

December 4, 2016

YOUTH FAITH CONNECTIONS

Lesson

1

Unit 4: Promises Fulfilled

Biblical Reference: Luke 1:5-25

PREPARE FOR THE LESSON:

- Bibles
- Student Handouts 1.1 and 1.2
- The Nativity Story movie
- Incense

THE BIRTH OF JOHN THE BAPTIST FORETOLD

PREPARE TO TEACH

The beginning of the story of Jesus, according to Luke, actually starts with the prophecy of the birth of John to Zechariah and Elizabeth. The story begins in typical Luke fashion, describing the setting with extensive details. Luke's written voice echoes an idiom used by many of the prophetic writings. "In the days of" a king, "there was" a prophet. Those familiar with the Scriptures would recognize that Luke is placing a premier importance on this story.

Zechariah was from a priestly family in the line of Abijah. Elizabeth was the daughter of a priest and fulfilled the expectations of the day

by marrying someone within the priesthood. They are both described as living by the word of the Lord, fully obeying the commands of God. As is typical of many birth narratives in the Old Testament, the woman was barren until God intervened. Zechariah and Elizabeth were like Sarah and Abraham, both being advanced in age, and like Isaac, Rebekah, and Hannah, all having prayed for a child.

As a priest, Zechariah would serve at the Temple for a full week, twice a year. On this specific occasion, Zechariah was selected to enter the Most Holy Place and offer the incense. The honor of entering here occurred very infrequently, if ever. This was the pinnacle of service for a priest, to enter the Temple and offer a sacrifice. And when he least expects it, Zechariah encounters a messenger of God.

Zechariah enters the Temple while the people are gathered around outside praying, a sacred and holy ritual. Then, God interrupts. Zechariah's response to the angel again echoes the angelic encounters of the Old Testament—he is seized by fear. The angel's first words, accordingly, "Don't be afraid, your prayer is answered." The angel declares that Zechariah will have a son and the baby's name will be "John," which means, "Yahweh is gracious." The angel continues describing how Zechariah's son will be "great in the sight of the Lord," and set apart for God's service. Instead of being filled with spirits (alcohol), John would be filled with *the Spirit*.

The angel proclaimed that John would live in the spirit and power of Elijah—meaning he would preach repentance, as Elijah did in the Old Testament. His preaching would prepare people for the coming of the Lord. This is a fulfillment of Malachi 4:5-6. The angel's announcement about John is a sign of the coming time of the Messiah, as one who would prepare the way of the Lord. What greater honor could there be for the son of a priest?

Zechariah's response is reminiscent of Abraham in Genesis 15:8, "How will I know that this is so?" This is an intentional allusion to the Abraham story; just as Abraham and Sarah were old, so too are Zechariah and Elizabeth. Just as Isaac was a sign of God's covenant, so too is John a sign of the arrival of God's new covenant. Zechariah says, "I am old." God's messenger replies, "I am Gabriel." Gabriel proclaimed the words of God from the presence of God. Because Zechariah did not believe the angel's words, he would not be able to speak until the prophecy was fulfilled.

The people praying outside wondered what was taking so long. When Zechariah came out, unable to speak, he wasn't able to conclude his

priestly responsibility of pronouncing the blessing over the people. The people recognized Zechariah's inability to speak as a sign that he had an encounter with God.

The next thing we know, Elizabeth is pregnant. She responds to this good news in praise of God, just like the women before her who were barren and God opened their wombs.

Helping Students Connect to the Story

The story of the foretelling of the birth of John is a story of holding onto hope, even when we begin to despair that it's too late. Zechariah and Elizabeth were God-fearing, humble, righteous people. Compared to the wealthy and the powerful, Zechariah and Elizabeth were seemingly insignificant. However in the religious world, they played a crucial role—a role of sharing God's presence. Zechariah and Elizabeth were God's chosen people. They did nothing per se to earn God's favor, other than believe that God is worthy of obedient worship and faithful service.

