

Growing in God's Love

A Story Bible Curriculum

The Birth of Jesus



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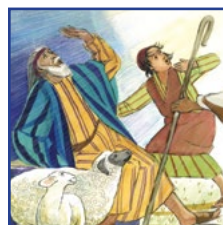
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The Birth of Jesus

Introduction	2
Unit Overview	3
Intergenerational and Home Ideas	4



How Can This Happen?
Luke 1:26-38



Surprise Visitors
Luke 2:8-20



A Prophet Is Born
Luke 1:5-21, 57-80



Visitors from the East
Matthew 2:1-12



A Baby Is Born
Luke 2:1-7

The free At-Home Kit Guide provides instructions and suggestions for at-home faith formation. Download it at www.pcusastore.com/StoryBibleCurriculum or www.thethoughtfulchristian.com/StoryBibleCurriculum. Click on the unit title, and then click on the download button found at the bottom of the product page for this unit.

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Connecting with the Biblical Text

Yet another baby is born to a couple beyond children-bearing years (remember Abraham and Sarah!). God certainly is full of surprises. In Luke, we have a woman yet to be married who is told she will have God's son; now we have an older woman who has prayed for a child for years and is about to give birth to a prophet of God. That's not the only contrast in this story. Mary questions how it could be possible for her to be pregnant when she has not had sexual relations with a man, and Gabriel answers her and gives her time to consider what God is asking of her. But when Zechariah questions the ability of his wife to have a baby at her age, the same Gabriel silences his mouth for expressing an obvious doubt.

When Mary visits Elizabeth, who is six months pregnant (Luke 1:39-55), she says the now-famous Magnificat (vv. 46-55) about her future son. When John is born and being circumcised, Zechariah tells everyone what this tiny boy will accomplish for God. Both mother-to-be and new father are fully aware of what the future holds for their sons.

For more on Zechariah's words about this son, go to bit.ly/ZechariahCommentary.

Connecting with the World

What can we take from Zechariah's message in Luke 1:68-79 of peace, unity, and salvation for the Christian life today?

- ✦ Study the effects of gun violence using the DVD *Trigger: The Ripple Effect of Gun Violence* available at triggerdoc.com. A four-session study guide is also available on the website.
- ✦ Join a neighborhood or community group that seeks to improve communication among neighbors.

- ✦ **Goal:** To consider what God's plan for us may be.
- ✦ Learn about interfaith relations in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) at www.presbyterianmission.org/interfaith, or explore your denominational equivalent.

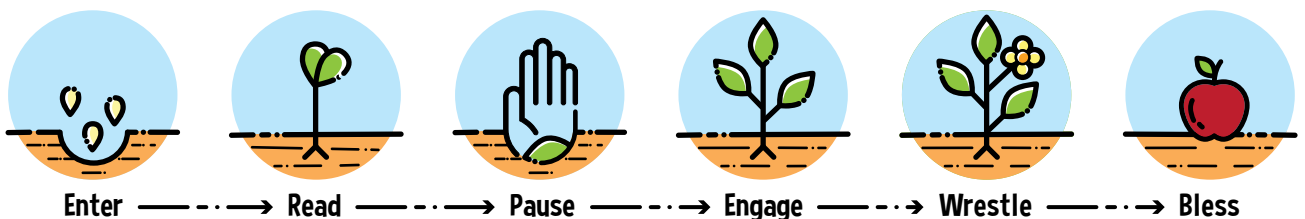
Connecting with the Spiritual Lives of Children

Aside from this being another faith family story to help children connect with the church, this story reveals the plan God has for creation, and particularly humanity. Research in the spiritual lives of children and adolescents by Lisa Miller and reported in *The Spiritual Child* (Picador Paper, 2016) supports what we have always believed in the church: children who grow up knowing that there is a larger purpose for the world and a sense of the divine are prepared to engage with all of life in a positive way. As you talk about this story with children, help them think of Zechariah's speech as a vision rather than a plan to be accomplished in the lifetime of John and Jesus.

Connecting with the Spiritual Lives of Adults

- ✦ What hopes do you have for the children in your life, your own or those of others?
- ✦ Elizabeth and Zechariah waited a long time for a baby. When have you waited for something for a long time? What sustained you during that wait? How was your faith part of it?
- ✦ Meditate on Luke 1:78-79 this week. Pray for peace, God's shalom in its many forms.

Compassionate God, look on us with your steadfast mercy and break open our darkness with your light. Amen.



