

GraceCity Advent Study

Good News, Great Joy, All People



Week #1 “John the Baptist” (Luke 1:5-25, 36-45)

November 25-December 1, 2019

Week #2 “Elizabeth” (Luke 1:5-25, 36-45)

December 2-December 8, 2019

“But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.’” – Luke 2:10 (NIV)

Preparation:

Have you ever been in a desperate or difficult situation that left your faith intact but hope all but gone? What did you learn about God’s timing in how the difficult situation was resolved? Do you share your story of God’s faithfulness so others may be as confident in the trials of their lives?

In Luke 1, we meet a devout, elderly couple named Zechariah and Elizabeth who must have wrestled with these issues. Going about their daily activities, they could not have known that God was about to break a four hundred-year silence wherein no prophet had spoken to the nation. During this period between the Old and New Testaments, two world empires had passed off the scene, and Rome was now fully in control. Herod the Great, referred to in verse 5, was a puppet of the Roman government, a ruthless and self-aggrandizing king. To say the least, this society was not known for either justice or mercy. And yet in all this, Zechariah and Elizabeth remained upright in the sight of God. They knew and believed the prophetic promises of Israel’s redemption and restoration—and they very much wanted to have a child; infertility in this culture was considered a sign of God’s disfavor. Zechariah was a priest, and on a seemingly ordinary occasion his division was on duty and he was chosen by lot, from thousands, to burn incense in the temple and offer prayers for Israel. This was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and little did he know what God had in store.

Read: Luke 1:5-25, 39-45

Notes/Definitions:

Levitical tribe (Numbers 3:11-13, 41-45): Of the 12 tribes of Israel, the tribe of Levi was not given an inheritance of land in Canaan. Instead, God appointed them to be priests, representing him to the people and interceding with God on their behalf.

Nazirite vow (Numbers 6:1-8): This was a vow of separation. Anyone taking this vow had to abstain from wine, fermented drink, and anything from the vine. No razor was to be used and he could not go near a dead body.

Herod the Great: Ruler over Judea from 37 BC-4 BC. Paranoid and cruel—John the Baptist was imprisoned and executed by his son.

Elijah: Israel’s greatest prophet, active during the reign of Ahab & Jezebel from 1 Kings 17 – 2 Kings 2. Along with Enoch in Genesis 5, Elijah was one of two people in the Old Testament who never died. In 2 Kings 2:11 he was raptured to heaven in a whirlwind.

Judea: Octavian/Caesar Augustus (same person) had confirmed Herod’s kingship. In so doing, he gave Herod an army and the realm of Israel was united into four provinces, one of which was Judea. Samaria, Galilee, and Idumea were the others.

Gabriel: One of the highest-ranking angels who “stands in the presence of God”, he is always seen as a messenger-type figure.

This study has been developed for personal reflection and group discussion. To participate in the conversation, join a GraceCity small group. For more information on times and locations, email smallgroups@gracecitybaltimore.org.

Questions:

1. Read Exodus 30:7-10. What is the significance of the burning of incense? What does this say about our prayers to God?
2. How would you have felt if you were Zechariah, hearing such a message? What do you note about Zechariah and Elizabeth's reactions?
3. Is it possible that Zechariah and Elizabeth had given up praying for a child? In their minds, with the passage of time, had "reality" set in on them? Is there anything you've given up praying for? Are there any areas where you may still have faith but little to no hope?
4. What were the messianic hopes and expectations in Israel at this time in history?

Read Acts 5:35-39 and Gamaliel's appeal to the Sanhedrin. He reminds them of two specific attempts to revolt against Rome, both of which ended up in death and increase in oppression. Potential violence was always in the air. Also, read Luke 24:21 and Acts 1:6—even the disciples were hoping for a political/military deliverer. 1 Kings 4:20-25 is a good brief description of life in Israel at the height of her power, and Jewish people would have been told of this history from generation to generation. For the disciples, the idea of an earthly kingdom that they would have prominent places in (see Mark 10:35-37) was very appealing.

5. How would John the Baptist fulfill the prophecy given in Malachi 4:5-6?

⁵ "See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. ⁶ He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction." – Malachi 4:5-6 (NIV)

6. What does it mean to "make ready a people prepared for the Lord?"

At this time in history it was customary for kings, when they traveled to a town, to send a messenger ahead who would prepare the road. The roads were obviously not paved, so the messenger's job was to clear obstacles, make causeways, straighten roads that were crooked, and level hills. You wanted the king's travel to be as safe as possible.

7. What was John's message and how did it prepare the hearts of the people for the coming of Jesus (see Luke 3:1-22)? Why was his message effective?

Read Hosea 10:12. Just as the ground needs to be plowed so the planted seed can do its work, our hearts need to be purified through the confession of sin. Then, and only then, can we hear and obey God's Word.

Read Luke 3:1-6 and Matthew 3:4-6. John's was not a "seeker-sensitive" message—he wasn't advertising to generate an audience, nor was he out to win a popularity contest. He could preach the undiluted Word of God because he was not beholden to the establishment or to any constituency, be it economic, political, or religious.

8. Apart from the unusual diet and appearance, why does the church need men and women like John in every generation? How can we be a John the Baptist? Considering how God has gifted you, what does "preparing the way for the Lord" look like in your life?
9. John had words of exhortation for the crowds (Luke 3:10), the tax collectors (3:12), and the Roman soldiers (3:14). How does this exemplify that the good news is for all people? What message do you think John might have for you and/or for our church?
10. Elizabeth named her baby in Luke 1:57-66. What do her actions around naming say about how she understood who John was to be? In what way is Elizabeth's blessing of Mary a preview of the role her son would play in the life and ministry of Jesus? See John 1:19-34 for additional context.
11. It's been said that when we make requests of God he answers in one of four ways: Yes; Yes, but not now; Yes, but not in the way we expect or think we want; and no. Considering that, it's likely that Zechariah & Elizabeth had prayed many years for a child. Have we let unbelief steal our joy, as it may have for Zechariah considering his response to the angel? Dare we believe that God might have a purpose in our waiting that far exceeds any plan we might have?

Closing Prayer:

As we enter into this Advent season, pray that we would live in confident expectation of the way that Jesus will show up in each of our lives. Be aware of the unexpected ways that God will use our waiting. Ask God for eyes to see the world as He does, both as it is now in its brokenness and as it will be in its perfection. Pray that we would prepare the way for Jesus to come again and bring God's kingdom here on earth as it is in Heaven.