Zechariah, a priest, was not prepared for God to answer his prayers. Even when he was in the Temple, he was not anticipating an encounter with God. His cynical response to Gabriel's proclamation got him silenced for the duration of Elizabeth's pregnancy.

Your students (and you as well) may at times feel insignificant. Yet one truth remains clear. God does not see us as insignificant creatures. God's grace is greater than these feelings of insignificance. He is powerful. By His power and grace, He chooses and uses us, weak as we are, for His kingdom purposes, spreading the news of His love and grace to others, proclaiming the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. We would be wise to—just as John did—recognize His power, and humbly accept this call.

We should also learn to live life with a holy expectancy, waiting and yearning for God to call wherever we may be. Brother Lawrence (17TH Century lay monk in Paris, France) and Saint Benedict taught that God often comes in what we perceive to be the mundane and ordinary things of life. Our prayer each morning should be, "God, open my eyes to see you today, and give me the courage to say, 'Yes!' to your invitation!" Encourage your students to do the same.

Welcome

We reflect on the week that has passed since we were together last.

Where did you see God at work in the world around you this week?

Where did you see God at work in you this week?

Time line from Last Week

Revisit the time line to review last week's step in the story of the Passover. Point out the cotton balls on the time line. Say, **We can find ourselves in God's story because it is our story, too. What was our story last week? Where did you find yourself in that story? How does this story fit in with the rest of the story of the Bible?**

SENSORY OPTION

Before the Scripture reading begins, burn incense so that students can catch a glimpse (and smell!) of the worship ritual and service that Zechariah was performing that day in the Temple. (Be sure to check with your church leadership to make sure this is an okay practice in the building.)

EXPLORE THE STORY

Luke 1:5-25

Reading 1: Ask an elderly couple to join your group for today's lesson. Finding opportunities for intergenerational interactivity is a must for youth to see the effects and power of faith over a lifetime. For the first reading, ask the couple to read the story slowly, and alternate verses, giving space for the youth to hear it as they read.

Reading 2: For the second reading, ask for a youth volunteer to join the couple. If the youth is a young man, have him read the verses the man read. If the youth is a young woman, have her read the verses in place of the woman. Again, have them alternate verses and read slowly, giving appropriate pause and dramatic inflection where it needs to be.

Reading 3: For the final reading, ask for another youth volunteer. This reading will be the opposite of the previous reading. If a boy volunteered the first time, then this time a girl would be needed. If the youth who volunteer and the elderly couple do not already know each other, give them opportunities for an introduction. An important part of the Scripture reading is to provide an opportunity for different generations to interact with the Scriptures.

MEDIA OPTION

The movie *The Nativity Story* has an excellent introduction that visually shares today's Scripture reading. One option would be to replace a reading with a showing of the first five minutes of the movie, stopping after the phrase, "He has seen a vision from God!"

REFLECT ON THE STORY

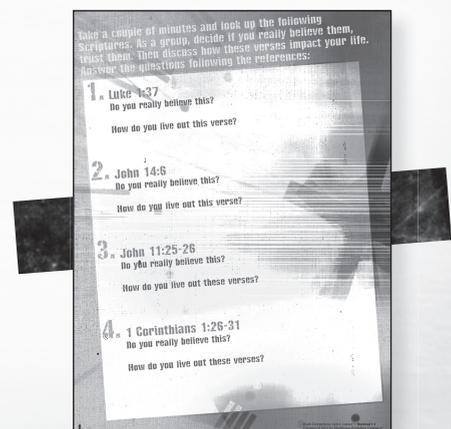
Before leading a time of group reflection, ask the couple to share their insights and reflections on the story. Are they able to relate specifically? What is something they waited for God to answer? When has God surprised them? What prayers has God answered in a unique fashion? After the couple has shared, use the following questions to foster a time of group reflection:

