superior of the community, saw to the well-being of the monastic community. Thus, women's leadership was exerted and tested on everything from spiritual life and scholarship to managing the monastery's properties, business relationships and lay retainers. Somehow, into the midst of this community, word came of a monk who was challenging the very premise on which monastic communities rested: that the monastic life was holier than that of the everyday lay person. Somehow, the monk's writings circulated among the nuns. Somehow, the freeing word of the Gospel freed a dozen or so nuns to follow that freedom beyond the cloister walls, knowing full well what they were risking in doing so. Katharina and the others were smuggled out of their convent – an act that could have resulted in death for the nuns and their accomplices had they been caught before reaching safety in Wittenberg.

Ask: How did life in the monastery prepare Katharina for life as Luther's spouse and partner?

Servitude between monastery and marriage

In Wittenberg, under Martin Luther's direction, homes and husbands were found for eight nuns who could not be returned to protective hands. The exception was Katharina who – we believe – for a time lived and served in the household of Louis Cranach the Elder, artist, local druggist and eventually mayor of the town. She fell in love with a student, only to have her suitor's plans for marriage blocked by his family. She would not settle for a less-than-satisfactory match, even if it meant staying single.

Ask: What can 21st Century people learn from 16th Century Katharina in this stage of her life?

Marriage

An ex-monk marries an ex-nun who is almost young enough to be his daughter. The sudden marriage is greeted with cheers as well as jeers, celebration as well as suspicion. The odds are against them, yet the marriage set an example almost unheard of in that day.

Ask: 1. What made this marriage different? 2. What made it work? 3. What can we learn from this couple?

The fourth verse of Martin Luther's famous hymn, A Mighty Fortress is our God, is especially moving when set into the context of Katharina's life with him: God's word forever shall abide, No thanks to foes, who fear it; For God himself fights by our side With weapons of the Spirit. Were they to take our house, Goods, honor, child or spouse; Though life be wrenched away, They cannot win the day. The Kingdom's ours forever! -- Hymn 229, Lutheran Book of Worship

Sing or read this hymn verse out loud. Image yourself as Katharina von Bora Luther singing it in worship in the daily routine of running the busy Luther household, a farm, a business as she read the letters Martin would write to her as she mourned the deaths of two children

Discuss what you find in this hymn verse for Katharina and for yourself as you contemplate each of these.

Ask: 1. What strikes you now about Katharina? 2. Was she an ordinary woman in extraordinary times, or an extraordinary woman in the face of ordinary 16th Century challenges for women?

Widowhood

Throughout their married life Luther remained at risk on two fronts: for what he taught as the Reformer, and his health had been weakened by early asceticism and complicated by a host of ailments.

When Luther died, Katharina was left a widow with children for six years until her accidental death.

Ask: 1. How did Katharina care for herself and her family after Luther's death? 2. What extraordinary step did Luther take to provide for his family?

Looking again at the hymn verse above, consider the same thought questions of yourself and as you imagine it was for Katharina as she thought back on her own journey through childhood, convent, the time of waiting for God's will in the matter of marriage as she mourned the death of her spouse and faced the prospect of widowhood as she faced her own death

Ask: 3. What were the weapons of the spirit in Katharina's life? 4. What does her example mean for women and men of the Reformation today? 5. Has Katharina's story changed your understanding in any way, and, if so, how?

Closing prayer

Your Word, O God, does abide forever. May the same Word, the Christ who dwelt in the hearts and home of Katharina and Martin Luther, dwell richly in us, that we may tell of your faithfulness to all generations. In Jesus' name. Amen.

"The Morning Star of Wittenberg" is available for \$19.95 from MOSAIC, the video magazine of the ELCA.

[Order by e-mail](#)

Call **800-638-3522 ext. 6009** to order your copy today!