

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

Zechariah's Blessing

Goal for the Session *Children will hear how Zechariah sang about God's promises for John's life and for theirs, and respond with peaceful actions.*

■ 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

Focus on Your Teaching

Children this age think in concrete and literal ways, and their ideas about God's peace are likely to be defined by actions. They have been part of arguments and have witnessed others behaving in contentious ways. They can appreciate that all people can learn more peaceful ways of responding. They also can envision doing peaceful actions. Expect the children to be a bit more restless this month. It may help to offer a wider variety of activity levels and learning spaces during the session.

*God of peace, thank you for the gift of the vision of peace in the Scriptures.
Fill me with your wisdom and love as I teach. Amen.*

YOU WILL NEED

- ❑ Bible
- ❑ Resource Sheet 1, materials listed there
- ❑ Color Pack 1, 2, 27, 28
- ❑ *Singing the Feast, 2021–2022*; CD player

For Responding

- ❑ option 1: *Singing the Feast, 2021–2022*; CD player; Internet-connected device (optional)
- ❑ option 2: copies of Resource Sheet 2 on card stock, scissors, glue sticks, hole punch, markers, crayons, yarn
- ❑ option 3: copies of Resource Sheet 3

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Before the session, if you did not prepare an Advent wreath for the November 29 session, make one according to the directions on Resource Sheet 1 (Preparing for Advent) and attach a paper flame to one of the paper candles. If you are using option 1 in Responding, become familiar with the song “Dona Nobis Pacem” (track 5 on *Singing the Feast, 2021–2022*).

Welcome each child by name. Invite them to tell about any guests their families are expecting at Christmastime. Ask how their families prepare for guests.

Gather with learners around the Advent wreath and explain that today is the second Sunday in the season of Advent, the time when Christians prepare to celebrate Christmas. Remind them about the meaning of the color of the candles. Recall that the candle with the flame is the first Advent candle of hope. Attach the flame to the second candle, saying that this is the candle of peace. Invite learners to offer definitions of the word *peace*. Affirm that we have peace because God is always with us. Pray aloud, asking learners to repeat each phrase:

*Loving God, / thank you for being with us today. / Help us to learn more
/ about the peace you give. / Amen.*

Show Color Pack 27. Introduce the words to the second stanza of “God, We Sing” (Color Pack 27; track 21 on *Singing the Feast, 2021–2022*). Sing stanzas 1 and 2.

EXPLORING

Open your Bible to Luke 1:68–79 and say that this is where the story is found. Show Color Pack 1 and introduce the characters of Zechariah (seated at table) and Elizabeth, holding baby John. Tell the story, using the following script:

Zechariah (zeh-kuh-RAI-uh) will be an unusual name for most children, but they will enjoy learning to say it. Have them repeat it several times.

God, We Sing

1. God, we sing with praise
to you,
Light the flame of *hope*
anew;
Light this candle, light the
way,
Bring *hope* into our hearts
today.
Jesus, near us as we pray,
Let *hope* be in our hearts
today.

2. God, we sing with praise
to you,
Light the flame of *peace*
anew; . . .

Zechariah was a priest, a worship leader in the temple. He and his wife, Elizabeth, had wanted a baby for a long time. After many years, God's angel told Zechariah that they would have a son, whose name was to be John. Zechariah didn't believe it, so the angel took away Zechariah's ability to speak! When their son was born, their neighbors and families celebrated with them.

When the baby was eight days old, Zechariah and Elizabeth took him to the temple. The people there were going to name the baby Zechariah, after his father. But Elizabeth said, "No! His name is John." There was an argument. The people in the temple looked at Zechariah to find out what he wanted to name his son.

Zechariah took a tablet and wrote, "His name is John." Right away, Zechariah started speaking again! He praised God. In fact, Zechariah was so excited that he sang about the good things God promised to do. He sang about two people—his son, John, and the one who would be God's promised Savior.

Zechariah sang that God's savior was coming to bring God's love and mercy. This promised one would turn enemies into friends. He would give people the courage to do good things. He would bring peace.

Then Zechariah sang about his son, John. He said that God had blessed John to help people prepare to meet God's savior. John would tell the good news of God's savior. Zechariah said God would bless John and help him to do this important job.

