

# The Best Christmas Ever

## Advent Through Epiphany Devotional – Week 2

The Church of St. John the Divine - Adult Education

\* Bible quotations taken from the NIV on <http://www.biblegateway.com/>

### THE BIRTH OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

#### Zacharias and Elizabeth

*\* Note that Zacharias, Zechariah, & Zachary are all variant spellings of the same name \**

Read Luke 1: 5-25. What strikes you about this passage?

<sup>5</sup> In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. <sup>6</sup> Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. <sup>7</sup> But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.

<sup>8</sup> Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, <sup>9</sup> he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. <sup>10</sup> And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.

<sup>11</sup> Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. <sup>12</sup> When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. <sup>13</sup> But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. <sup>14</sup> He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, <sup>15</sup> for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. <sup>16</sup> He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. <sup>17</sup> And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

<sup>18</sup> Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."

<sup>19</sup> The angel said to him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. <sup>20</sup> And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time."

<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. <sup>22</sup> When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.

<sup>23</sup> When his time of service was completed, he returned home. <sup>24</sup> After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. <sup>25</sup> “The Lord has done this for me,” she said. “In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people.”

- *it is interesting that Zacharias continues to fulfill his time of service after being struck mute (vs. 23) before going home; most people, I would think, would head home after experiencing such an emotionally harrowing event as an angelic visitation within the Holy of Holies and then being struck mute*
- *the angel Gabriel asserts his authority in the face of Zecharias' doubt about the possibility of the events foretold (vs. 19); “I am an angel of light who stands in the very throne-room of the Most High! Who do you think that you are that you should question what I tell you?!?”*

As the story of the birth of John the Baptist opens in Luke 1:5, who is the King of Judea? What do you know about him from the Bible? From elsewhere? Do some research if you know nothing about him.

*Herod the Great was the king of Judea. He was a wicked man who wanted to kill Baby Jesus after the Magi came looking for the newborn king of the Jews, which was Herod's official title conferred by Rome. He ordered the slaughter of all male children two years old & under in Bethlehem & the surrounding area. Jesus escaped this fate because Joseph was warned in a dream to flee to Egypt until it was safe for the Holy Family to return to Israel (Mt 2, see below). We know a lot about Herod & his sons from the writings of the historian Josephus, who also tells about the time period around Jesus' ministry and the Crucifixion. Herod the Great's most infamous son is Herod Antipas, who beheaded John the Baptist.*

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herod\\_the\\_Great](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herod_the_Great)

Matthew 2

### **The Magi Visit the Messiah**

<sup>1</sup> After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi<sup>[a]</sup> from the east came to Jerusalem <sup>2</sup> and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.”

<sup>3</sup> When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. <sup>4</sup> When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. <sup>5</sup> “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written:

<sup>6</sup> “But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;  
for out of you will come a ruler  
who will shepherd my people Israel.”<sup>[b]</sup>”

<sup>7</sup> Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup> He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.”

<sup>9</sup> After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. <sup>10</sup> When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. <sup>11</sup> On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. <sup>12</sup> And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

### **The Escape to Egypt**

<sup>13</sup> When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. “Get up,” he said, “take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.”

<sup>14</sup> So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, <sup>15</sup> where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: “Out of Egypt I called my son.”<sup>[c]</sup>

<sup>16</sup> When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. <sup>17</sup> Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:

<sup>18</sup> “A voice is heard in Ramah,  
weeping and great mourning,  
Rachel weeping for her children  
and refusing to be comforted,  
because they are no more.”<sup>[d]</sup>

### **The Return to Nazareth**

<sup>19</sup> After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt <sup>20</sup> and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child’s life are dead.”

<sup>21</sup> So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. <sup>22</sup> But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, <sup>23</sup> and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets, that he would be called a Nazarene.

Approximately one thousand years before the birth of John the Baptist, David planned on building a temple to the Lord. He divided the descendants of Levi into 24 groups according to their family lineage. The 24 groups were each given a two-week shift of duty in the Temple every year. What were some of their duties according to 1 Chronicles 23: 24-32?

