

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

The Path of Peace

Goal for the Session

Children will examine Zechariah’s prophecy and add this message of peace to their Advent practices.

■ 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

Children usually know something about waiting for a baby to be born from their own experience or their friends. Although the focus scripture is Zechariah's prophecy, the larger story of John's birth is included to help children place the story in context with other stories surrounding Jesus' birth. Younger children will hear this as a single story, but older children can place the story in the nativity sequence from Luke. When the focus turns to Zechariah's prophecy, children will spend time with verses 76–79, which tell about John's work. This emphasis prepares them for other stories about John's coming soon.

Loving God, may I see in each child the promise that Zechariah saw in the baby John. Amen.

YOU WILL NEED

- ☐ purple or blue cloth
- ☐ Advent wreath
(directions on
Resource Sheet 2)
- ☐ *Singing the Feast*,
2021–2022; CD player
- ☐ Bible
- ☐ offering basket
- ☐ Color Pack 1, 28
- ☐ Resource Sheet 1, 2

For Responding

- ☐ option 1: copies of
Resource Sheet 3,
crayons, scissors,
glue, hole punch,
yarn
- ☐ option 2: Color Pack 2;
two balls; *Singing the
Feast*, 2021–2022;
CD player
- ☐ option 3: index cards,
pencils
- ☐ option 4: Color Pack
17, 28; *Singing the
Feast*, 2021–2022;
CD player

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Before the session, place a bookmark at Luke in the worship table Bible. Many churches prohibit lighted candles in the classrooms. If that is your situation, make the Advent wreath described on Resource Sheet 2 (Preparing for Advent).

Note: If you used Color Pack 26 from November 28, 2021, for the Advent wreath, continue to add paper flames to it.

Invite the first children to arrive to arrange the worship table with the purple or blue cloth (use the color used by your congregation), Advent wreath, Bible, and offering basket.

When everything is ready, gather around the worship table. Invite a child to receive the offering. Point to the Advent wreath. Ask:

- ✠ What do you know about the Advent wreath?
- ✠ What do you know about the season of Advent?

After the children have told what they know, explain that the first candle to be lit is the candle of hope and that the second candle is the candle of peace. (They will be lit at the end of the session.) Ask:

- ✠ What does *peace* mean?

Their answers will prepare them to move to Exploring following this prayer:

Loving God, as we celebrate the season of Advent, we give thanks for our church. We are here to learn more about your son Jesus and the Bible. Amen.

EXPLORING

Request a child to retrieve the Bible from the worship table and open it to the bookmark. Invite children to decide whether today's reading is from the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) or New Testament. Have the child read the name of the book to determine which answer is correct. Recall that the Bible story from the previous week was from a prophet in the Hebrew Scriptures, Jeremiah. Ask the children to listen for words that sound like words from God as you tell the story on Resource Sheet 1 (A Message of Peace).

Show Color Pack 1. Ask:

- ✿ What part of the story is shown here?
- ✿ What happened before this scene? (*Allow time to tell the whole story.*)
- ✿ How do you think Zechariah and Elizabeth felt about their baby boy?
- ✿ What do you think other family and neighbors thought about this new baby?
- ✿ What happened after this scene?

Peace: As described by Zechariah, peace is a time when all creation will live in God's ways.

Read Zechariah's words of prophecy from Resource Sheet 1 to the children. Ask:

- ✿ What good things would God do?
- ✿ How would John help these things happen?
- ✿ What words of peace did you hear?
- ✿ What message of peace do you want to remember?

RESPONDING

Offer at least two options so children have a choice. One might be more challenging to interest older children.

EASY
PREP

- 1. Peace Ornament** These ornaments will remind children and their families of God's path of peace. Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 3 (Peace Ornament). Ask a volunteer to read the words on the ornament aloud. Talk together about how the world would be different if everyone was on God's path of peace. Review the directions for making the peace ornament on the resource sheet. Ask them to consider what colors on the ornament would remind them of peace. Provide crayons, scissors, and glue for the children to decorate and make their ornaments. Help them punch a hole and thread yarn through it to make a hanger.
- 2. Prepare-the-Way Game** This game will help children consider ways to prepare for the birth of Jesus as John would help prepare people for Jesus, the Messiah. Show Color Pack 2. Explain that the man in front of the cave is John. People called him John the Baptist because he baptized people in the Jordan River. Invite children to sit in a circle close together on the floor or in chairs. Give small balls to two children. Explain that when the music plays they will pass the balls around the circle. When the music stops, they stop passing the balls and the children holding the balls each tell one way to prepare for the birth of Jesus. Play "Dona Nobis Pacem" or "O Little Town of Bethlehem" (tracks 5 and 16 on *Singing the Feast, 2021–2022*). When the game is over, ask the children to name which way they want to try during Advent.

