



Rewards of faithfulness

LUKE 1:5-38



Opening

The angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah and then to Mary. Mary’s visit upstages Zechariah’s. Were you greeted by an angel when you felt God’s presence? How did it change your life?

Understanding God’s Word

Luke stresses that salvation is rooted in the faith and longings of Israel. In Zechariah and Elizabeth (vv. 5-25), we find the best of faith and personal longings.

Verses 26-38 describe the angel’s meeting with Mary, announcing that she will become pregnant and give birth to Jesus. Jesus will establish a new eternal kingdom in the lineage of David.

Catholics meditate on Mary’s lack of sin. Uniquely “full of grace,” she was the only fit vessel for the Son of God. For Protestants, grace is central; it is “unmerited favor.” What did Luke want us to understand—Mary’s questions or Mary’s obedience?

Connecting with God’s Word

Both were upright in the sight of God (1:5-7)

Both Zechariah and Elizabeth were members of priestly families. They were



For the leader

When has God come near to you? Share your story so that class members will also share.

1. In prayer, thank God for entering the lives of class members. Sing a gathering hymn.
2. Read Luke 1:5-38. Assign readers: verses 5-7; 8-20; 21-25; 26-38. Listen closely to the conversation of the angel Gabriel with Zechariah and with Mary.

accorded the highest tribute for a faithful Israelite—“righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all of the commandments” (v. 6).

Yet God did not bless them with children. They were vulnerable, since the care of the elderly was the responsibility of the children.

- How do you see the disparity between a life of faith and not realizing goals and dreams?
- In what ways does your family care for its older members?

Zechariah's division was on duty (1:8-10)

The twenty thousand priests and Levites around Jerusalem were divided into twenty-four divisions. Each division served in the temple twice a year, performing sacrifices, caring for the candlesticks, and burning incense.

By lot, Zechariah earned the privilege of burning incense. His was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

- Describe a “once-in-a-lifetime” event that your church treasures. Or tell the story of one who made a major change in response to God’s call.
- What duties do you carry in your congregation? Do you look forward to fulfilling them?

Gabriel, an angel of the Lord, appeared to him (1:11-15a)

In the temple, Zechariah breathed to God the couple’s great longing. Then Gabriel appeared to calm his fears. He affirmed that God had heard his prayer. Elizabeth would give birth to a son named John. “Many will rejoice,” the angel said, “because of his birth” (v. 14).

- How has the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth helped couples who have struggled with infertility?
- Describe the joy you experienced when you knew that your prayer would be answered.

In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth (1:26-27)

Gabriel now appeared to Mary. She had exchanged vows with Joseph, a descendant of David, but had not yet moved to his home.

- What does the visit of Angel Gabriel to Mary, a woman, suggest about her key role in salvation history? How are the insights and gifts of women recognized in your church?

Greetings, favored one! (1:28-33)

This passage is full of “grace” (Greek *charis*). The common greeting, “You who are highly favored,” translates into one Greek word, *kecharitomene*.

Mary was “much perplexed.” She would become pregnant and bear a son, to be named Jesus. He would be great, Son of the Most High, and would sit on David’s throne to rule over the house of Jacob in an eternal kingdom.

- The Advent season can be a time to “listen to our longings.” How do we test whether our call from God is within our longings and hopes?

How will this be, since I am a virgin? (1:34-37)

Gabriel’s answer moved the miracle of Mary’s pregnancy beyond everyone’s expectations. The child would be the result of the creative agency of the Holy Spirit. The terms “will come upon you” and “will overshadow you” (v. 35) do not have sexual connotations: the first appears at Pentecost (Acts 1:8), the second with the cloud at the Transfiguration (Luke 9:34).

The Spirit’s action was the source of the child’s significance: “Therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called the Son of God” (v. 35). The angel divulged the wonder being fashioned in Mary’s relative Elizabeth, demonstrating that “nothing will be impossible with God” (v. 37).