- What's your initial reaction when you hear this story?
- What do you know about Zechariah and Elizabeth from the introduction?
- What does the story say about the ritual that Zechariah was performing?
- How do you imagine the appearance of the angel?
- Why did Zechariah burn incense?
- What was Zechariah's reaction to the presence of an angel? Why? What does this tell you about how the angel looked?
- What does the angel say about the baby?
- What was Zechariah's response to the proclamation of the angel?
- What tone do you think Zechariah used in verse 18?
- How do you think the crowd responded when Zechariah returned to them unable to speak, to pronounce the priestly blessing over them?
- How do you think Elizabeth responded to his announcement?
- What do you learn about God in this story?
- What do you learn about yourself in this story?

CONNECT TO THE STORY

Two of the major themes of this story are hope and trust. Do we really believe that God is able to do everything that God says? Do we really believe that Jesus is God's Son? Do we live in such a way that our lives echo our core convictions regarding God and Christ?

Distribute *Student Handout 1.1* and ask students to get into small groups. Give students a few minutes to work through the handout



together before asking them to return to the group to share their insights and connections.

From the Handout:

Take a couple of minutes and look up the following Scriptures. As a group, decide if you really believe them and trust them. Then discuss how these verses impact your life. Answer the questions following the references:

1. Luke 1:37

Do you really believe this?

How do you live out this verse?

2. John 14:6

Do you really believe this?

How do you live out this verse?

3. John 11:25-26

Do you really believe this?

How do you live out these verses?

4. 1 Corinthians 1:26-31

Do you really believe this?

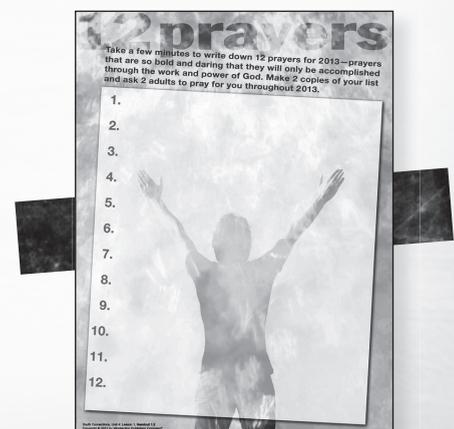
How do you live out these verses?

After students have had ample time to reference the Scriptures, invite them to share their insights. Ask, **We are very fortunate to have God's written Word available to us, yet we may still tend to respond like Zechariah. Why?**

LIVING OUT THE STORY

Say, **With all the distractions of school, social life, and technology, it is easy to tune out God's voice and invitation in our lives. When we do turn our hearts and minds toward God, we are often insistent and impatient when demanding an answer. God is not limited by our timing or circumstances. His ways and acts are much greater than we could possibly imagine.**

Distribute *Student Handout 1.2* and ask students to write a list of 12 bold prayers for 2017. After they have written their lists, ask them to make a couple of copies so that they might distribute their lists to two adults who will join them in prayer for 2017.



Strongly encourage the youth to take this time seriously, to search their hearts and lift their deepest desires to God in prayer. Asking others to come alongside them in prayer is a biblical model, as well as a way of fostering more intergenerational interaction.

TIMELINE ACTIVITY

The call of the follower of Jesus is to trust, to hope in Christ, even when circumstances around us are difficult and trying. For the time line activity, ask one student to read Proverbs 3:5-6 as a prayer for the group. On the time line, draw a simple heart and write, "Trust" on it.

YOUNGER OPTION

Organize an "Adoptive Grandparent Day," where students and seniors in the congregation have an opportunity to come together beyond church walls. The purpose of the day is to foster relationships among common interests.

SKILL BUILDER

One of the best resources for youth ministry that has been developed in recent years comes from Fuller Institute and Kara Powell. "Sticky Faith" (www.stickyfaith.org) helps churches develop environments where faith is not just something that is explored through high school, but an active and integral part of a student's life, for life.