When John was an adult, he met Jesus. God's Spirit told him that Jesus was God's promised savior. And John told everyone he met to follow Jesus.

Ask:

- ✪ What things in the story surprised you?
- ✪ Why do you think Zechariah sang about the good things God was promising to do?
- ✪ What job did Zechariah say his son, John, would do?

Form pairs, and designate one child in each pair as Zechariah and the other as John. Have the children portraying Zechariah speak God's blessing to the children portraying John. Have them tell the work God is blessing them to do. Have partners switch roles and repeat.

Show Color Pack 2, inviting learners to tell what story it shows. As needed, say that this picture illustrates the story of Jesus' birth. The words are ones that Zechariah spoke. Explain that the word *light* refers to God's promised Savior, Jesus. Wonder together what Zechariah meant when he said God's savior would "guide us into a life of peace" (Luke 1:79, CEV).

- ✪ What might you do to live in peaceful ways as you prepare to celebrate the birthday of Jesus, God's promised Savior?

**EASY
PREP**

Option: To view a children's choir singing "Dona Nobis Pacem," go to www.youtube.com/watch?v=gKz_aBRhClk.

Dona Nobis Pacem

Dona nobis pacem, pacem.
Dona nobis pacem.

Dance and Sing

Dance and sing, for God
will be with you,
Glory, hallelujah!
Dance and sing, for God
will be with you,
Glory, hallelujah!

Refrain:

Dance and sing for joy,
Glory, hallelujah!
Dance and sing for joy,
Glory, hallelujah!

Repeat stanza and refrain
one time
Repeat refrain three times

RESPONDING

Mark the activities you will use:

1. **"Dona Nobis Pacem"** Singing a song will reinforce Zechariah's message for the children. Ask learners to listen to "Dona Nobis Pacem" (track 5 on *Singing the Feast*, 2021–2022). Have them repeat the words after you. Explain that this song is a prayer. The words mean "Give us peace." Sing the song together. Ask: When might you sing this song, either aloud or to yourself? When might you sing it alone? When might you sing it with others? Why is God's peace important?
2. **Peace Ornament** Children will create a concrete symbol for peace to hang on a Christmas tree. Give each child a copy of Resource Sheet 2 (Peace Ornament). Lead learners in following the directions on the resource sheet. Read the words on the ornament in unison. Invite learners to tell what colors, shapes, and images remind them of peace. Have them use markers or crayons to decorate both sides of the ornament to tell about God's peace that comes to us through Jesus, the Savior. Encourage learners to hang their ornaments on a Christmas tree or other place at home. Ask: What will you tell your family about God's peace? What might you pray together?
3. **Finding Peace** As they discuss contemporary stories, learners will name peaceful actions they might take. Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 3. Read aloud the story of Lily. Form groups of three to talk about the story and to think of peaceful actions that could be taken in that situation. Have each small group tell their ideas to the entire class. Follow up by asking what learners would do if they were Lily. Repeat this process for the story of Andre.

Invite learners to tell how knowing about God's peace might help them when faced with a situation that is not peaceful.

CLOSING

Gather around the Advent wreath and invite learners to tell what they will remember about Zechariah, Elizabeth, and John. As the group sings "Dance and Sing" (Color Pack 28; track 3 on *Singing the Feast*, 2021–2022), change the words in the refrain to "Dance and sing for peace."

Invite the children to pray with you, saying "give us peace" when you point to them:

God, when we are worried,

give us peace.

When we are not sure of what we should do,

give us peace.

When someone is not kind to us,

give us peace.

We pray for peace in our homes and in our world. Amen.

Bless each child by saying, "(Name), God bless you and fill your heart with peace."

