

Adult Teaching Resources

December 6, 2015



Hope Waits

A Time for Praise — Luke 1:68-79

A Time for Joy — Zephaniah 3:14-20

A Time for Peace — Micah 5:2-5a

Season of Christmas

A Time for Growth — 1 Samuel 2:18-26

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A Time for Praise

Luke 1:68-79

FIT Teaching Guide

by Rick Jordan

This adult teaching outline is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartlege, printed in *Baptists Today*. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Baptists Today* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Baptists Today* so they can prepare before the lesson.

Fellowship Question

Use *one* of the following to break the ice, to begin discussion, and lead into the study:

What is one thing you are doing in your life that five years ago you could not have predicted you would be doing?

Do you carve out time for silent reflection in the typical day? If so, when is it?

Information

Zechariah was a priest. Like any job, I suppose a priest's job could be routine. Study, pray, slaughter a lamb, etc. But there was that day that an angel visited Zechariah in his old age and told him that he and Elizabeth, his wife, who had grown old along with him, were going to have a son. They were to name him John. Zechariah knew human biology, so he argued with the angel. This is not the thing to do with an angel. So, the angel ended the debate by striking Zechariah mute until the baby, sure enough, was born. It was like a ten month "time out." The baby was born. They named him John. And Zechariah could use his voice again.

[Have a class member read Luke 1:59-66.]

As we look back over the text, let's find all the emotions surrounding this birth. What do we find? (curiosity, amazement, joy, fear, wonder, mystery)

The parents have joy. The onlookers have fear. Why do you think this is?

The community ponders the events and wonders, "what will this child become?" The mere *physical* circumstances make this an odd birth. What of the divine adds to the mystery? (the story of an angel's visit, the muted father, the singing father, etc.)

Zechariah opens his mouth and spoke or sang a psalm. When we hear the word "psalm" we may think of the Old Testament book of Psalms. But there are other psalms scattered throughout the Old and New Testaments. Luke's gospel has five psalms or prayers within the first two chapters.

Zechariah's psalm was surely spontaneous. By the time the words were put to paper, they were organized into a form typical of Jewish psalms. His is basically in two parts. Some Biblical scholars believe that the first part, which focuses on God fulfilling prophecy, was

Information *continued*

Zechariah's original psalm, while the second part, which focuses on John, was added later by followers of John. Let's look at the first part of the psalm.

[Have a class member read Luke 1:67-75.]

The name Zechariah means "God remembered." Where do you see that God remembered? What is it that God remembered?

Zechariah has been silent for many months. His soul has been a womb for his ponderings. Finally, his pregnant thoughts find their voice. In those nine or so months of silent rumination, Zechariah came to realize that what Israel needed was a savior. And, he came to believe that his son would be the savior's scout, preparing the way.

Surely his ponderings included the Hebrew scripture, including the Psalms. As we listen to this psalm, listen for parallels to Zechariah's situation and psalm.

[Have a class member read Psalm 113.]

What parallels do you see between Psalm 113 and Zechariah's situation and psalm?

There is language in Zechariah's psalm about enemies and "those who hate us." The savior will rescue them from their enemies. And, then, once rescued, what will the people of God do, according to verses 74-75? ("serve God without fear, in holiness and righteousness")

Is there any hint of retribution or revenge in Zechariah's psalm? What does this tell us about God's plan of redemption? (It had nothing to do with weapons of war. Holiness and righteousness are separate from the evil and wrong ways of treating people. Etc.)

For over 400 years, there had been no prophet in Israel. Again, a very long period of silence. But now, a baby's cry will lead to the prophet's cry. A new word from God is about to make an appearance. Let's hear the second part of this psalm.

[Have a class member read Luke 1:76-79.]

The psalm of Zechariah begins with the word "blessed." In the Latin translation, this is the word, "benedictus." It is the morning prayer used in Roman Catholic, Anglican and (some) Lutheran churches. What imagery is here that makes it appropriate for a morning hymn?

Let's hear another psalm from the book of Psalms and listen for more parallels.

[Have a class member read Psalm 67:1-5.]

What parallels do you see between Psalm 67 and Zechariah's psalm?

Again, Luke emphasizes peace, not violence. "The LORD...will guide our feet into the way of peace." Why do you think it is so difficult for us to follow the peaceful way?