<sup>24</sup> These were the descendants of Levi by their families—the heads of families as they were registered under their names and counted individually, that is, the workers twenty years old or more who served in the temple of the LORD. <sup>25</sup> For David had said, “Since the LORD, the God of Israel, has granted rest to his people and has come to dwell in Jerusalem forever, <sup>26</sup> the Levites no longer need to carry the

tabernacle or any of the articles used in its service.”<sup>27</sup> According to the last instructions of David, the Levites were counted from those twenty years old or more.

<sup>28</sup> The duty of the Levites was to help Aaron’s descendants in the service of the temple of the LORD: to be in charge of the courtyards, the side rooms, the purification of all sacred things and the performance of other duties at the house of God.<sup>29</sup> They were in charge of the bread set out on the table, the special flour for the grain offerings, the thin loaves made without yeast, the baking and the mixing, and all measurements of quantity and size.<sup>30</sup> They were also to stand every morning to thank and praise the LORD. They were to do the same in the evening<sup>31</sup> and whenever burnt offerings were presented to the LORD on the Sabbaths, at the New Moon feasts and at the appointed festivals. They were to serve before the LORD regularly in the proper number and in the way prescribed for them.

<sup>32</sup> And so the Levites carried out their responsibilities for the tent of meeting, for the Holy Place and, under their relatives the descendants of Aaron, for the service of the temple of the LORD.

*We know, too, from Luke that their duties also included burning incense in the Holy of Holies, the place where the Ark of the Covenant was kept.*

How are Elizabeth and Zacharias described in Luke 1: 6-7? Who else is described this way in the Bible? See Matthew 1:19 and Luke 2: 25. What does it mean that they walked blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord?

*Luke 1: 6-7*

<sup>6</sup> Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commands and decrees blamelessly.<sup>7</sup> But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.

*Matthew 1:19*

<sup>19</sup> Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet [Or was a righteous man and] did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

*Luke 2: 25*

<sup>25</sup> Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him.

*Elizabeth, Zechariah, Joseph, and Simeon are all referred to as ‘righteous’. Not that they lived perfectly but that they were faithful to God & His commandments, and it was credited to them as righteousness. See Genesis 15:6 & Romans 4: 1-8.*

*Genesis 15:6*

Abram believed the LORD, and He credited it to him as righteousness.

*Romans 4: 1-8*

<sup>1</sup> What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, discovered in this matter? <sup>2</sup> If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God. <sup>3</sup> What does Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.”<sup>[a]</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Now to the one who works, wages are not credited as a gift but as an obligation. <sup>5</sup> However, to the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness. <sup>6</sup> David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the one to whom God credits righteousness apart from works:

<sup>7</sup> “Blessed are those  
whose transgressions are forgiven,  
whose sins are covered.

<sup>8</sup> Blessed is the one  
whose sin the Lord will never count against them.”<sup>[b]</sup>

During his annual Temple service, Zacharias was chosen by lot to burn incense (see Exodus 30: 7-8). This was an infrequent privilege that some priests were never granted. From Luke 1:10 and Revelation 8: 3-4, what might incense be a symbol for?

*Exodus 30: 7-8*

<sup>7</sup> “Aaron must burn fragrant incense on the altar every morning when he tends the lamps. <sup>8</sup> He must burn incense again when he lights the lamps at twilight so incense will burn regularly before the LORD for the generations to come.

*Luke 1:10*

And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.

*Revelation 8: 3-4*

<sup>3</sup> Another angel, who had a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense to offer, with the prayers of all God’s people, on the golden altar in front of the throne. <sup>4</sup> The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of God’s people, went up before God from the angel’s hand.