3. **Prayer** An important part of Zechariah's message was that his son John would encourage people to say they were sorry (repent) and prepare for God's Messiah. Distribute index cards and pencils. Ask children to write or draw something they did or forgot to do to follow God's path of peace this week. Explain that no one else will see their cards. Have them write or draw something on the other side of the index card that they can do to change that kind of behavior in the coming week. Conclude this activity by gathering around the worship table. Have everyone stand facing outward and ask them to look at their cards and tell God silently what they wrote on the first side. After a moment, ask them to turn around so everyone is facing the worship table and tell God silently what they wrote on the second side of their cards. Suggest that they do this prayer with their families.

Dona Nobis Pacem

Dona nobis pacem, pacem.
Dona nobis pacem.

God, We Sing

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.

(Stanza 2: replace *hope*
with *peace*)

4. **Songs** Two songs will help children recall the second Sunday of Advent and God's message through Zechariah. If "Dona Nobis Pacem" (Color Pack 27; track 5 on *Singing the Feast*, 2021–2022) was played during another activity during this session, children will recognize it. The simple lyrics, which mean "Give us peace," are easy to learn. After children know the words, sing it without pausing several times.

Review "God, We Sing" (Color Pack 28; track 8 on *Singing the Feast*, 2021–2022). The first stanza with *hope* was sung on the previous Sunday. After singing it together, substitute *peace* for *hope* and sing the song again. This song is part of Closing.

CLOSING

Gather at the worship enter. Light two candles of the Advent wreath with a paper flame or light the votive candles.

Sing the first stanza of "God, We Sing" (Color Pack 28; track 21 on *Singing the Feast*, 2021–2022). Sing it again substituting *peace* for *hope*.

Invite the children to think about how God's words to Zechariah about his son John give them peace today. Pray:

God of Peace, as we go into the second week of Advent, we will remember Elizabeth, Zechariah, and John. When we struggle, we will remember your path of peace. Amen.

To each child, say, "Thank you for coming. See you next week."

A Message of Peace based on Luke 1:68-79

Many, many years after Jeremiah spoke God's words to the people of Israel, a man named Zechariah was taking his turn as a priest in the temple in Jerusalem. Only priests could go into the holiest places in the temple where they prayed to God. Each day was much like the one before it, until this day.

On this day, Zechariah was doing what he always did when the angel Gabriel appeared before him. It was pretty scary to have a messenger from God standing next to you.

"Don't be afraid," said Gabriel. "You and your wife Elizabeth have prayed for many years for a child. Now you are going to have a son!"

"But we're too old to have babies now," stammered Zechariah.

"God sent me to speak to you about this baby. Believe me, it will happen. However, you don't believe me, so you will be unable to speak until this happens."

Gabriel left, and Zechariah went into the part of the temple where others were waiting. They knew immediately that something had happened.

And Elizabeth did have a baby boy. Everyone came to hear the baby boy's name, expecting it to be Zechariah. But Elizabeth said, "His name is John."

Right away, Zechariah spoke,

*"Bless the Lord God of Israel, who comes to help the people.
You, child, will be called a prophet of God.
You will prepare the way for God's messiah.
You will tell people how to be saved through forgiveness of their sins.
The light of God will come over us.
We will be shown the path to peace."*

Zechariah and Elizabeth raised their son to be this prophet of God. The next story about John in the Bible is when he is a grown man, doing just what Zechariah said.