This is a wonderful psalm. But it is germinated in thoughtful silence. One pastor said this:

It was a gift really...this muteness of Zechariah's. Perhaps the fact that he had no other choice

Information *continued*

but to silently watch and listen is what prepared him to burst forth in song when he was finally able to speak. Because when his tongue was finally loosened he did not use it to justify himself or defend his position or to yammer on about things...having been silent and watchful and receptive to the unexpected story of God when Zechariah finally could speak again he did so in the only way he could at that point: by singing praises to God. And really, what else could he have done? Perhaps this is the gift of silence, it shuts off our brains enough for us to receive a new story and, like Zechariah, to worship fully. (Nadia Boltz-Weber. <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/nadiaboltzweber/2012/12/pregnant-old-ladies-and-other-signs-that-gods-story-is-better-than-the-one-we-tell-ourselves/>)

How have you found silence to be a gift?

Transformational Exercise

Zechariah could hardly imagine that he just became a father, much less what this child would become, or who Mary's child would become, or how those two little ones would grow up to live – or die. Maybe it is best that we only know enough to make our next move. We sing life one verse at a time.

Nadia Boltz-Webber said this about Zechariah in a sermon on this passage:

I wonder if Zechariah was reluctant to believe this good news that Elizabeth would bear a son because he thought he already knew his own story. ... because he had become so comfortable with the story he told himself and others had told him about what his life looks like and what it will always look like and so he couldn't believe another story was even possible.

Maybe he was so used to being the childless old couple that, even as he had prayed for children, he had actually foreclosed on any other story being possible. So, I think maybe that his enforced period of muteness was actually what allowed him to receive a new story...

Maybe that is an invitation for us as well, that we too should take opportunities to just shut up, and receive a new story or maybe just a whole new way of understanding the old one.

Because maybe your old story is simply not the final edition. (Ibid.)

So, in today's time of silence, I invite you to reflect on this question: How open am I open to receiving from God a new chapter in my story?

[After a period of silence, close in a prayer something like this: *God of surprising prophecies and pregnancies and peace — Give us the faith to trust that you are at work in the world. Give us the will to sit in silence, to wait for your call on our lives. Give us the patience to wait as you work. Help us do our part when it is time to speak a "benedictus." Amen.]*

Comments or Questions for Rick Jordan? You may send comments to the lesson plan author at rjordan@cbfnc.org. Rick is also available to lead workshops and conferences on Christian Education, with particular emphasis on how best to use the FIT Faith model.

Digging Deeper

by Tony Cartlege

Digging Deeper is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartlege, printed in *Baptists Today*. Watch for the “shovel” icon in the THE BIBLE LESSON, and then reference that item in this Digging Deeper resource. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Baptists Today* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Baptists Today* so they can prepare before the lesson.

Zechariah’s task — On the day Zechariah had the honor of offering incense, women would have been gathered in the outer courts as Jewish men prayed in the inner (but still unroofed) court of the temple compound. Zechariah, clad in special garments, would have marched ceremonially through the people and toward the temple proper. Other priests would have drawn the tasks of clearing ashes and refreshing the charcoal in the brazier to make it ready for the daily offering. We can only imagine Zechariah’s sense of pride as he carried the golden container of incense through the mighty doors and into the darkened temple, wreathed in smoke from the oil lamps and the charcoal on the altar.

Zechariah’s assignment was to pour the incense over the coals as a sweet smelling offering to God, and then prostrate himself in prayer before returning to the sunlit courts.

But, after all the years of waiting and practicing, things did not go according to plan: Gabriel was waiting inside.

Mary and Elizabeth — In the annunciation to Mary, Gabriel announced something even more amazing than the news to old Zechariah: she would become pregnant without the help of a man, and give birth to a child who would become the Messiah (vv. 26-33). Like Zechariah, Mary also asked how such a thing could happen, wondering how she could be a pregnant virgin. Instead of striking her dumb, however, the angel explained that the child would be conceived of the Holy Spirit — and told her that her elderly aunt Elizabeth was also pregnant. Showing no more doubts, Mary submitted: “let it be with me according to your word” (vv. 34-39).

We’re not surprised that after Mary became pregnant, she went to visit Elizabeth, then in her sixth month. Elizabeth was overcome by the Holy Spirit and declared that her infant had flipped with excitement at being in the presence of Mary’s growing womb, offering a blessing of praise (vv. 40-45).

Zechariah as a prophet — A belief in prophecy was integral to the early church. As John Nolland describes it, “Prophecy such as that of Zechariah marks the life of the early church (Acts 2:17–18; 11:27; 13:1; 19:6; 21:9) and is eschatological in character (esp. Acts 2:17–18). The future orientation of vv 76–79 is clearly prophetic, but so too are vv 68–75 which, on the basis of the beginning made with the conception of Jesus, announce the impending fulfillment of all God’s promises” (*Luke 1:1-9:20*, Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 35a [Thomas Nelson, 1989], p. 85).

Favorable looks — In v. 68, “looked favorably” could also mean “care for” or “visit.” The language of divine visitation is common in the Old Testament, where writers speak of God coming to help in times of need. Thus, the NET translates the phrase as “for he has come to help.”