*The fragrant smoke rising from the burning incense symbolizes the prayers of people rising up to Heaven to be presented before the Lord.*

*It is also considered an offering for purification. See also Ephesians 5: 1-2 and Exodus 30: 34-38. Incense was burned especially on the Day of Atonement, an annual day of sin offerings made for the forgiveness of the sins of the whole nation (see Leviticus 16: 12, 29-34).*

*Ephesians 5: 1-2*

<sup>1</sup> Follow God’s example, therefore, as dearly loved children <sup>2</sup> and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

*Exodus 30: 34-38*

<sup>34</sup> Then the LORD said to Moses, “Take fragrant spices—gum resin, onycha and galbanum—and pure frankincense, all in equal amounts, <sup>35</sup> and make a fragrant blend of incense, the work of a perfumer. It is to be salted and pure and sacred. <sup>36</sup> Grind some of it to powder and place it in front of the Ark of the Covenant Law in the tent of meeting, where I will meet with you. It shall be most holy to you. <sup>37</sup> Do not make any incense with this formula for yourselves; consider it holy to the LORD. <sup>38</sup> Whoever makes incense like it to enjoy its fragrance must be cut off from their people.”

*Leviticus 16: 12, 29-34*

<sup>12</sup> He is to take a censer full of burning coals from the altar before the LORD and two handfuls of finely ground fragrant incense and take them behind the curtain. <sup>13</sup> He is to put the incense on the fire before the LORD, and the smoke of the incense will conceal the atonement cover above the tablets of the covenant law, so that he will not die.

...

<sup>29</sup> “This is to be a lasting ordinance for you: On the tenth day of the seventh month you must deny yourselves<sup>[c]</sup> and not do any work—whether native-born or a foreigner residing among you— <sup>30</sup> because on this day atonement will be made for you, to cleanse you. Then, before the LORD, you will be clean from all your sins. <sup>31</sup> It is a day of sabbath rest, and you must deny yourselves; it is a lasting ordinance. <sup>32</sup> The priest who is anointed and ordained to succeed his father as high priest is to make atonement. He is to put on the sacred linen garments <sup>33</sup> and make atonement for the Most Holy Place, for the tent of meeting and the altar, and for the priests and all the members of the community.

<sup>34</sup> “This is to be a lasting ordinance for you: Atonement is to be made once a year for all the sins of the Israelites.”

We are still in Luke 1: 5-25. What is Zacharias’ initial response when he sees the angel of the Lord? Who else in Scripture is old and barren and has some doubts when God announced the birth of a miracle baby? See Genesis 18: 10-15.

*The first response is FEAR at the appearance of an angel. Angels are not cute babies with wings but rather mighty spirit warriors.*

*Sarah was also described as elderly & barren and was doubtful about God’s promise that a child could and would be conceived in that state. Notice in the reading that the Lord can hear Sarah’s very thoughts.*

*Genesis 18: 10-15*

*[three visitors, 2 angels as well as the pre-incarnate Christ, stop by to visit Abraham & Sarah as they are on their way to destroy Sodom & Gomorrah]*

<sup>10</sup> Then one of them said, “I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son.”

Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent, which was behind him. <sup>11</sup> Abraham and Sarah were already very old, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing. <sup>12</sup> So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, “After I am worn out and my lord is old, will I now have this pleasure?”

<sup>13</sup> Then the LORD said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Will I really have a child, now that I am old?’ <sup>14</sup> Is anything too hard for the LORD? I will return to you at the appointed time next year, and Sarah will have a son.”

<sup>15</sup> Sarah was afraid, so she lied and said, “I did not laugh.”

But he said, “Yes, you did laugh.”

From Luke 1:13, how do we know that Elizabeth and Zacharias had been praying, and what do you think they had been praying about?

*Luke 1:13* But the angel said to him: “Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John.

*We know that Elizabeth & Zechariah were praying because the angel Gabriel told Zechariah that the Lord had heard their petitions. We know that they were praying for a child because Gabriel also told them that their prayers would be answered and that Elizabeth would miraculously conceive a son to be named John though she was past the age of childbearing.*

How does this example of Elizabeth and Zacharias encourage you in your daily life, especially in your prayer life?