Preparing for Advent

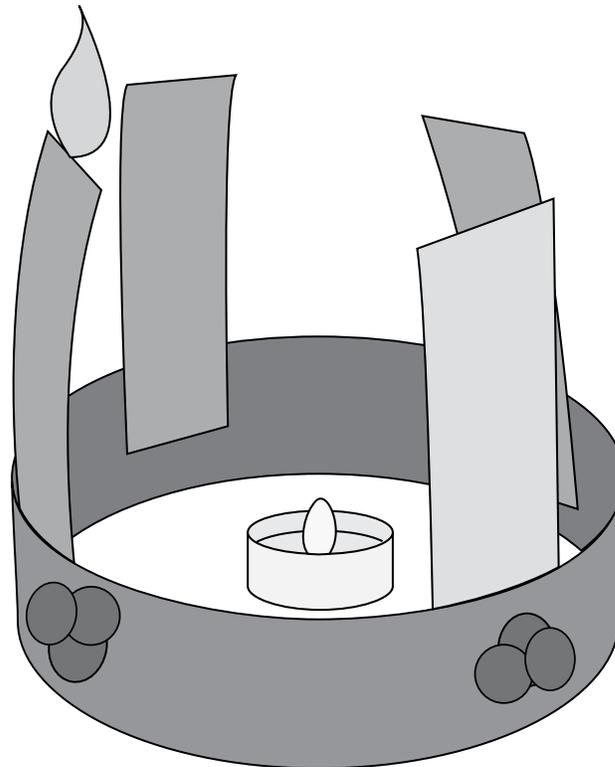
YOU WILL NEED

- purple or blue place mat, napkin, or cloth
- green construction paper
- blue or purple construction paper
- pink construction paper (optional)
- yellow construction paper
- scissors
- stapler
- markers
- tape
- battery-powered candle

Note: During Advent, some churches use the color blue as a symbol of hope. Some churches use purple, a color of royalty, to honor the coming of our king, Jesus. In your class, use the same color your church uses in worship during Advent.

Directions:

1. Cut two 3" x 12" strips from green construction paper. Staple them to form a circle (to be the wreath).
2. Cut four 2" x 9" rectangles (to be the candles) from purple or blue construction paper, using the color your church uses during Advent. Option: If your congregation uses one pink candle in its Advent wreath, replace one of the purple or blue rectangles with a pink one.
3. Space these four paper candles around the wreath and staple them in place. (See diagram below.)
4. Use markers to decorate the outside of the wreath as desired.
5. Cut four large teardrop shapes from yellow construction paper to be the "flames." You will tape a flame to one candle each week.
6. Choose a place to set the Advent wreath, perhaps in the center of the table where you meet. Put a blue or purple place mat, napkin, or cloth under it.
7. Put a battery-powered candle in the center of the wreath.