Gathering Supplies

Based on your choices, you will need:

- ✓ *Growing in God's Love: A Story Bible*
- ✓ Battery-operated candle
- ✓ Resource Page 1
- ✓ Paper lunch bag
- ✓ Biblical costumes
- ✓ Copies of Resource Page 2
- ✓ Props, such as a tablet or pad of paper and a baby doll
- ✓ Incense or fragrant potpourri

Preparing to Lead

Take a deep breath, in and out. Repeat three times. Center yourself in this moment. Then pray this prayer:

Dear God, help me to hear this Scripture in a new way. Fill me with creativity and compassion as I prepare to lead your children. Amen.

Read the story from the Bible, Luke 1:5–21, 57–80 twice, using two different translations. Note any differences in words or phrases between translations. What stands out to you? How do these differences change your understanding of this Scripture? Then read the story “A Prophet Is Born” in *Growing in God's Love: A Story Bible* (p. 188).

Engage with this passage by reflecting on these questions:

- ✓ When have you had to wait a long time for a prayer to be answered? What was this experience of waiting like? How was your faith challenged or changed?
- ✓ Zechariah is startled by the angel Gabriel appearing in the sanctuary. How would you react to an angel appearing to you at church?
- ✓ Why do you think Zechariah asks the angel Gabriel for a sign?
- ✓ How do you think Zechariah felt when he was unable to speak after receiving the good news that his and Elizabeth's prayers had been answered? How might this forced silence have been challenging? How might it have been a gift?
- ✓ What is the most surprising part of this story?
- ✓ What is the story of your birth?
- ✓ Who are you named after and why?
- ✓ What does it feel like to be filled with the Holy Spirit?

- ✓ What parts of Zechariah's vision (vv. 68–79) speak to you most and why?

Now think about the children with whom you will share this story. What questions might they have? What might surprise them? Consider what words or ideas might need to be explained or explored together, such as *temple*, *priest*, *prophet*, and *prophecy*. Imagine the face of each child you will be teaching, and pray for them by name.

Cut apart the cards from Resource Page 1 to use for a game of charades.



Enter into sacred space together.

Invite the children to gather in the seating area. Welcome them each by name, and tell them that you are glad they are there. Sing “My God Is So Big” together. You can learn it by watching the YouTube video “16 My God Is So Big Lyrics 1080pMQ” (bit.ly/MyGodIsSoBigVideo, 2:43) and inviting the children to sing and follow the motions in the video. When the singers hold up stars, have the children wiggle their fingers over their heads, and when the singers play inflatable guitars, invite the children to play the “air guitar.”

Turn on the candle. Invite the children to repeat after you and follow your motions as you pray:

Holy God, (*raise hands in air*) /
help us to listen to your story, (*make cup around ear*) /
to feel your love in our hearts, (*place both hands over heart*) /
and to show your love with our hands. (*extend both hands out with palms up*) /
Amen. /

The Bible refers to God using many names and metaphors, including Yahweh, Mother, Father, Rock, Creator, and Water. Using diverse language for God broadens our understanding of who God is. Throughout the session, consider incorporating a variety of ways of talking about God. For example, in “My God Is So Big,” suggest that the children sing, “The mountains are God’s” rather than “the mountains are his.”

Leading



Read a story of God's people.

Invite the children to listen to a story about Elizabeth and Zechariah and the birth of their son, John. Read the story, "A Prophet Is Born" (p. 188). Pause after the first paragraph. Wonder about stories the children know regarding what their parents or caregivers have said about what their children may grow up to be.

Read the rest of the story.



Pause to let God's Word enter into hearts and minds.

Ask the children to take three deep breaths in and out. Invite them to spend a few minutes in quiet time so that they can think about the story they just heard. Encourage them to wonder about how Zechariah and Elizabeth felt when they were waiting for their prayers to be answered and how they felt when their prayers were answered.



Engage curiosity and imagination with God's story.

Explain that John was Jesus' older relative and that he was born before Jesus. Ask the children if they have any cousins. Share that John was also a prophet. Explain that a prophet is a special person who shares important messages from God. Share that God had a special plan for John's life as a prophet, preparing the way for Jesus. Engage the children in conversation about the story using the following questions to check for understanding:

- What did Elizabeth and Zechariah pray for?
- How long did they wait for their prayers to be answered?
- Where was Zechariah when the angel Gabriel appeared to him?
- What did the angel Gabriel tell Zechariah?
- What happened to Zechariah?
- What was the baby's name?
- What did Zechariah tell his son, John, about his future?

Wonder together:

- How old do you think Zechariah and Elizabeth were?
- How do you think Zechariah felt when he heard the angel Gabriel's message?