*We know that the Lord hears our prayers, even our daily random thoughts & pensive musings. He knows our needs & wants and gives His answers according to His good will and in His own timing. So when there has been a large gap of time where it seems as if He has not heard your prayers, as when Elizabeth & Zechariah prayed for a child for years, do not allow circumstances to shake your faith in God. His plan is always greater than our preconceived notions of what is best.*

Read Luke 1: 15-17 again and in your own words describe what John the Baptist will be like:

*Luke 1: 13b-17*

Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. <sup>14</sup> He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, <sup>15</sup> for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. <sup>16</sup> He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. <sup>17</sup> And he will go on before the Lord, **in the spirit and power of Elijah**, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

- *An easy child for his parents to raise*
- *Pleasing to the Lord*
- *Teetotaler*
- *Fervent believer from childhood, even as a babe in utero*
- *He will persuade many Jews to repent*
- *Through preaching repentance, he will create in the people’s hearts fertile soil to plant the words & works of the Messiah*

- *He will prepare the way of the Lord as prophesied in Isaiah 40:3 & Malachi 4:5 (supported by Jesus in Matthew 11: 9-10, 14), in the manner of & with power like Elijah*

*Isaiah 40:3*

A voice of one calling:

“In the wilderness prepare  
the way for the LORD<sup>a</sup>;  
make straight in the desert  
a highway for our God.

*Malachi 4:5*

See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes.

*Matthew 11: 9-10, 14*

<sup>9</sup> Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. <sup>10</sup> This is the one about whom it is written:

“I will send my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way before you.’

...

<sup>14</sup> And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come.

*Note on a theological controversy: John the Baptist was not Elijah reincarnated as some think considering that Elijah was lifted into Heaven in a flaming chariot rather than dying in a conventional manner (2 Kings 2: 11-12) & considering Jesus’ statement in Matthew 11: 14 (above). Recall Luke 1:17 highlighted on the previous page. Also note that Elisha, Elijah’s successor, worked miracles “in the spirit of Elijah” (2 Kings 2: 14b-15) as did John the Baptist.*

*2 Kings 2: 11-12, 14b-15*

<sup>11</sup> As they were walking along and talking together, suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind. <sup>12</sup> Elisha saw this and cried out, “My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!” And Elisha saw him no more. Then he took hold of his garment and tore it in two.

...

<sup>14b</sup> When he struck the water, it divided to the right and to the left, and he crossed over [the Jordan River].

<sup>15</sup> The company of the prophets from Jericho, who were watching, said, “The spirit of Elijah is resting on Elisha.” And they went to meet him and bowed to the ground before him.

The Response of Zacharias and Elizabeth

According to Luke 1:18 and 1:20, what do you think was Zacharias' "level of faith"? Look at Genesis 15:8, Judges 6:17, and Kings 20:8 to see others who asked for a sign from God in order to believe.

*Luke 1:18, 20*

<sup>18</sup> Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years." ... <sup>20</sup> And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time."

*Genesis 15:8*

<sup>8</sup> But Abram said, "Sovereign LORD, how can I know that I will gain possession of it [the land of Canaan, future Israel]?"

*Judges 6:17*

<sup>17</sup> Gideon replied, "If now I have found favor in your eyes, give me a sign that it is really you talking to me. [commanding him to attack the Midianites & save the nation though his group was not very numerous or powerful]

*Kings 20:8*

<sup>8</sup> Hezekiah had asked Isaiah, "What will be the sign that the LORD will heal me and that I will go up to the temple of the LORD on the third day from now?" [the sign was to be a reversal of the way a shadow fell on the steps of the Lord's Temple!]

