



On your marks

It is part of the mystery of the Christian story that God's eternal plan to send Jesus into our world rests on a simple 'yes' from ordinary people like you and me. When Luke sets out to relate what happens at the beginning of his story of Jesus, he tells us about two responses to what God was about to do. Both Zechariah's and Mary's replies are vital to the unfolding of the drama but Luke draws an important contrast between what they say to the angel. They both ask 'how will this happen?' (see Luke 1:18 and 34) but from quite different motives. Each of these Advent stories has a lot to teach us about how we too might respond to God's call upon our lives.

The following idea focuses on Zechariah's story in Luke 1:5-25 and 57-80.

Get Set

You will need:

- a hat
- some competition prize announcements (see below)
- a print off of the story cut up into nine sections (see below)
- paper, coloured pens and art materials

Go

Background to the story

When Luke opens his account of the life, death and 'life again' of Jesus Christ, dedicated to his friend in Rome, he decides to begin the story with an incident in the temple at Jerusalem in the late spring of 5 or 4 BC. From the very start, he wanted to underline that this was no myth but a true story that really happened, possibly within the reader's own lifetime. When God stepped into time and space, he chose to use ordinary human beings with all their problems and possibilities.

Zechariah's day in the Holy of Holies of the temple in Jerusalem was in every sense a day to remember. The privilege of representing all of Israel as a priest in its most sacred place - and indeed coming as close as was believed possible to God - was one he could only expect to come his way once in a lifetime.

I wonder what expectations he had of this unique moment. Maybe that he would at last feel fulfilled as a priest? Or maybe that people would respect him more in future? Or perhaps that he might even feel that bit more holy from then on? But I wonder if he ever expected to hear God speaking to him in the voice of the angel whom he met face to face! When he came out from behind the curtain, he was certainly a changed man and not just in the sense that he could no longer speak.

What do we expect when we settle down to pray? Are we prepared to hear God speaking?

Opening up the story

1. Being chosen to be the priest for this particular task on that day must for Zechariah have been like winning a competition against all the odds. Amazingly, Zechariah's name had been drawn 'out of the hat', as it were, and he must have been thrilled. To explore the sort of feelings that he would have had, put the following surprise announcements into a hat for individuals from your group to draw out, one at a time, and then ask them to react instantly to what they read. Include prize announcements such as the following but also add a few of your own ideas that might appeal particularly to your group:

- Congratulations! You have just won £10,000
- Congratulations! You have won a two-week luxury holiday for the family in Bermuda
- Congratulations! You have been chosen to appear on TV as a guest presenter to work with Ant and Dec on 'Britain's Got Talent'
- Congratulations! You have been chosen to represent your country in the next World Games
- Congratulations! You have won a year's supply of chocolate

2. Zechariah clearly had to learn sign language very quickly once he had encountered the angel and come out alive. Introduce this aspect of the story by teaching your group some basic sign language - you may find that some already know a few key words. If possible, find and include the sign language for: God, angels, baby, name, rescuer, preparation and joy. For some basic sign language, go to <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6y0e1zmFWE8>

Telling the story

The flow of this story is one of 'good news' followed by 'bad news'. Divide up the text of the story into nine sections as below. Give each set of verses to one or two of the group, inviting them to come up with a 'good news' or 'bad news' headline for that section in the style of a tabloid newspaper. Make it short, punchy, eye-catching or maybe even funny with a play on words.

- Luke 1:5-6 (good news): Elizabeth and Zechariah are happy God-fearing people with a long history of service of God in the family.
- Luke 1:7 (bad news): They were childless and were getting on.
- Luke 1:8-11 (good news): Zechariah gets chosen to be the one to go into the Holy of Holies. It's a huge privilege.
- Luke 1:11-12 (bad news): An angel turns up by the altar and scares Zechariah to death!
- Luke 1:13-17 (good news): God is going to give them a child who will be famous. He will get Israel ready for God's Messiah, who is coming soon.
- Luke 1:18 (bad news): Zechariah wants proof.
- Luke 1:19 (bad news): The angel is angry with his response; he loses the power of speech.
- Luke 1:21-22 (good news): Zechariah survives the encounter and the people recognise that something awesome has happened.
- Luke 1:23-25 (good news): Elizabeth gets pregnant and she knows that God has blessed her.

Talking about the story

Get the group talking about the story, prompting them with thoughts and questions such as:

- Was it fair that the angel was so angry with Zechariah? After all, it was a lot to take in and Zechariah was very scared.
- What was wrong with asking for some proof? Surely, we should be encouraged to ask questions and search deeper into what we believe.
- What do you think it was about Zechariah's response that upset Gabriel?

Now imagine what it was like for Zechariah trying to explain to Elizabeth exactly what happened behind the curtain. Maybe some from the group can try and mime and/or sign the events of that encounter to the others so that they make sense. As they are doing this, focus on what Zechariah actually looked like when he was asking that fateful question in Luke 1:18.

- Do you think that his lack of faith was somehow visible in an unspoken way? Or was it his tone of voice?

Elsewhere in the Bible, we're told that we are to live by faith and not by sight, and that we have to trust in the unseen (see 2 Corinthians 5:7 and Hebrews 11:1 and 6). For example, when we sit down to pray with God, we can't see him - we simply believe he is there. We don't ask for proof every time and for explanations. What does the group think of this? Is this where Zechariah went wrong?

Playing with the story

Maybe Zechariah was so concerned to know how God was going to accomplish what the angel talked about that he didn't really listen carefully to what this child was going to do. John was going to be a remarkable person (Luke 1:13-17):

- John will bring great happiness to everyone
- John will be very special and different
- John will be filled with the Holy Spirit
- John will have a powerful ministry
- John will direct people towards God
- John will bring families and particularly fathers and children back together again
- John will help prepare the road for God to come and rescue the world

Invite your group to turn John's job description into something visual. Using a very large sheet of paper, write the word 'John' at the centre and then get them to illustrate the ways in which John will be used by God in the spaces around the name. Use a new space for each truth about John.

Reflecting on the story

What a lot Zechariah had to think about over the next nine months and in silence too! We also know that during this time Mary visited the family and her news must have helped Zechariah make more sense of the angel's words to him. When he does eventually speak at John's naming ceremony, Zechariah burst into song. With God's help, he'd been composing this for a quite a while!



Using the following much simplified version of the song, read it together with silences so the group has some space to reflect on what the words might mean for them in the week ahead, and to pray the words into their own lives and into the lives of those they love. Maybe together you can create some sign language for these words.

Praise God! God has come to rescue us

Praise God! God has kept his promises

Praise God! God is going to make all things new

Praise God! God will forgive us

Praise God! God will bless us

Praise God! God will bring us a light

Praise God! God will give us peace