Preparing for Advent

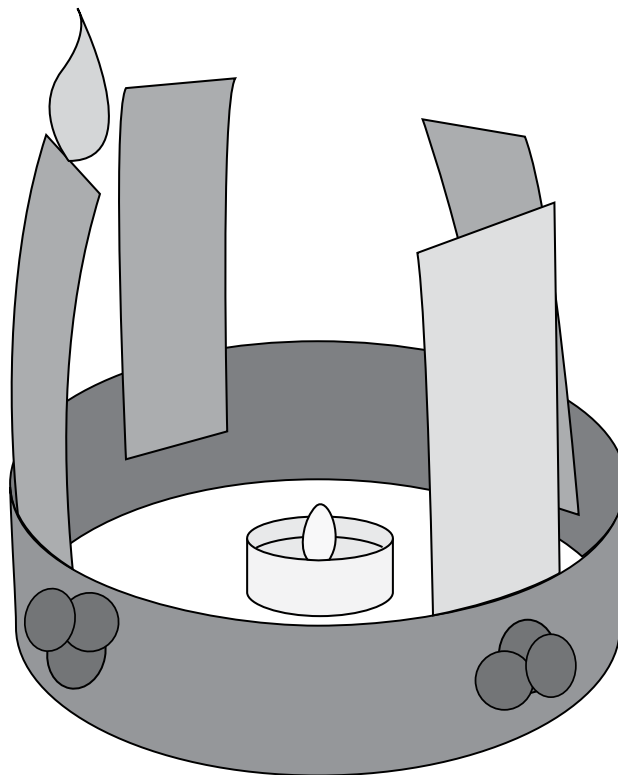
YOU WILL NEED

- ☐ 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

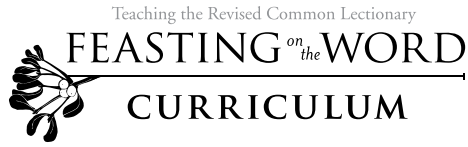
Note: During Advent, some churches use the color blue as a symbol of hope. Some churches use purple, a color of royalty, to honor the coming of our king, Jesus. In your class, use the same color your church uses in worship during Advent.

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.



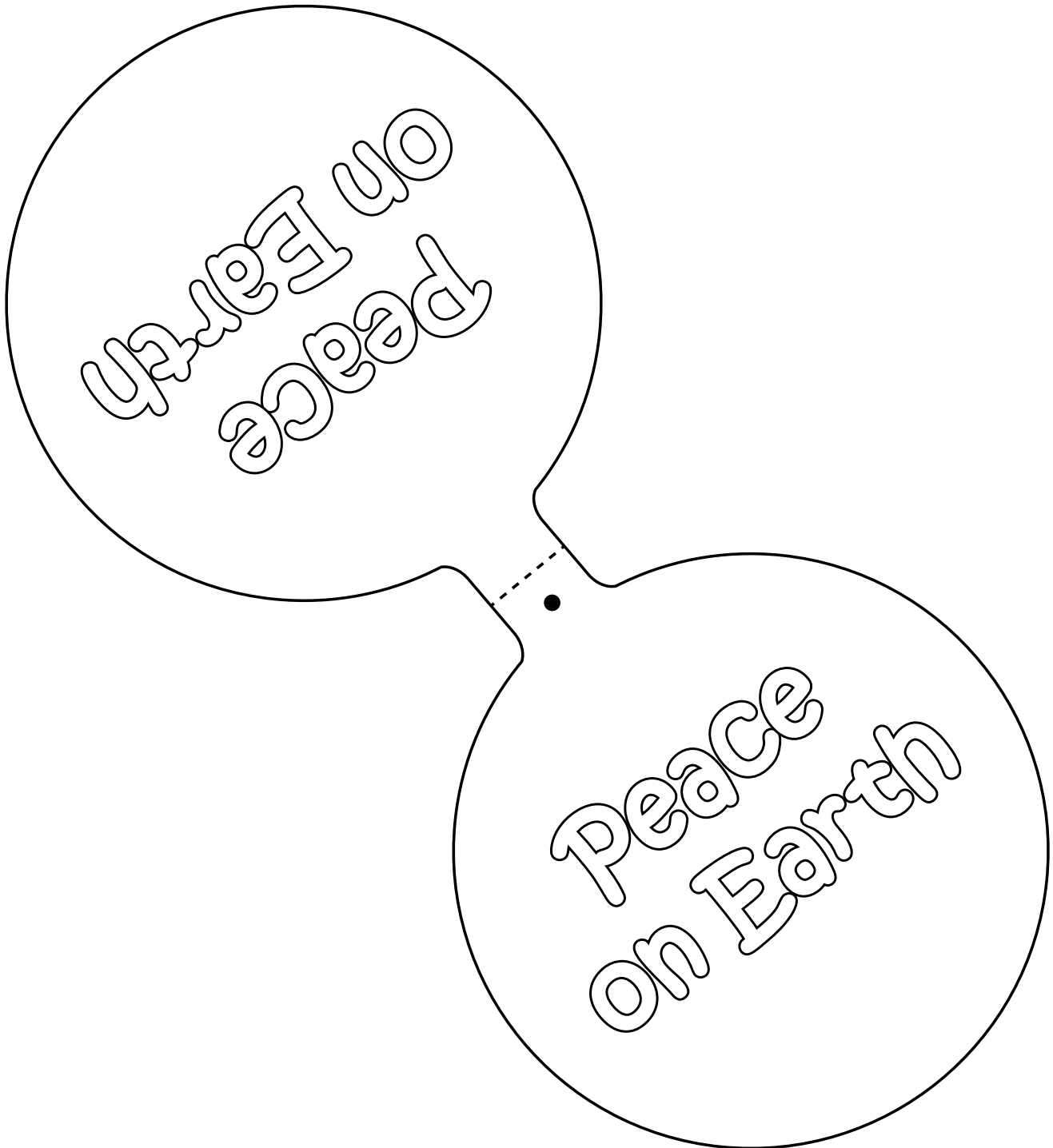
December 5, 2021
The Path of Peace



Multi-Age
Resource Sheet 3

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.



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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?

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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.

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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.

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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

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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.