*In the cases of Abram, Gideon, & Hezekiah, the Lord provided miraculous confirming signs of the promises extended to them. In the case of Zacharias, there must have been doubt which is not obvious through the text but of which the Lord was aware. Zacharias recalls to my mind Doubting Thomas who also had a 'low level' of faith (John 20:24-29). In general, we are not to 'put our Lord to the test' (Deut. 6:16 & Matthew 4:7).*

*John 20:24-29*

<sup>24</sup> Now Thomas (also known as Didymus<sup>[a]</sup>), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. <sup>25</sup> So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!"

But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe."

<sup>26</sup> A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" <sup>27</sup> Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

<sup>28</sup> Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

<sup>29</sup> Then Jesus told him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

#### *Deuteronomy 6:16*

Do not put the LORD your God to the test as you did at Massah.

#### *Matthew 4: 7*

Jesus answered him [Satan], “It is also written: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

What are the consequences for Zacharias for not believing the word of the angel?

*He would remain mute until John was born.*

After the two weeks of service in the Temple, Zacharias goes home to Elizabeth. Where was their home located according to Luke 1: 39-40?

<sup>39</sup> At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in **the hill country of Judea**, <sup>40</sup> where she entered Zechariah’s home and greeted Elizabeth.

How can we follow the example of Elizabeth in Luke 1: 24-25 when God answers our prayer? (Although maybe not for five months!)

<sup>24</sup> After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. <sup>25</sup> “The Lord has done this for me,” she said. “In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people.”

*Elizabeth went into seclusion and offered prayers of thanksgiving to God. Jesus also sets an example for us of the benefit of seclusion for focused & earnest prayer in Matthew 14:22-23a & Luke 22: 39-44.*

#### *Matthew 14: 22-23a*

<sup>22</sup> [after feeding the five thousand] Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. <sup>23</sup> After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray.

#### *Luke 22: 39-44*

<sup>39</sup> Jesus went out as usual to the Mount of Olives, and his disciples followed him. <sup>40</sup> On reaching the place, he said to them, “Pray that you will not fall into temptation.” <sup>41</sup> He withdrew about a stone’s throw beyond them, knelt down and prayed, <sup>42</sup> “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.” <sup>43</sup> An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him. <sup>44</sup> And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.

#### The Activity of the Holy Spirit

Read Luke 1: 57-80. What strikes you about this passage?

## The Birth of John the Baptist

<sup>57</sup> When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. <sup>58</sup> Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy.

<sup>59</sup> On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, <sup>60</sup> but his mother spoke up and said, “No! He is to be called John.”

<sup>61</sup> They said to her, “There is no one among your relatives who has that name.”

<sup>62</sup> Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. <sup>63</sup> He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone’s astonishment he wrote, “His name is John.” <sup>64</sup> Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God. <sup>65</sup> All the neighbors were filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. <sup>66</sup> Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, “What then is this child going to be?” For the Lord’s hand was with him.

## Zechariah’s Song

<sup>67</sup> His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:

<sup>68</sup> “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,  
because he has come to his people and redeemed them.

<sup>69</sup> He has raised up a horn<sup>[d]</sup> of salvation for us  
in the house of his servant David

<sup>70</sup> (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),

<sup>71</sup> salvation from our enemies  
and from the hand of all who hate us—

<sup>72</sup> to show mercy to our ancestors  
and to remember his holy covenant,

<sup>73</sup> the oath he swore to our father Abraham:

<sup>74</sup> to rescue us from the hand of our enemies,  
and to enable us to serve him without fear

<sup>75</sup> in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

<sup>76</sup> And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High;  
for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,

<sup>77</sup> to give his people the knowledge of salvation  
through the forgiveness of their sins,

<sup>78</sup> because of the tender mercy of our God,  
by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven

<sup>79</sup> to shine on those living in darkness  
and in the shadow of death,

to guide our feet into the path of peace.”

<sup>80</sup> And the child grew and became strong in spirit<sup>[d]</sup>; and he lived in the wilderness until he appeared publicly to Israel.