- Our experiences with the divine are seldom as dramatic as Mary’s, yet we know of genuine encounters with God. How do we cultivate such openness?
- Have you experienced tension between your desire to know and your sense of what God is doing?

Here am I, servant of the Lord (1:38)

Mary’s willingness to accept her role is unique: “Let it be with me according to your word.” Protestant stress on God’s unmerited grace may overlook this view of Mary. Heirs of the Anabaptists see Mary as the first and model disciple. When Jesus learns that his family wishes to see him, he replies, “My mother and brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it” (8:21). When the disciples await the birth of the church, “Mary, the mother of Jesus” (Acts 1:14) is among them.

- As we respond to God’s word, we become like Mary, bearers of Christ to the world. Listen for God’s word to you. Believe that God hears and accepts your responses.

Closing

1. Recall the expectations at the birth of your child, your grandchild, or your friend’s newborn.
2. Close by reading Luke 1:26-38. Thank God that Mary’s obedience brought to us the Savior.

DEVOTIONALS

Devotional 1

[Zechariah and Elizabeth] were righteous before God, living blamelessly. . . . But they had no children. —Luke 1:6-7

A young couple was awash in tears. Five years ago, I'd performed their wedding. Now they were grieving, broken. They discovered they would never have biological children. Their dreams of a family were shattered. Most couples are able to bear children naturally. For those who are childless, life seems unfair.

Zechariah and Elizabeth are childless in a culture where children are a sign of God's blessing. Since they are blameless and godly, shouldn't God honor their desire? But God doesn't until the angel appears in the temple.

You may also know the pain of not receiving what you deserve. Your dreams are broken, hopes shattered. The angel's visit to Zechariah affirms that God does not leave us discouraged. We may not have an angel visitor, but God cares and will meet our needs.

The couple was able to adopt and fulfill their dream of a family. God hears and acts; that's the lesson of this text. —Jim Holm

I have great hopes, too, Lord. Help me trust your care, even in the dark places when hope seems gone. I know you hear; please let me feel your love, wherever the path may lead.

Devotional 2

[Zechariah] was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. —Luke 1:9

The TV. ad features a man standing on a street corner holding his umbrella. A voice says, "You may think your chances of winning a lottery are like the odds of being struck by lightning." At that moment the man is zapped, and his umbrella is a smoking skeleton.

Zechariah is chosen by "chance" to enter the sanctuary to offer incense. This way of assigning the coveted task was like pulling names from a hat to decide who will serve.

At first it seems that Zechariah simply has "good luck." He anticipates the experience as a spiritual highlight. But this event has greater significance. While in the holy place, an angel visits Zechariah, announcing the promise of a son for him and Elizabeth.

Good things come unexpectedly. We can label them "good luck" or coincidence, but faith and reflection teach us otherwise. The way the pieces fit into place show that God is at work. In what ways do "chance" events reveal God's provision and love for you?

—Lynn Graham

Fill each step of my journey with anticipation, O God. Assure me that you are setting out a way for your plan to unfold.

Devotional 3

[John the Baptist] will . . . turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous. —Luke 1:17

When your heart turns and points, do people say, "Don't point that thing at me!" Or does your heart point others to the grace in Jesus' birth?

I must allow God to turn me toward being

as innocent as a child, rather than cynical and doubting. Though the latter may be easier—as it was for Zechariah—I believe that at Christ’s birth new opportunities came for him to be born in our hearts and relationships.

It is hard to believe that the hearts of adults would turn toward a child, that erring souls would turn to wisdom. A social worker places children from neglectful homes into foster care. A therapist deals with the mentally ill. Teachers deal with rival gangs. They ask, “When will this day dawn?”

The power of love strengthens my belief that the day is still dawning. John’s mandate, “to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (v. 17), is still working its mysterious power in the hearts of people today.

