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Waiting and Hoping

Zechariah and the Angel

Luke 1:1-25; 57-80

The couple in California made front-page news. They were in their mid-sixties, and she was expecting their first child! A week later a photo of the fine-looking immigrant couple from the Philippines and their beautiful baby daughter was released. After forty years their dreams came true.

GROUP DISCUSSION. What thoughts rush into your mind as you consider the story of the California couple?

PERSONAL REFLECTION. Think of an extraordinary personal experience that you could not account for apart from God's unique intervention. What bigger view of God did you learn from that?

Luke begins his Gospel with a similar sensational event—a couple past their reproductive years also having their first

child. But the country into which their son was born was very different from affluent America. Israel was a small, second-rate country occupied by imperial Rome. It is 4 B.C. The people had not heard from God in over four hundred years and were starting to wonder if God had forgotten them. Had he reneged on his many promises to send Messiah to deliver them? *Read Luke 1:1-25.*

1. What do you learn about Luke's reasons for writing and his approach from verses 1-4?

2. Verse 7 tells us that Zechariah and Elizabeth were both barren and aging. What do you think this experience would have been like for them—especially in a culture in which parents and children worked together in a trade or in the fields?

3. God chose this elderly couple for an extraordinary job. Several factors in verses 5-10 give hints of God's reasons for this choice. What might those reasons be?

4. From what you read throughout these verses, how would you describe the angel who appears to Zechariah?

How is this depiction of an angel similar to or different from the ways in which you've seen angels depicted in the media or art?

5. Do you find yourself sympathetic or critical of Zechariah's response of unbelief (vv. 18-22)? Explain your view.

6. How do the people respond to Zechariah when he emerges (vv. 21-22)?

7. Note Elizabeth's response (vv. 24-25). What kinds of emotions do you think she was having during this time?

8. Read Luke 1:57-80. At what point was Zechariah able to speak again (vv. 59-62)?

9. Note that Luke describes people's spontaneous reactions to John's birth three times. What might be Luke's purpose in repeating this fact?

10. The Holy Spirit sharpened Zechariah's faith to see (1) the great acts that God's Redeemer will do (vv. 68-75) and (2) his child's unique relation to this Redeemer (vv. 76-79). Suppose you were one of the neighbors listening to his prophecy. As a devout Jew, which part would have especially stirred you?

11. Reflect on the kind of God you have seen in this chapter. What is this God telling you about how to approach a discouraging situation that you are facing or that you see in the world?

Thank God for being the only source of true hope.

Now or Later

The Advent stories may lead you to want to inquire more about angels. The following passages will give you a good starting place. Hebrews 1 gives an overall understanding of angels to people who then were tempted to worship them (see especially verse 14). Angels were active throughout the Old Testament. They witnessed creation (Job 38:7), destroyed evildoers (Genesis 19:1ff.), have warlike potential (Genesis 32:1-22), restrained a false prophet (Numbers 22:21-35), mediated God's law to Moses (Acts 7:38, 53), served as God's messengers (Judges 6:11-23), aided his servants (1 Kings 19:5-7) and gave military assistance (2 Kings 19:35). They also strengthened Jesus in temptation (Mark 1:13; Luke 22:43) and were present at his resurrection and ascension (Luke 24:4-7; Acts 1:9-11). They guided the apostles in evangelization as well (Acts 8:26; 10:3-8; 12:7-10; 27:23).