*It strikes me that Elizabeth knew that the child was to be named John, although Zechariah was unable to communicate that to her verbally.*

Based on Leviticus 12: 1-3, how did Elizabeth and Zacharias continue to “walk blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord”? See Luke 1:6 and 1:59.

*Leviticus 12: 1-3*

<sup>1</sup> The LORD said to Moses, <sup>2</sup> “Say to the Israelites: ‘A woman who becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son will be ceremonially unclean for seven days, just as she is unclean during her monthly period. <sup>3</sup> On the eighth day the boy is to be circumcised.

*Luke 1:6*

Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commands and decrees blamelessly.

*Luke 1:59*

On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah

*Both Zechariah & Elizabeth were observant Jews who followed the Torah, the part of the Old Testament referred to as the Law which is a written set of commandments and restrictions proscribed by God for the Jewish people to set them apart from other peoples/ ethnic groups in the area. Many Jews consider(ed) observance of the Law the means to piety & salvation. But as Christians, we know that the Law was not meant to save. Rather it was a means to recognize one’s sin nature and then to encourage repentance & the placing of one’s trust (i.e. faith) in God for salvation. See Galatians 2: 15-16, Galatians 3: 10-14, and Romans 3: 19-24.*

*Gal 2: 15-16*

<sup>15</sup> “We who are Jews by birth and not sinful Gentiles <sup>16</sup> know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in<sup>[d]</sup> Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified.

*Gal 3: 10-14*

<sup>10</sup> For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse, as it is written: “Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.”<sup>[e]</sup> <sup>11</sup> Clearly no one who relies on the law is justified before God, because “the righteous will live by faith.”<sup>[f]</sup> <sup>12</sup> The law is not based on faith; on the contrary, it says, “The person who does these things will live by them.”<sup>[g]</sup> <sup>13</sup> Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: “Cursed is everyone who is hung on a pole.”<sup>[h]</sup> <sup>14</sup> He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.

Rom 3: 19-24

<sup>19</sup> Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. <sup>20</sup> Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin.

### **Righteousness Through Faith**

<sup>21</sup> But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. <sup>22</sup> This righteousness is given through faith in <sup>[h]</sup> Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, <sup>23</sup> for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, <sup>24</sup> and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

How do you think Elizabeth knew their son's name should be John?

*I believe that the Holy Spirit inspired her, because the meaning of the name John is 'God is gracious'. I think that she meant it in an attitude of thanksgiving for the Lord's mercifully providing her a child in her advanced age.*

What is the first thing that Zacharias does when he gets his "tongue" back?

*Referring back to Luke 1: 64-66, the first thing that Zechariah did was to praise God. It's interesting to note that the people observing these events felt afraid.*

<sup>64</sup> Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God. <sup>65</sup> All the neighbors were filled with awe [in another translation this word is 'fear'], and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. <sup>66</sup> Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, "What then is this child going to be?" For the Lord's hand was with him.

How many instances in Luke 1 can you find where people are filled with the Holy Spirit? Where else in Scripture do you find this many references to people being filled with the Holy Spirit?

*I counted four people: John the babe in utero (vs. 15), Elizabeth (vs. 41), Mary (vs. 46-55, the Magnificat/Song of Mary), and Zechariah (vs. 67). Similar occurrences are seen in the Book of Acts.*

Notice the impact that the birth of John had on the surrounding area according to Luke 1: 10, 21-22, and 65-66. People had an expectation that something was different, that something was about to happen.

<sup>10</sup> And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside...

<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple.

<sup>22</sup> When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak...

<sup>65</sup> All the neighbors were filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. <sup>66</sup> Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, "What then is this child going to be?" For the Lord's hand was with him.