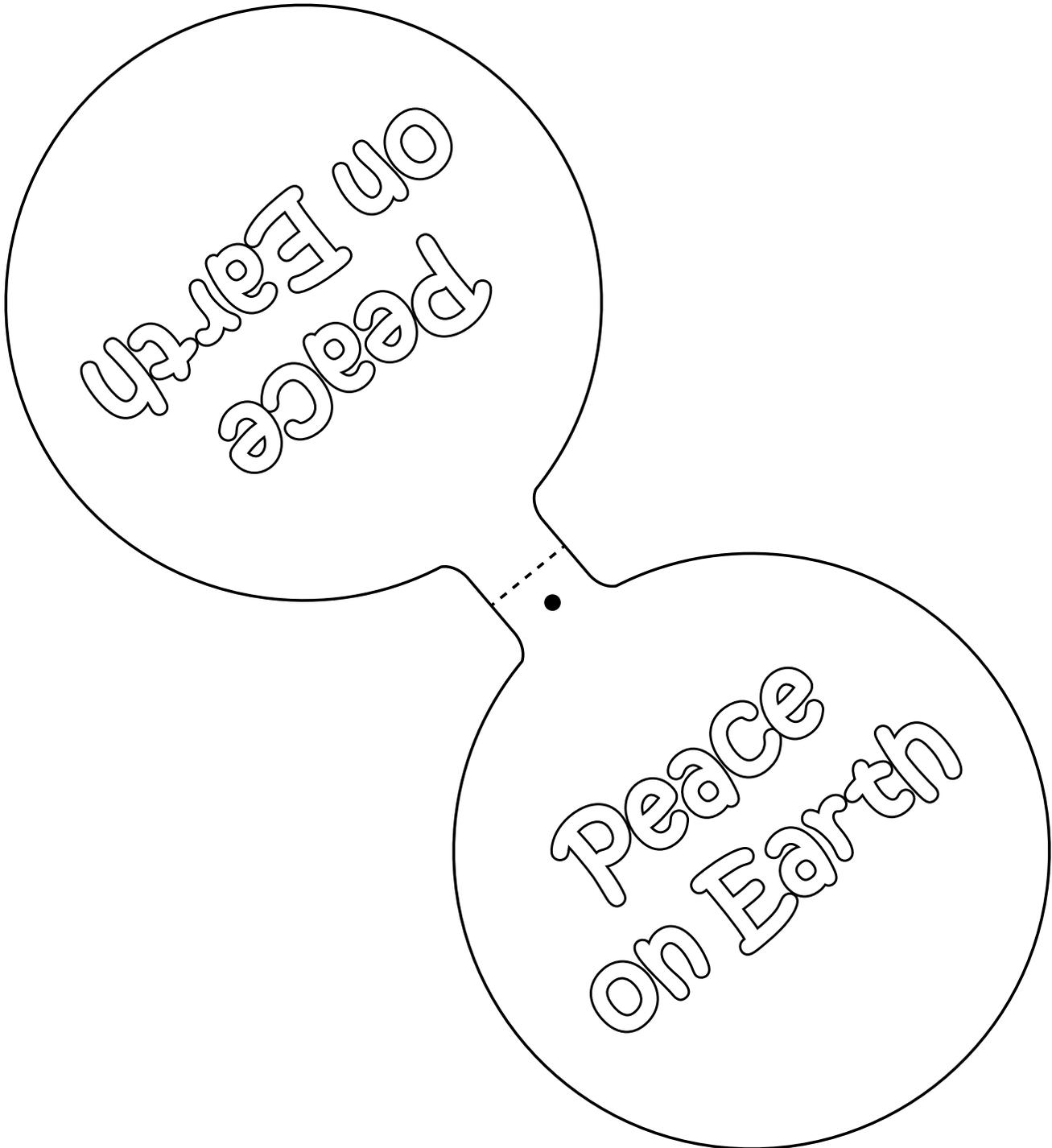


December 5, 2021
Zechariah's Blessing

Grades K-2
Resource Sheet 2

Peace Ornament

Directions: Cut out the double-circle shape, being careful not to cut the circles apart. Fold on the dotted line so that the two circles line up with each other. Glue the circles together. Use a hole punch to punch a hole on the black circle. Put a 12" piece of yarn through the hole and tie it to make a loop for hanging.



December 5, 2021
Zechariah's Blessing

Grades K–2
Resource Sheet 3

Finding Peace



Lily shares a bedroom with her sister, Emma. Lately, they can't seem to stop fighting! They tease each other. They take each other's things. They tattle on each other. Lily feels like there is no peace at home. What peaceful actions might make things better? Who might take these actions?



Andre plays on a soccer team. Lately, the team members can't seem to stop fighting! They say mean things to each other. They do not take turns with the ball. They do not listen to the coach. They push and shove each other. Andre gets a stomachache just thinking about soccer practice. What peaceful actions might make things better? Who might take these actions?

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

Turn Around

**Goal for
the Session**

Tweens will engage with Zechariah’s prophecy and discuss ways to practice repentance this Advent.

■ 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?

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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?

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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

From a young age most tweens have been urged to say, “I’m sorry” when they’ve hurt someone. They likely have had others apologize to them on occasion. Tweens are beginning to grow in understanding that any declarations of remorse must be accompanied by a change in behavior in order to be sincere and meaningful. Use this understanding to tackle the concept of repentance. Although the focus of this session is on the practice of repentance, it also provides the opportunity to emphasize God’s unfailing love and eagerness to forgive.

YOU WILL NEED

- blue or purple cloth
- shallow bowl
- glass floral beads
- 4 votive candles, matches or battery-powered votives
- Color Pack 1, 2, 28, 30
- Singing the Feast*, 2021–2022; CD player
- copies of Resource Sheet 1
- Bibles
- paper, pens
- colored paper
- scissors

For Responding

- option 1: copies of Resource Sheet 2, pens, envelopes
- option 2: index cards; pens; *Singing the Feast*, 2021–2022; CD player
- option 3: copies of Resource Sheet 2, card stock, scissors, fine-tipped markers, glitter glue, hole punch, yarn

Dona Nobis Pacem

Dona nobis pacem, pacem.
Dona nobis pacem.

