

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

# Preparing the Way

**Goal for the Session**

*Hearing Zechariah’s prophecy about John the Baptist’s role and message, adults will ponder preparing for the work of incarnation.*

## ■ 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?**

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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**

## Focus on Your Teaching

While it is only the second week of Advent, the Christmas shopping season has been under way for some time. Before All Saints' Day, Christmas glitter replaced orange and black Halloween decorations on store shelves. The culture's consumer messages are relentless and seductive. Even adults who thrive on nonstop carols may be tiring of the commercial barrage that assaults us at every turn, encouraging us to equate piles of stuff with happiness. The themes of Advent—and the meaning of preparation—are very different. Adults may welcome pausing to refocus their attention and energy on an alternative message.

*Holy God, draw me into the silence of Advent, that I may lead others in encountering you. Amen.*

### YOU WILL NEED

- newsprint or board
- markers
- Bibles
- Resource Sheet 2
- copies of Resource Sheet 1
- Advent wreath
- Advent candles; 3 purple, one pink (suggested)
- matches or lighter
- copies of Resource Sheet 1 for December 12, 2021

### For Responding

- option 1: Resource Sheet 2
- option 2: newsprint, markers
- option 3: drawing paper, colored markers or crayons

## LEADING THE SESSION

### GATHERING

*Before the session*, print the following on a board or newsprint: *Be prepared!* Read over the monologue and decide if you will be the reader, or recruit a reader and provide him or her with a copy of Resource Sheet 2 (The Silent Musings of Zechariah).

Welcome participants. Point out that the posted phrase is the Boy Scout motto, but it can be said to apply to the holiday season as well. Ask participants:

- ✠ How are your preparations for Christmas going?
- ✠ How are you preparing spiritually for the birth of Jesus?

Tell participants that in this session, they will explore a kind of preparation that contrasts sharply with the commercial preparations for the holiday.

Remind participants that last session, they lit the first Advent candle, the candle of hope. Traditionally, the second Sunday of Advent focuses on peace. Light two Advent candles and invite participants to sit in silence for a moment. Pray the following:

*Come, Lord Jesus. We long to encounter you and your peace in the midst of the culture's frenzy. Open our eyes to your presence with us today. Amen.*

### EXPLORING

To set the context for the focus scripture, form two groups. Ask one group to read Luke 1:5–24 and the other Luke 1:57–66 and then prepare a brief summary. Invite groups to quickly describe for the total group the events in their passage. Discuss:

- ✠ How might Elizabeth have prepared for the birth of a baby she had never expected to bear?
- ✠ What do you think might have been her response to her husband's silence?
- ✠ In pondering what had happened, what question did friends and neighbors have?

The metaphor of light figures prominently in Advent Scriptures and rituals. In this focus passage, light serves to give new sight and the ability to see things differently.

For some adults, familiarity with the Christmas story may be confined to the account of Jesus' actual birth. A quick review of Zechariah's story can shed light on his song and clarify it for participants with less biblical background.

Tell the group that they will now hear what might have been going on in Zechariah's mind and heart during his months of enforced silence. Invite the group to listen as you (or the recruited reader) read the monologue from Resource Sheet 2 (The Silent Musings of Zechariah). Ask:

- ✧ Here we imagine Zechariah musing on the profound changes he was undergoing, preparing for the birth of a son. What kinds of changes do you think they might have been?

Invite participants to imagine being part of the crowd hearing Zechariah's prophecy as you read aloud Luke 1:67–79. Ask:

- ✧ What questions do you have about what Zechariah had to say?
- ✧ What role is Zechariah playing in preparing the way for the coming savior?
- ✧ What role does his prophecy articulate for his son John?
- ✧ What does Zechariah say will be John's message?

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Luke 1:68–79). Ask participants to read the "What?" and the "Where?" excerpts silently. Discuss:

- ✧ Zechariah, a priest and a member of the ruling elite, proclaims that new sight allows us to see things differently. How does his perspective appear to have altered in his time of silence?
- ✧ God's "tender mercies" are the source of what is to come. How would you define this term?
- ✧ If you had been listening to Zechariah's prophecy, what kind of peace do you think you would have expected to result from seeing things differently?