Read the prophecy given by Zacharias in Luke 1: 68-70 several times, asking God to help you focus on words of importance. Write those words down:

<sup>68</sup> “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,  
because he has come to his people and redeemed them.  
<sup>69</sup> He has raised up a horn<sup>[c]</sup> of salvation for us  
in the house of his servant David  
<sup>70</sup> (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),  
<sup>71</sup> salvation from our enemies  
and from the hand of all who hate us—  
<sup>72</sup> to show mercy to our ancestors  
and to remember his holy covenant,  
<sup>73</sup> the oath he swore to our father Abraham:  
<sup>74</sup> to rescue us from the hand of our enemies,  
and to enable us to serve him **without fear**  
<sup>75</sup> in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

<sup>76</sup> And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High;  
for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,  
<sup>77</sup> to give his people the knowledge of salvation  
through the forgiveness of their sins,  
<sup>78</sup> because of the tender mercy of our God,  
by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven  
<sup>79</sup> to shine on those living in darkness  
and in the shadow of death,  
to guide our feet into the path of peace.”

Describe John the Baptist’s job description in your own words:

*He is like a signpost pointing to:*

- *WHO: the Lord Jesus*
- *WHAT: the way to salvation via forgiveness of sins*
- *HOW: execution & death on the cross during which our sins are also crucified (vs. 76-77).*

John the Baptist is often thought of as an angry prophet who cries for doom and gloom, but actually joy was the hallmark of his life. Circle the words joy, rejoice, and rejoicing in Luke 1: 5-25, 1:44, and 1: 57-80 and see how many times they are used. 4x

<sup>5</sup> In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. <sup>6</sup> Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commands and decrees blamelessly. <sup>7</sup> But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.

<sup>8</sup> Once when Zechariah’s division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, <sup>9</sup> he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. <sup>10</sup> And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.

<sup>11</sup> Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. <sup>12</sup> When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. <sup>13</sup> But the angel said to him: “Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. <sup>14</sup> He will be a **joy** and delight to you, and many will **rejoice** because of his birth, <sup>15</sup> for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. <sup>16</sup> He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. <sup>17</sup> And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

<sup>18</sup> Zechariah asked the angel, “How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.”

<sup>19</sup> The angel said to him, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. <sup>20</sup> And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time.”

<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. <sup>22</sup> When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.

<sup>23</sup> When his time of service was completed, he returned home. <sup>24</sup> After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. <sup>25</sup> “The Lord has done this for me,” she said. “In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people.”

...<sup>44</sup> As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for **joy**.

...<sup>57</sup> When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. <sup>58</sup> Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her **joy**.

<sup>59</sup> On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, <sup>60</sup> but his mother spoke up and said, “No! He is to be called John.”

<sup>61</sup> They said to her, “There is no one among your relatives who has that name.”

<sup>62</sup> Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. <sup>63</sup> He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone’s astonishment he wrote, “His name is John.” <sup>64</sup> Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God. <sup>65</sup> All the neighbors were filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. <sup>66</sup> Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, “What then is this child going to be?” For the Lord’s hand was with him.

### **Zechariah’s Song**

<sup>67</sup> His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:

<sup>68</sup> “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,  
because he has come to his people and redeemed them.

<sup>69</sup> He has raised up a horn<sup>[c]</sup> of salvation for us

in the house of his servant David  
<sup>70</sup> (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),  
<sup>71</sup> salvation from our enemies  
and from the hand of all who hate us—  
<sup>72</sup> to show mercy to our ancestors  
and to remember his holy covenant,  
<sup>73</sup> the oath he swore to our father Abraham:  
<sup>74</sup> to rescue us from the hand of our enemies,  
and to enable us to serve him without fear  
<sup>75</sup> in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

<sup>76</sup> And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High;  
for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,  
<sup>77</sup> to give his people the knowledge of salvation  
through the forgiveness of their sins,  
<sup>78</sup> because of the tender mercy of our God,  
by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven  
<sup>79</sup> to shine on those living in darkness  
and in the shadow of death,  
to guide our feet into the path of peace.”

<sup>80</sup> And the child grew and became strong in spirit<sup>[d]</sup>; and he lived in the wilderness until he appeared publicly to Israel.