

Bar. 5:1–9
or Mal. 3:1–4
Luke 1:68–79
Phil. 1:3–11
Luke 3:1–6

Tender Mercy

Goal for the Session

Third- and fourth-graders will hear Zechariah’s prophecy as a word for God’s people and celebrate how God’s love and kindness bring light to darkness.

■ PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on Luke 1:68–79

WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” Robin Gallaher Branch

Although Zechariah’s is quite possibly the most endearing, heartwarming prophecy over a child in the biblical text, what makes the prophecy so compelling is that Zechariah is not primarily concerned about himself or about his miraculous son. Instead, Zechariah’s prophecy exalts God, points to the dominant work of the Dayspring, and foretells God’s tender mercies on upcoming generations of God’s covenant people. Zechariah conveys a sense of wonder that he is part of it. He—with all his arrogance and unbelief—basks now in the love, forgiveness, mercy of God.

WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” Rosetta E. Ross

Zechariah identifies John as one who makes way for the work of the incarnation by delivering knowledge about salvation and forgiveness. Offered because of God’s “tender mercy,” the forgiveness coming through the incarnation will make it possible to see differently. New sight, resulting from the dawn breaking in and giving light, insinuates possible paradigm shifts and the reversals identified with Luke’s Gospel. Perhaps those identified as enemies earlier in the song may become friends. In fact, Luke’s Gospel and Acts feature many such reconciliations—the conversions of Zacchaeus and Paul and the openness to Gentiles being typical.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,” Randle R. Mixon

This ancient hymn is set in two parts. The first deals with social redemption, salvation of the people; the second addresses more personal redemption, salvation of the soul. Repentance that leads to forgiveness is to be John’s message, repentance and redemption that are both personal and corporate. We now look deeply into our hearts to see what changes may be needed, to understand where we must turn around and head in a different direction in our lives. We also ask where repentance and redemption are needed in the social and political realities of the world in which we live.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,” Randle R. Mixon

Zechariah’s hymn makes clear that true peace—in our hearts and in our world—will come only when we are right with God, when we have laid aside our own ambitions and passions, or at least turned them over to God. The condition of souls and the condition of creation is troubled by self-centeredness, self-absorption, and failure to understand what is available in true communion with God, what God has offered us in the ancient covenant and offers us still in the coming of Jesus, the Christ. Though we may live in between times, when we do not yet fully walk in the way of peace, Zechariah promises that his little boy, John, will prepare us to bridge those times as we live toward God’s reign in hope.

FOCUS SCRIPTURE

Luke 1:68–79

YOU WILL NEED

- blue or purple cloth or place mat
- 4 votive candles and holders
- matches or lighter
- Color Pack 1, 2
- Singing the Feast*, 2021–2022; CD player
- Bible
- copies of Resource Sheet 1
- copies of Resource Sheet 2, materials listed there

For Responding

- option 1: honeycomb beeswax sheets, candle wicking, ribbon, index cards, hole punch, markers
- option 2: copier paper, black construction paper, pencils, scissors, tape, crayons or colored chalk
- option 3: 2 soft balls; Color Pack 29; *Singing the Feast*, 2021–2022; CD player

Some churches use the color blue in worship during Advent as a symbol of hope. Some churches use purple, a color of royalty, to honor the coming of our king, Jesus.

Focus on Your Teaching

Children don't need much prompting to share their stories of scary, dark places. Whether they remember using a nightlight, a power outage during a storm, or the sometimes scary experience of being at camp at night, they will understand the power of light being brought into darkness. On this second Sunday of Advent we explore Zechariah's words and the promise they bear—God's light and mercy chase away the shadowy darkness of our lives. This promise is for your learners and for you, and has been fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

Loving God, thank you for flooding my life with your mercy and your light. Help me to share the light of your love with all your children. Amen.

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Before the session, if open flames are not allowed in your Sunday school, bring battery-powered votives instead of candles and matches. Plan to use the same color cloth or place mat that your church uses in worship during Advent. (See the sidebar.) If you are using option 1 in Responding, purchase honeycomb beeswax sheets and candle wicking from a craft store. Cut the beeswax sheets into a 3" x 6" or 4" x 8" rectangles, one per child.