To transition to Responding, ask the group now to silently read the "So What?" excerpt. Invite the group to reflect in silence on the following:

- ✧ The writer suggests that we need to ask where repentance and redemption are needed in our own lives and in the social and political realities of the world. How would you answer that question?

## RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities depending on the length of your session.

- 1. Preparing to Prepare the Way** Adults can consider the Advent practice of silent reflection to help to prepare themselves to prepare the way for God's realm. Keeping in mind Zechariah's possible musings in Resource Sheet 2 (The Silent Musings of Zechariah), invite participants to form pairs to discuss the following:
  - ✧ What physical, emotional, and psychological preparations does a prospective parent make during the gestational period (or between the initiation of adoption and when it is finalized)?
  - ✧ The weeks of Advent, when we prepare for the Messiah's birth, mirror the time of preparation for parenthood. What practices might help us to make the necessary changes so that we might participate more fully in the work of incarnation in the world?
  - ✧ Consider the role of silent reflection in today's text. How might times of silence function to open one's heart to the Spirit's guidance?

EASY  
PREP

Encourage adults to consider incorporating periods of silence in their devotional time for the remaining weeks of Advent, seeking guidance in identifying ways to prepare for and participate in the coming of God's reign.

- 2. Places Needing Redemption** Adults can help prepare the way for the work of the incarnation by naming aspects in their own lives and situations in the world that are in need of redemption and repentance, then identifying what their role might be. Recall for participants the question posed in the transition activity and ask adults to name situations or places that came to mind. List them on a sheet of newsprint. Together, select two or three places or situations and form small groups to discuss them. Ask groups to come up with steps that require their own personal repentance—ways to turn around our own behaviors and attitudes, as well as one or two concrete actions to address the issue.

Encourage adults to commit to taking one small step during the remainder of Advent.

- 3. Create an Advent Pathway** By creating a visual representation of a pathway and identifying ways it can be made straight, adults can claim their own role in preparing the way for God's reign. Distribute drawing paper and colored markers or crayons. Invite participants to sketch out a "path in the wilderness," with mountains and valleys, crooked and rough places. Then ask them to print on the path one or two places or situations in need of repentance. Under each situation, have them label their pathway with a step they might take to make way for the work of incarnation. Ask them to take their drawings home as a reminder to commit to one step, if only to pray for forward movement toward God's reign.

## CLOSING

Remind the group that the second Sunday in Advent traditionally focuses on peace. Ask someone to read aloud the "Now What?" excerpt, and invite participants to consider those things that block us from true peace. In the Gathering activity, adults considered how they are preparing spiritually for the birth of Jesus. In Advent, our preparation is ongoing, moving us toward the reign of God.

Pray the following:

*Come, Lord Jesus. Give us the vision to see things in a new light. Illuminate where repentance and redemption are needed. Prepare us to be agents of transformation. In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for December 12, 2021, or e-mail it to the participants during the week. Encourage participants to read the focus scripture and Resource Sheet 1 before the next session.

## Focus on Luke 1:68–79

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## The Silent Musings of Zechariah

It has been nine months since I was able to speak. I, a member of the elite—a priest, someone with considerable status in this society. I, a personage with plenty to say, rendered mute!

How well I remember the astonishing event that plunged me into silence. It was my time of service, and I had entered the sanctuary to offer incense as part of my priestly duties. Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared at the right side of the altar. When I recall the shock of that encounter, I can almost feel the terror all over again!



And the angel's message was almost as shocking as his sudden appearance. It seemed that my wife, Elizabeth—as advanced in years as I—was to bear a son.

Despite my terror, I could hardly let such an incredible assertion go unchallenged, even if it came from an angel. After all, I am a priest. I am used to speaking my mind and being listened to. "How will I know this is so?" I asked. "For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." And in response to my challenge—my unbelief, my skepticism, and, yes, I admit it, my arrogance—I found my tongue stopped.

But in these months since, I have watched as my wife's belly grew large as she prepared for what neither she nor I ever believed would happen, the birth of a child. I found myself undergoing profound changes, too. Just as the child was growing within his mother, in my silence, God's spirit was at work in me, preparing my spirit for what would come. Just eight days ago, an event of unspeakable joy took place when my son was born. And today in his naming, my tongue has been loosened, and speech again has burst forth—not in skepticism or challenge, but in joy.