



grow. pray. study.

December 9, 2018 *Preparing the Way for Christmas* “God is Gracious”

Scripture: Luke 1:57-64, 67, 76-79

When the time came for Elizabeth to have her child, she gave birth to a boy. Her neighbors and relatives celebrated with her because they had heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy. On the eighth day, it came time to circumcise the child. They wanted to name him Zechariah because that was his father’s name. But his mother replied, “No, his name will be John.” They said to her, “None of your relatives have that name.” Then they began gesturing to his father to see what he wanted to call him. After asking for a tablet, he surprised everyone by writing, “His name is John.” At that moment, Zechariah was able to speak again, and he began praising God.

Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied...

You, child, will be called a prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way. You will tell his people how to be saved through the forgiveness of their sins. Because of our God’s deep compassion, the dawn from heaven will break upon us, to give light to those who are sitting in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide us on the path of peace.”

Questions in this GPS marked with an arrow bullet point are particularly recommended for group discussion. Group leaders may add other discussion questions, or substitute other questions for the marked ones, at their discretion.

God brought peace to the lowly

MONDAY 12.10.18 Luke 1:46-50

Last week, we read Elizabeth’s greeting when Mary, pregnant with Jesus, came to visit her (cf. [Luke 1:39-45](#)). In Mary and Elizabeth’s culture, women were second-class citizens. But Mary responded to Elizabeth with a poetic expression of praise that said God had “looked with favor on the low status of his servant.” They were both living examples of that. God valued who they really were, no matter what their status in human society!

- In verse 46 Mary said, "With all my heart I glorify the Lord!" Mary’s first words to Elizabeth were a glowing expression of gratitude to God. In this season when we remember and celebrate the birth of God’s Son, Jesus Christ, who or what in your life are you thankful for? What aspect(s) of your life cause you to glorify the Lord with “all your heart”?
- Elizabeth and Mary rejoiced that God had blessed them. But that did not mean what we often think. Pastor Ginger Gaines-Cirelli wrote, “It was a blessing of purpose....of participation in what God was doing in the world. Her blessing brought hardship, confusion and grief, but it was still a blessing.” * Have you ever received a blessing that included hardship, confusion or grief? Are you willing to receive that kind of blessing?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, when I ask you to bless me or those I love, I realize that I usually want you to make our immediate lives easier. Teach me how to keep my mind and heart open to your more challenging blessings. Amen.

* Ginger Gaines-Cirelli, study note on “Blessed” in *The CEB Women’s Bible*. Nashville: Common English Bible, 2016, p. 1288.

God brought peace by humbling the powerful

TUESDAY 12.11.18 Luke 1:51-56

The second part of Mary's song showed that the effects of John's and Jesus' births went far beyond a couple of happy rural families. Pastor Adam Hamilton wrote that many of us "fail to realize how subversive, even revolutionary, Mary's song really was.... Mary's words should make us uncomfortable. They point to a concern God has for the poor, and a sense that the rich have received theirs already.... We have the obligation and calling to be used by God to 'fill the hungry with good things.'" *

- Mary's song alluded to Old Testament promises that God would deliver Israel from oppressors (Romans in her day). Mary was glad, not just to be a mother, but that through her son God would make real the promise of ultimately ending all the world's tyranny and evil. As we await evil's final destruction, can you think of ways in which the Christmas child's coming helped (and helps) reverse evil and oppression?
- In what ways are you rich or powerful? In what ways "lowly" or "hungry"? Are you willing to seek and accept help in any areas where your life may be "lowly"? Do any parts of Mary's song make you uncomfortable enough to actively use the ways you are rich and/or powerful to lift the burdens of those who are lowly and hungry, and not just to further enhance your own wealth and power?

Prayer: Lord God, I don't want you to have to pull me down or send me away empty-handed. Give me the wisdom to share what I have, not to hoard it just for myself. Amen.

* Adam Hamilton, *The Journey: A Season of Reflections*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011, pp. 87-90.

The birth of John the Baptist

WEDNESDAY 12.12.18 Luke 1:57-64

Remember that Zechariah couldn't speak because he had seriously doubted the angel's word that he and Elizabeth would have a son ([Luke 1:5-20](#)). However understandable we may find his skepticism, what God's messenger told him all came true. When Zechariah wrote that they would name the baby John, as the angel instructed, he was able to speak again.

- To most Hebrews, names were not just a nice-sounding tag. They believed a child's name forecast (in a sense, even prayed for) the child's life mission. Zechariah was a fine name—it meant "Yahweh [God] remembers." But the Hebrew *iehoanan* [John] (of which the Greek *Ioannes* was a short form) meant 'Yahweh is gracious,' an even better fit for John's message and mission. Has your name in any way shaped your life? What other influences have done that?
- Zechariah obeyed God and gave up the highly-prized privilege (see verse 61) of naming his son after himself. John's call was not to follow his father as a priest but to challenge those religious leaders. When grown, John's ministry pointed to someone greater, not to his own virtues or strengths. How did his father's surrender to God point the way for John's life mission? What inner qualities did Zechariah and John need to live out God's call without resentment or bitterness? How can you nurture those qualities in your life?

Prayer: King Jesus, Zechariah and his son John focused on bringing praise and glory to you, not themselves. Keep developing the same spirit in me. Amen.