Greet learners by name as they arrive. Work with learners to place the blue or purple cloth or place mat in the center of your learning space and arrange four votive candles in a circle on it. Show Color Pack 1 and ask a volunteer to point to the season of Advent, the season when Christians give thanks for God's promises and prepare to celebrate the birthday of Jesus Christ. Remind learners that there are four candles because there are four Sundays in Advent. Invite learners to sing "Dona Nobis Pacem" (track 5 on *Singing the Feast*, 2021–2022) as you light two candles. After the song, pray aloud:

Dear God, like light in darkness, your promises give us hope! Be with us and guide us as we prepare to celebrate Jesus' birthday. Amen.

Extinguish the candles.

Display Color Pack 2. Invite learners to name situations in which they would want to have a flashlight and why. Ask them to name different kinds of light they have experienced, including natural light, artificial light, tiny lights that make a big difference, and bigger lights that help to focus attention on something.

Invite learners to recall times or places where darkness felt very scary to them.

✠ When the darkness is scary, who or what helps you to feel better?

Say that today's Bible reading talks about light and darkness.

The part for The Dawn is very short and might be a good choice for learners who are not confident in reading aloud.

Dona Nobis Pacem

Dona nobis pacem, pacem.
Dona nobis pacem.

Using an inflated paper bag puppet without a moving mouth allows students to focus on the words of the story, rather than the distraction of movement and noise that comes with traditional bag puppets.

EXPLORING

Open your Bible to Luke 1 and say this is where today's Bible story is found. Remind learners that Luke is one of the four Gospels—the books in the Bible that tell the stories of Jesus' life on earth. Today's story happens a short time before Jesus is born.

Explain that the group will work together to tell this story as a puppet play. Form three groups. Assign one group to be Zechariah, another to be Elizabeth, and a third to be The Dawn. Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 (Zechariah and Elizabeth) and Resource Sheet 2 (Paper Bag Puppets). Set out the puppet-making supplies listed on Resource Sheet 2. Say that each learner will make a puppet to use in the puppet play. (For example, each one in the Zechariah group will make a Zechariah puppet.) Explain that small groups will read their parts in unison.

Allow time for puppet construction, and then ask learners to sit in a circle with their puppets and copies of Resource Sheet 1. Perform the play, with learners holding their puppets in front of their faces when they read their group's part.

After the puppet play, encourage learners to refer to Resource Sheet 1 as you discuss the Bible story:

- ✎ Why were Zechariah and Elizabeth surprised when the angel said they would have a child?
- ✎ What happened when Zechariah doubted the angel?
- ✎ What did they name their son?
- ✎ What job did God plan for their son?
- ✎ How does Zechariah talk about light?
- ✎ How do you think it made Zechariah and Elizabeth feel to know that God was sending their son to prepare people to meet God's promised Savior?
- ✎ Who is God's promised Savior?

Read in unison Zechariah's words of hope (Luke 1:78–79), found near the end of the script on Resource Sheet 1. Point out how Zechariah celebrates God's love and kindness. Ask:

- ✎ What does it mean that God's love and kindness shine on us? How might this happen?

RESPONDING

Mark the activities you will use:

1. **Peace Lights** Learners will make candles to give to someone as a sign of God's kind and loving light, Jesus. Give each child a precut sheet of beeswax and a 3½-inch or 4½-inch piece of candle wick. Demonstrate how to press the wick into one edge of the smooth side of the beeswax, being careful to leave ½ inch extending beyond the edge of the wax. Then, slowly roll from the wick edge, rolling the sheet as tightly as possible. Ask each learner to think of a person to receive his or her candle as a gift. Provide index cards and markers to make gift tags. Have learners write the following verse on their gift tags: "This light will shine to guide us into a life of peace." (Luke 1:79, CEV)



FEASTING on the WORD

CURRICULUM



EASY PREP

Ways to be God's people of peace include being kind, being truthful, forgiving others, asking for forgiveness, caring for those who suffer, praying, and more.

Some ways to prepare to celebrate Jesus' birth: pray, sing Christmas carols, take part in a choir concert or Sunday school program, read the Bible, invite friends to a church program or worship service, help people who need help, send Christmas cards to people who are sick or lonely, do random acts of kindness.