—Craig Morton

Shake from me the cynical expectations for the worst in my world to happen, and replace the doubt with hope that your Word will not return to you fruitless.

Devotional 4

This is what the Lord has done for me.
—Luke 1:25

Annie M’Bwana, 23, cuddled her tiny son in a room with women theologians, students, and church leaders from six African countries.

In 2002, Annie heard that African women theologians would meet in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. She was determined to join them. With little money Annie managed to get a flight to Zimbabwe. Due to red tape at the Harare airport, she and wee Jacob missed their connecting flight. The next morning Barbara, a Brethren in Christ sister, put them on a train to Bulawayo.

At the conference, Annie heard African women tell of struggles to be trained

theologically and to be recognized as church leaders. Their stories encouraged her to pursue her studies and the work to which God had called her.

In Luke’s story, Elizabeth endured a long journey of delays, disgrace, and despair. Like Sarah, Rachel, and Hannah before her, she begged God for a son. God heard and answered her prayer. Even in “seclusion” she proclaims the goodness of God.

—Ferne Burkhardt

You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God, I will extol you.
(Psalm 118:28)

Devotional 5

You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.
—Luke 1:31

I remember the moment when a drugstore box test told me that I was pregnant with my second child. It was news I wanted to receive.

Mary’s story is different. She discovers she is “with child” when an unexpected messenger from God tells her the news. Her reaction, “perplexed,” is an understatement. Speechless, dumbfounded, or stunned is more accurate. Yet Mary has the courage to continue the conversation. She listens to the angel and accepts this amazing news.

God may speak in more conventional modes, through a box, as it were. We hear God in the awe of worship, through powerful Scriptures, and in the magnificence of nature.

But sometimes God catches us off guard. A family member, a sales clerk, a hymn speaks to us in a new way. We are perplexed. What does this mean? What does God want me to hear? How should I

respond? To whatever message, we hear the same encouragement as the angel to Mary: “Don’t be afraid.” —Jayne Byler

Open our ears and our eyes today, Lord, to hear you speaking to us. May we listen outside the box for your more perplexing calls.

Devotional 6

For nothing will be impossible with God.
—Luke 1:37

My friend found for her fiancé a one-bedroom apartment near her house—perfect, since they would share a car. That he didn’t have a job didn’t seem to worry her. “If it’s God’s will, it will work out,” she said.

He settled in and applied for an auto mechanic position. The job market was rather dismal, but by the middle of the week he had landed a job.

My friend’s statement of faith echoed Mary’s. For the second time, an angel of the Lord delivered an early, shocking birth announcement, this time to Mary. The angel assured her, “Nothing will be impossible with God.”

While Mary was surprised, she believed that God would bring it about. God’s will is much stronger than any other she could imagine. God could create miracles—even a virgin birth—to accomplish God’s mission. Mary simply accepted that if it is God’s will, there will be a way, for nothing is impossible with God! —Jill Landis

God, if your will involves “impossibilities,” grant us faith to wait for those things to happen. Let us, with Mary, believe that nothing will be impossible for you!

Devotional 7

Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” —Luke 1:38

At nineteen I was working in refugee camps in Thailand. I thought I was taking time off from school to figure out what I wanted to study. The work was mundane, but the experience was extraordinary.

Midway through my term, it happened for me. Standing in a building with walls of mesh wire, a roof of corrugated metal, and surrounded by bags of milk powder, I knew that I was called to church work. I assumed it meant working with refugees, but that was not the case. Living into my calling did not come for years.

In that warehouse I was not sure to what I was saying yes. But I was primed to say yes because my faith community had prepared me. They told stories of people who said yes to God in many ways. They supported those who said yes in ways large and small. It taught the liberating gospel of Jesus.

Did Mary know to what she was saying yes? Perhaps not, but something prepared her to say yes. —Regina Shands Stoltzfus

God, I am grateful that you call your people to participate in your work in the world. Equip me to hear you speak and then to respond with my whole heart.