God of love, as I examine my own life this Advent, give me wisdom to see where I fail to follow you and the grace to practice meaningful repentance. Amen.

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Before the session, make an Advent bowl by placing a layer of glass floral beads (available at craft stores or florists) in a shallow bowl and nestling four votive candles into the stones. Place a blue or purple cloth (see sidebar) in the center of your learning space and place the Advent bowl on it. Print each of the following Scripture references on a separate slip of paper: Luke 1:1–17; Luke 1:18–25; Luke 1:57–66. If you are using option 3 in Responding, bring several 6-inch circles that learners can trace.

Welcome tweens as they arrive. Gather around the Advent bowl. Welcome them to the Second Sunday of Advent. Remind them that during Advent, Christians hope for the completion of God’s kingdom and prepare to celebrate Jesus’ birthday.

Sing “Dona Nobis Pacem” (Color Pack 28; track 5 on *Singing the Feast*, 2021–2022) as you light two candles as a reminder that Jesus, the light of the world, is coming. Pray aloud:

God, be with us as we wait and hope for the love that will be poured into the world through a baby in a manger. Help us to prepare our hearts for Christmas. Amen.

Extinguish the candles.

Place Color Pack 1 in the middle of the group and challenge learners to use only their eyes to find their way through the maze. Ask:

- ✎ How difficult was it to do this without touching the maze?
- ✎ What did you do when you found yourself going the wrong way?
- ✎ In life, when can it be helpful to turn around and change the way you are going?

Say that the Bible reading today says something about changing directions.

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. In your class, use the same color your church uses in worship.

EXPLORING

Show Color Pack 2 and ask learners to recall what they know about John the Baptist (also called John the Baptizer). Affirm their responses. Say that today's Bible reading is about John's birth. But first, they need to know the backstory.

Distribute Bibles. Form three groups and give each group one of the prepared slips of paper. Instruct groups to read their passage and plan a creative way to present that part of John's story. After a few minutes, have each group present its part of the story, beginning with Luke 1:1–17 and proceeding in order. Invite learners to follow along in their Bibles as you read aloud Luke 1:69–79.

Form two groups. Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 (Zechariah's Song.) Assign one of the parts to each group. Have tweens work together to complete their assigned section and then present their findings to the whole group. Discuss:

- ✿ What do we learn about God from Zechariah's prophecy?
- ✿ What words would you use to describe the mood of Zechariah's words?
- ✿ What does Zechariah say John will do?
- ✿ What will John's message be?
- ✿ Which part of Zechariah's prophecy gives you hope? Why?

Show Color Pack 2 and comment that this scene would have taken place about thirty years after Zechariah sang his song. Read the words in the speech bubble in unison. Discuss:

- ✿ What does the word *repent* mean? (Explain, if necessary, that *repent* means to turn around or change one's behavior. John called people to turn to living in God's ways.)
- ✿ Why do you think John told the people to repent as they prepared to meet Jesus?

Distribute construction paper, pencils, and scissors and invite tweens to trace and cut out one footprint. Have tweens sit in a circle. Arrange the footprints in a circle in the center, all pointing in the same direction. Play "My Heart Cries Out to You" (track 15 on *Singing the Feast, 2021–2022*) and invite tweens to think silently of things they have done that are selfish or mean, and what they might do to change their behavior.

Invite tweens to tell their ideas for things they might do to change direction and follow God's ways more closely during Advent. As ideas are given, turn the footprints to face in the opposite direction.

RESPONDING

Mark the activities you will use:

1. **Note to Self** Tweens will write letters to reflect on their practice of repentance during Advent. Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 2 (Turn Around) and ask volunteers to read it aloud. Brainstorm ways of completing the final sentence. Have tweens turn their papers over and write a short letter to themselves as a reminder to take two or three specific actions during Advent. Have learners place their letters in envelopes, seal them,

EASY
PREP

and print their name and address on the front. Plan to mail the letters this week or hold them to give to learners next week.