2. **Guide Our Feet** Learners will celebrate how God's love and kindness guide them through times of darkness. Distribute copier paper and pencils. Ask learners to trace their feet on the paper and cut out the footprints. Distribute black construction paper. Have learners use loops of tape to attach their footprints to the paper. Demonstrate how to hold the footprint securely with one hand and use the other hand to push chalk or crayon marks off the edge of each footprint, all the way around to create a sunburst effect. Have learners remove the footprints and use a white or yellow crayon to write "Guide us" inside the left foot outline and "into a life of peace." inside the right foot outline. Brainstorm ways learners can be God's people of peace. Encourage learners to talk with their families about how God's light, Jesus, can guide them each day.

3. **Prepare the Way Game** Learners will play a game and consider the ways they can prepare for the birth of Jesus. Remind learners that Zechariah and Elizabeth's son, John, grew up to be John the Baptist, the one who prepared people to meet Jesus. Sit with the children in a circle. Explain that you will play some Christmas music as the group passes two balls around the circle. When the music stops, the children holding balls will each tell one way to prepare to celebrate Jesus' birth. Play "O Little Town of Bethlehem" (Color Pack 29; track 16 on *Singing the Feast, 2021–2022*) or other Christmas music, pausing from time to time for learners to respond. After the game, ask learners to tell which ways to prepare for Christmas are their favorites.

CLOSING

Gather with learners around the Advent candles and light two. Ask:

- ✠ How are God's love and kindness like lights in the darkness?
- ✠ How does your family prepare to celebrate Jesus' birth?

Explain that you will close with a circle blessing. Begin by turning to the child on your left and saying: "(Name), God bless you with love and hope." This child then blesses the child on his or her left, and so on.

Thank learners for coming and tell them you are looking forward to seeing them next week.

Zechariah and Elizabeth based on Luke 1

- Zechariah:** My name is Zechariah. I live in Israel with my wife, Elizabeth.
- Elizabeth:** We both follow God’s laws and love God very much.
- Zechariah:** We are very old.
- Elizabeth:** We had given up hope of ever having children.
- Zechariah:** One day, I was in the temple when an angel appeared to me. I was afraid!
- Elizabeth:** The angel told Zechariah that I would have a baby!
- Zechariah:** I didn’t believe the angel, and the angel made it so I could not speak.
- Elizabeth:** When we took our baby son to the temple to give thanks to God, Zechariah could speak again. People were amazed.
- Zechariah:** I was filled with joy!
- Elizabeth:** The angel had told us that our baby had an important job. He would prepare the way for God’s promised Savior.
- Zechariah:** I felt like I had been sitting in the dark, but then God was merciful to me.
- The Dawn:** God promised to give us light in our lives that would be like the dawn. (*Hold The Dawn over Zechariah and Elizabeth.*)
- Zechariah:** God’s love and kindness
will shine upon us
like the sun that rises
in the sky.
On us who live
in the dark shadow
of death
this light will shine
to guide us
into a life of peace. (Luke 1:78–79, CEV)
- Elizabeth:** God sent our baby, John, to prepare people to meet Jesus, God’s own light!

Paper Bag Puppets

Your class will perform a circle puppet play to tell the Bible story. There are three characters in the play. Your teacher will tell you which part you will play. Make the puppet you will use:

- Elizabeth (an old woman)
- Zechariah (an old man)
- The Dawn (a sunrise with a heart in it)

For each puppet, you will need:

- 1 paper lunch bag
- 1 paint stir stick or tongue depressor
- masking tape
- markers
- newspaper

Directions:

1. Lay the lunch bag on the table, with the flat side facing you. Be sure the sealed end of the bag is at the top!
2. Use markers to draw the face and hair of your character. (For The Dawn, draw a colorful sunrise with a heart inside it.) Use the entire space.
3. Gently blow air into the lunch bag so that it puffs up.
4. Stuff the bag with a few loosely crumpled pieces of paper.
5. Close the open edge of the bag around a paint stir stick or tongue depressor. Use masking tape to hold the edge of the bag in place.
6. Hold up your puppet as you read your part of the play.