"The Lord's power was with him"

THURSDAY 12.13.18 Luke 1:65-66

Luke said "everyone throughout the Judean highlands talked about what had happened." Today we might say there was "a lot of buzz" about John's birth. The aged priest struck dumb after offering incense at the Temple, the visibly pregnant woman all the neighbors knew couldn't have children—in a relatively small

town, those things would attract a lot of attention. Then the baby was born, and as soon as the father and mother agreed on a surprising name, Zechariah could speak again! Of course people talked.

- “Those who hear are interested but still have questions about what it means. This is a pattern in Luke ([Luke 3:15, 4:22, 5:26](#)), who distinguishes being amazed from having faith.” * Faith is about “what it means,” not just about whether something or someone is amazing. What helped you move from “Jesus is amazing” to having faith in what Jesus' life, death and resurrection mean for your life and the life of the world you live in?
- When John was born, many Israelites grieved that there were no more prophets (e.g. the historical intertestamental book of [1 Maccabees 9:27](#)). The last phrase of verse 66 in Greek literally read “the Lord’s hand was with him.” It was Old Testament language often used for prophets (cf. [2 Kings 3:15; 2 Chronicles 30:12; Ezra 7:6, 28; Ezekiel 1:3; 3:22](#)). How did Luke’s language foreshadow the prophetic impact of John’s preaching? Does “the Lord’s hand” still equip people to prophetically draw others to Jesus today?

Prayer: Lord God, thank you for sending John to prepare the way for Jesus. This Advent, help me to recognize ways I, too, can draw others to know and worship Jesus. Amen.

* Richard B. Vinson, study note on Luke 1:65 in *The CEB Study Bible*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013, p. 108 NT.

The power of the savior

FRIDAY 12.14.18 Luke 1:67-75

When we read Mary’s Magnificat (cf. [Luke 1:46-55](#)), we noted that her song was not about her personal hopes or wishes, but about what God was doing through the child she would bear. When John the Baptist was born, his father Zechariah’s praise was similar. He began by praising not his own son, but the child Mary would bear. He declared that God “has raised up a mighty savior for us in his servant David’s house...He has brought salvation...he has shown mercy.”

- The phrase “just as he said through the mouths of his holy prophets long ago” took in so much hoping, praying and trusting. God’s covenant with Abraham, God’s pledge to David, God’s promise of a deliverer to make our broken world new—it was all going to happen after all! How can the Advent story of John’s and Jesus’ birth help to nourish and sustain your trust in God’s big promises?
- Like all Jews in that day, Zechariah lived under Roman occupation. In verse 71 he said God “has brought salvation from our enemies.” But scholar N. T. Wright noted that there was more than that in his words: “Zechariah’s vision goes beyond simply a realigning of political powers. God’s mercy, the forgiveness of sins, the rescue from death itself; all of this points to a deeper and wider meaning of ‘salvation’.” * How did John and Jesus deliver all humans from “our enemies” in ways a merely political revolution could not?

Prayer: God of peace, there is so much awful stuff in our world that deeply troubles my heart. Let my peace and trust in your promises energize me to do my part in your work of setting this broken world to rights. Amen.

* Wright, Tom. *Luke for Everyone* (New Testament for Everyone) (p. 19). SPCK. Kindle Edition.

The peace-bringing mission of the forerunner

SATURDAY 12.15.18 Luke 1:76-80

Images of light and darkness occur over and over in the Advent songs and stories. Zechariah’s words reflected not just fatherly pride, but divine insight. The angel Gabriel had said John would “turn many people in Israel back to their God...herald God’s arrival in the style and strength of Elijah ...kindle devout understanding among hardened skeptics...get the people ready for God” (Luke 1:17, *The Message*). When

John was born, Zechariah said that he would share the good news that “The dawn from heaven will break upon us, to give light to those who are sitting in darkness.”

- We read earlier this week that when people in the Judean hill country heard of the events around John’s birth, they asked, “What will this child turn out to be?” His father Zechariah had a strong sense of his son’s mission, as verse 76 showed. Who played John’s role in your life—who prepared the way for your faith, and introduced you to Jesus? In what ways has Jesus dispelled darkness by bringing light into your life? Are you willing to trust Jesus to touch wounded parts of your life that still need the healing that comes as “the dawn from heaven” keeps breaking into our hurting hearts?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you were, and are, the dawn from heaven, the light in the darkness that my life needs. Open my eyes to take in and rejoice in the continual dawning of your light. Amen.

Family Activity: Shortly after the birth of John, his father, Zechariah, sang words of praise to God. This Advent season, consider writing your own song, poem or letter of praise to God for all of God’s goodness. Your family can begin by listing the many blessings you have received this year. Remember to include people, opportunities, learnings, experiences and times of growth as well as material items. If you choose to write a song, challenge yourselves to either fit this blessing list to a familiar tune or compose your own melody! If you decide to write a poem or letter, choose together what format and style you would like to use. Post your creation of praise in your home and sing or read it together this season and in to the new year! Praise God for your blessings!

Prayer Requests

Prayers for Peace & Comfort for:

Brigitte Syty and family on the death of Karin Danecke-Barkhofen, cousin, 11/25

Rick Dobbs and family on the death of Virginia (Ginny) Dobbs, mother, 11/27

Lee Harizanoff and family on the death of Robert Carpenter, Jr., father 11/28

Randy Thatcher and family on the death of Debbie Thatcher, wife, 11/28

Edie Gates, Eric Eicher and family on the death of Howard Eicher, father 11/30

Lisa Morrow and family on the death of Carolyn Opitz, mother, 12/4