- What might it have felt like for Zechariah to be unable to speak and share the big news from the angel?
- How do you think Zechariah felt when he was able to speak again?
- What do you think it means to be filled with the Holy Spirit as Zechariah was? What do you think it feels like?
- How do you think John felt about his future as he grew up knowing God had a special plan for him?

Playing Charades

- Remind the children that Zechariah could not speak until his baby was born. Play a game of charades with the children, explaining that they cannot speak but need to use actions to get others to guess words.
- Fold the cards cut from Resource Page 1 and place them in a paper lunch bag.
- Form two teams. Take turns between teams acting out and guessing the words. Give everyone who would like to act out a word an opportunity to do so.
- After the game, reflect on what it was like not being able to talk and what Zechariah's experience must have been like. Wonder together what would have been fun and what would have been challenging about being unable to speak.

For younger children, rather than breaking into teams, pick one word from the bag, read it aloud, and invite everyone to act it out.



Wrestle with our place in God's story.

Remind the children that God had a special plan for John, the baby born to Zechariah and Elizabeth. Ask them what that special plan was. (*God had a special job for John: to be a prophet.*) Tell the children that John would one day tell people about God sending someone else special for all people: Jesus. And John would baptize Jesus in the Jordan River, preparing him for his ministry.

Choose one or both options:

- When I Grow Up
 - Wonder together what special plan God has for the children. Tell the children that each one of

Leading

them is a child of God, is loved by God, and has a purpose in God's world. Hand out copies of Resource Page 2. Read the prompts aloud, and invite the children to write or draw in the spaces provided. Encourage the children to share, as they wish, what their thoughts are about their futures.

- Singing a Song
 - ✦ Learn the song "Blessed Be the God of Israel," also known as "The Song of Zechariah." It follows Zechariah's prophecy in Luke 1:68–79, praising God for what God will do through John and, ultimately, through a savior.
 - ✦ Read aloud, or invite volunteers to read, the words to the song using the YouTube video "CCS 396 Blessed Be the God of Israel" (bit.ly/BlessedBeHymn, 2:21). The song can also be found in *The Presbyterian Hymnal*, #602. Invite the children to raise a hand or call out any word for which they would like a definition. Use a smartphone or computer to look up definitions, such as "harbinger means a person or thing that announces the approach of another." As definitions are provided, wonder how knowing what that word means helps us understand Zechariah's words. For example, knowing that *redeems* means "to get something back," especially through paying back what is owed, tells us about God getting us, God's people, back after we have turned away to sin.
 - ✦ Play the video again and sing the song together.



Bless one another with God's grace.

Encourage the children to tell the story they heard about Zechariah, Elizabeth, and John to someone during the week.

Invite the children to do a circle prayer. Lead two rounds of prayer requests. For the first round, ask each child to share one thing they are thankful for. For the second round, ask everyone to share someone or something they would like to pray for. Let the children know that they can pass but that you are inviting everyone to participate. To close the prayer, invite everyone to say "Amen" loudly together.



Grow with more.

- Acting It Out
 - ✦ Invite the children to retell the story in their own words, using biblical costumes and props, if desired.
- Picturing the Story
 - ✦ Invite the children to draw or paint a picture of their choice from the list below. Once they have finished their pictures, have them display them in order and tell the story in their own words.
 - The angel Gabriel
 - A picture of Zechariah and Elizabeth
 - Zechariah at the temple
 - A birth announcement for John
 - The community celebrating John's birth
 - A part of Zechariah's prophecy from Luke 1:76–79
- Prayers Ascending
 - ✦ Remind the children that Zechariah was lighting incense and praying when the angel Gabriel appeared to him in the temple. Light incense or pass around fragrant potpourri so that children can experience what it smells like. Hand out paper and have the children write or draw prayers to offer. Then have the children put them in a bowl. After all the prayers are written, sit in a circle, pass around the bowl, and invite each person to pick out a prayer. Pray together, with each child offering another child's prayers. Invite the children to take their friend's prayer home and continue praying for them this week.