Option: If you have access to a long corridor, have tweens do the prayer exercise as they walk in a straight line, one after the other, then turn around and come back.

- 2. Prayer** Tweens will practice repentance as they participate in a prayer activity. Distribute index cards and pencils. Allow a quiet moment for each learner to write one way he or she has neglected or forgotten to follow God's ways on the front of the card and one action they could take to change this behavior on the other side. Gather around the Advent bowl and light two candles. Ask learners to turn so they are facing outward. Play "My Heart Cries Out to You" (track 15 on *Singing the Feast*, 2021–2022) and invite tweens to silently tell God what they wrote on the front of their cards. When the song ends, invite everyone to turn around and silently tell God what they will do to change direction. Read aloud Luke 1:78–79 and invite learners to tuck their cards into a pocket. Extinguish the candles.
- 3. Decorations** As they make decorations, tweens will discuss how to practice repentance during Advent. Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 2 (Turn Around) and read it together. Brainstorm ways of completing the final sentence. Have each tween trace a 6-inch circle on a piece of card stock and cut it out. Direct them to write one way they have forgotten to follow God's way of love on one side of the circle and one action they could take to change their behavior on the other side. Invite them to decorate the second side with glitter glue and a cheerful design. Have them punch a hole in the finished circle and thread a piece of yarn through it for hanging. If possible, hang circles in your learning area, where they can spin gently as reminders to practice repentance during Advent.

CLOSING

Gather around the Advent bowl and light two candles. Invite tweens to tell one thing they can do to help bring God's love into the world this week.

Play "Dance and Sing" (Color Pack 30; track 3 on *Singing the Feast*, 2021–2022), inviting learners to move in a circle as they sing along. Pray aloud:

O God, thank you for your never-ending love. May the time of your justice be now. Come, Lord Jesus, come. Amen.

Invite learners to clap twice as they say "amen" at the end of the blessing:

*May the God of peace go with you this Advent season.
Amen.* (Clap twice.)

Say good-bye to each learner by name.

Dance and Sing

Dance and sing, for God
will be with you,
Glory, hallelujah!
Dance and sing, for God
will be with you,
Glory, hallelujah!

Chorus:
Dance and sing for joy,
Glory, hallelujah!
Dance and sing for joy,
Glory, hallelujah!

Repeat verse and chorus (1x)
Repeat chorus (3x)

Save the Advent bowl
for use on December 12
and 19.



Zechariah's Prophecy

“John’s father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and he spoke God’s message.”

—Luke 1:67, TEV

Zechariah spoke God’s message in the form of a hymn. A hymn is a song or poem of praise or thanksgiving to God. The hymn has two parts. Part one is Luke 1:68–75 and part two is Luke 1:76–79.

Group 1

Read aloud Luke 1:68–75, and then fill in the chart below:

	Key idea:
Luke 1:68–69	
Luke 1:70–71	
Luke 1:72–75	

Summarize the main message of Luke 1:68–75 in one sentence:

Group 2

Read aloud Luke 1:76–79, and then fill in the chart below:

	Key idea:
Luke 1:76	
Luke 1:77	
Luke 1:78–79	

Summarize the main message of Luke 1:76–79 in one sentence:

Turn Around

In Advent we are called to turn from selfish, greedy, or mean-spirited ways. We are called to change our behavior so that we are living more in God's ways. How might we do this? Here are a few ideas:



This Advent, instead of buying new wrapping paper, I will wrap my Christmas gifts in the comic pages from a newspaper.



This Advent, instead of buying candy for myself, I will use some of my allowance to buy food for the community food pantry.



This Advent, instead of trying to get out of doing my chores, I will do them without being asked or reminded.



This Advent, instead of playing video games by myself, I will take time to play with or read a book to a younger child.



This Advent, instead of asking for lots of gifts for myself, I will ask that one of my Christmas gifts be a donation to a charity.



This Advent, instead of _____, I will _____.

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.

■ P R E P A R I N G F O R T H E S E S S I O N

Focus on Luke 1:68–79

WHAT is important to know?

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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

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.

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.