Digging Deeper *continued*

A saving horn — The NRSV glosses over the idiom found in v. 69, which literally says “He has raised up a horn of salvation for us . . .” Old Testament writers commonly employed the term “horn” — like the heavy horns of a strong bull — as a metaphor for strength or power.

This was a common image in the ancient Near East: Mesopotamian gods were routinely portrayed with rows of curved horns ringing their heads, and the crowns of kings often included similar horns.

Luke also picks up the Old Testament image of the horn as a symbol of salvation. For example, in 2 Sam. 22:3 (nearly identical to Ps. 18:3), David declares that God is “the horn of my salvation.” In Ps. 132:17, the prophetic psalmist speaks of Zion and declares “There I will cause a horn to sprout up for David; I have prepared a lamp for my anointed one.”

It is not surprising that Luke would choose this image, for his entire gospel is written as the story of how salvation came to humankind.

Not an easy read — The text in vv. 70-75 is much more difficult than most modern translations indicate: the entire section is a long, convoluted predicate composed of ejaculatory praises, but lacks active verbs to govern them. Thus, in the NRSV, “that we should be saved” in v. 71 turns the noun “salvation” into a verb, while “Thus he has shown” in v. 72 changes the infinitive form of the verb “make” into an active verb, so that “making mercy” becomes “Thus he has shown the mercy . . .” Similar changes are made throughout the passage in order to clarify it for English readers.

An anointed Messiah — The expression “anointed Messiah” is actually redundant, because the word “messiah” (*meshiach* in Hebrew) literally means “anointed.” Jesus’ title “Christ” is from the Greek word *Christos*, which also means “anointed.”

Jesus and John — John Nolland summarizes vv. 76-79 this way: “The perspective of the Benedictus is that God has in the conception of Jesus visited his people for the purpose of their redemption. But the fruition of that conception in the full realization of the messianic deliverance is yet to come: that will be the visitation of God to end all such visitations; that will be a sunrise out of heaven. Between the two “visits” that have to do with the Davidic savior comes the role of John. In a preliminary experience of the end-time bestowal of God’s mercy, John will bestow upon God’s people the forgiveness of their sins as he sets them waiting for the sunrise of their hopes.” (*Luke 1:1-9:20*, p. 91).

Words — In v. 78, the phrase translated as “tender mercy” is literally “bowels of mercy.” The Hebrews thought of the entrails as the seat of compassion or mercy, even as we might speak of having a “gut feeling,” or reacting to sorrow with a queasy stomach.

The word for “dawn” could refer to the morning star or to the rising sun. In the Septuagint (an early Greek translation of the Old Testament), the same word, *anatolē*, is used to describe the messianic sprout or shoot that would come up from David’s line (Jer. 23:5; Zech. 3:8, 6:12).

The Hardest Question

by Tony Cartlege

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Why wait until the eighth day to name John?

The story of John's naming in vv. 59-63 is a bit unusual. In Old Testament God sometimes declared what a child's name would be (as with Isaac, Gen. 17:19). In other cases, both fathers and mothers are credited with naming their children. When Esau and Jacob were born, the text says simply "they named him ..." (Gen. 25:25-26). When Jacob's sons were born, his wives Leah and Rachel named them (Genesis 29-30). Joseph is credited with naming his sons Ephraim and Manasseh (Gen. 45:51-52). In Ruth's case, it was the women of the town who insisted that her son be named Obed. In all cases, however, the naming appears to be associated with the day of birth, not with the child's circumcision on the eighth day.

Although the rule is found in Leviticus (12:3), it is likely that the ritual of circumcision on the eighth day was not widely practiced prior to the rise of rabbinic Judaism in the post-exilic period, when the Pentateuch likely reached its final form. By the first century, the day of circumcision had become the primary day to celebrate the birth of a boy, and may have taken on the significance of a public naming day, as well.

It is likely that Elizabeth and Zechariah would have named the child "John" at birth: we know from the later story that Zechariah communicated by writing notes on a tablet, so he would surely have told Elizabeth of the angelic directive concerning the child's name. As Richard B. Vinson has pointed out, "we are not supposed to imagine that she spent the first eight days of his life calling him Roscoe" (*Luke*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary [Smyth & Helwys, 2008], pp. 46-47).

Today, parents often choose a name for their children before birth, but refuse to announce it until afterward. In first century Judaism, some parents may have chosen to wait until circumcision day to announce the child's name. If this is the case, it could account for the gathered relatives and friends anticipating that the boy would be named for his father before Zechariah and Elizabeth announced their surprise choice: he would be called John.