Check if any children have sensitivities to fragrance before burning incense or using potpourri.

baby

praise

parents

family

grow

son

daughter

pray

love

old

temple

angel

happy

prophet

good news

speak

name

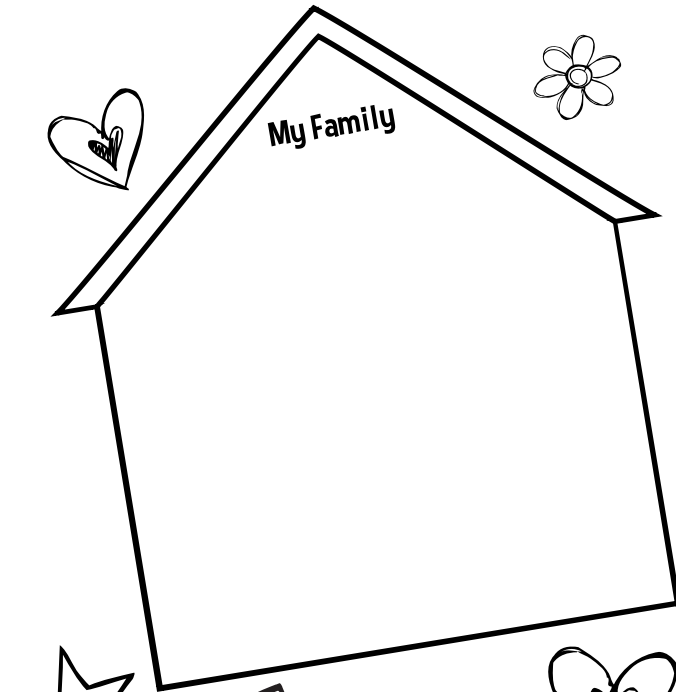
write

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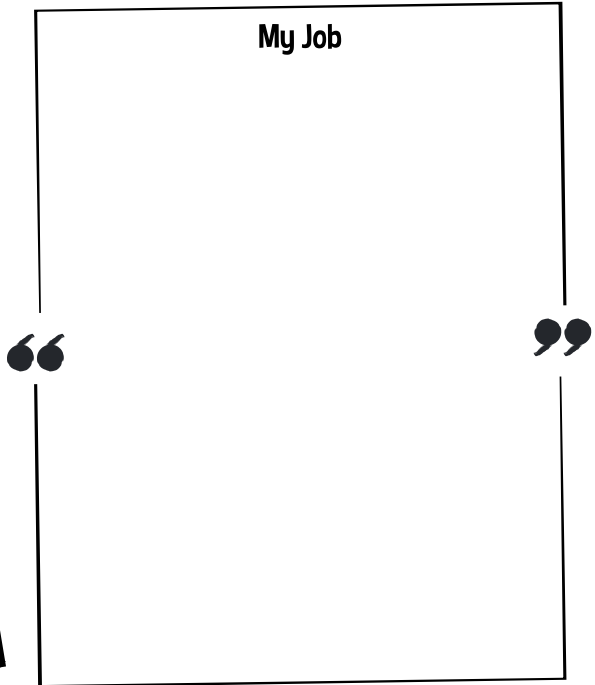
prepare

When I Grow Up

Name _____



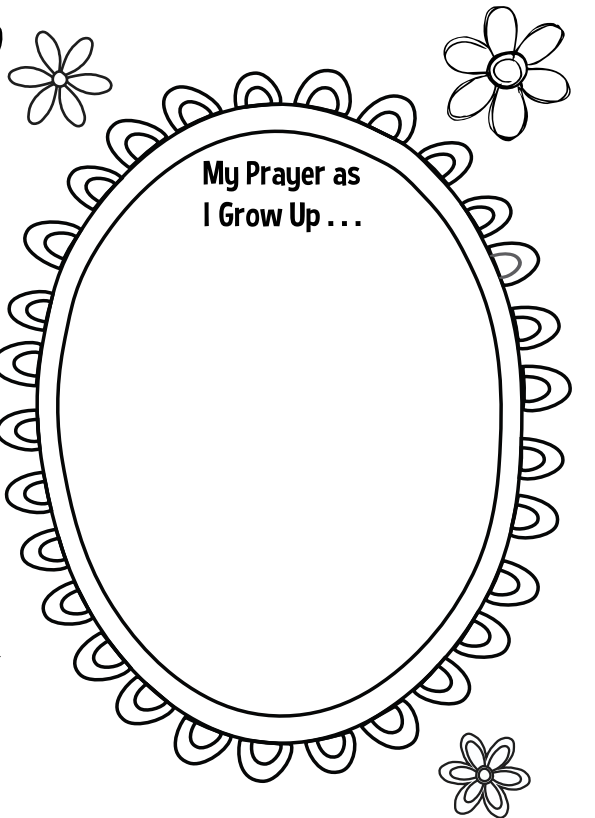
My Family



My Job



I will make God's world a better place by ...



My Prayer as I Grow Up ...

