



SENDTHEFIRE.CA

**theme:** The Prophet Prophesied (Luke 1:5-25)

**materials:** Bibles, news story, incense

## welcome

Has anyone ever told you something that you refused to believe, but actually turned out to be true? Are you the type of person who believes things easily, or are you more cynical and hard to convince?

*Bring in a news item about your neighbourhood, city, country or world that you can discuss with the cell. Where do you see God in this story? Ask other members of cell to bring in stories to discuss in subsequent weeks.*

## worship

Read 1 Samuel 1:1-20

The LORD worked through Hannah, a previously barren woman, to bring his prophet Samuel into the world, the prophet who would later anoint David as King. Hannah participated by pouring out her soul to the LORD, and having faith for what was seemingly impossible. What are you pouring your soul out to the LORD for? Share with one another what is really on your heart, what you really desire from the LORD. Pour yourselves out in prayer together. If you can light some incense while you pray and sing, so much the better.

Sing "Lord You Have My Heart": [http://www.ultimate-guitar.com/tabs/d/delirious/lord\\_you\\_have\\_my\\_heart\\_crd.htm](http://www.ultimate-guitar.com/tabs/d/delirious/lord_you_have_my_heart_crd.htm)

## word

Read Luke 1:5-25.

Throughout Scripture many key figures are born from women who had been barren their whole lives, or who were unlikely to give birth for other reasons. Why do you think this is?

What was Zechariah doing in the Temple?

Why was he surprised and afraid to receive a message from God when he was busy ministering to God in the Temple?

Do you expect an answer from God when you pray or worship? Why or why not?

Would it scare you if God communicated with you? How does God communicate?

Why does the angel tell Zechariah not to be afraid?

What prayer was being heard and answered?

Why does God insist on the name John? What is John's role going to be?

What does it mean to be "great before the LORD"? (verse 15)

Why does John have to avoid wine and strong drink?

Why was Zechariah struck dumb?

Have you ever doubted the LORD? Why or why not?



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## witness

Continue reading through the entire books of Luke and Acts with one other person. If the other person is a fellow believer, read them through in a public place, like a café (not yelling it out or anything, just reading it to one another). Make a regular time to come in and read together, and more likely than not someone will eventually ask you what you are reading and why.

If the other person is not a fellow-believer, perhaps choose a less public place to read, but again set regular times, daily if possible, to get together and read the Gospel. You don't have to read it all at once. Read two to three chapters at a time, and then meet another day to read some more.

## action points

John was chosen by God to fulfill a specific task. Not everyone (very few in fact) are chosen in this way. Are you chosen for something specific? Do you think you have a set calling from the LORD? How do you know what you are supposed to do in your life? Pray and research this question this week, and come back next week to discuss it in cell.

The Salvation Army sponsors children around the world who are living in circumstances of poverty and oppression. Any offerings given at cell meetings go towards covering the costs of these sponsorships. Please challenge your cell to bring loose offerings each week, and bring a container to collect any such offerings that are given.

## leader's guide

The birth narratives of John the Baptist and Jesus are probably pretty familiar to us. It is unclear where Luke got his sources for these stories, though it is probable they came from Jewish / Christian circles in Palestine, and quite likely from people who had links to the family of Jesus. One can accept the basic relation of these stories to history, while still acknowledging that their careful construction and the clear allusions to Jewish Scriptures within them suggest a type of history that is not simply presenting the facts, but is telling a story and making a theological point. In the first two chapters of his Gospel Luke is intentionally presenting the births of John and Jesus as miraculous fulfillments of Hebrew prophecy.

The story of the prophecy of John's birth has echoes from the stories of Abraham and Sarah, Jacob and Rachel, Samson's parents, and the prophet Samuel's parents. A miraculous birth announcement such as this is a marker in Scripture that this person has been chosen by God to fulfill a significant task. It also shows that God chooses to use the weak, the barren, the elderly, the ones through whom great things are not expected, in order to do great things. To be childless was considered a reproach, even possibly a sign of divine disfavour. But Zechariah and Elisabeth are called righteous, so their childlessness is not a punishment, but rather an opportunity for God to reveal himself and his work.

Zechariah was a priest, and the system was that different "divisions" of priests would serve in the Temple at different times of the year, but only for two weeks per year. No priest was allowed to offer incense more than once in his lifetime, so it fell to Zechariah by lot, at just this time, to perform this function. This was a great honour, the high point of a priest's life. Offering incense represented offering prayer to God and asking for his



favour, and it was done in connection with the morning and evening sacrifices. The incense was offered at the altar of incense, which stood in the holy place inside the Temple. Zechariah would have lit the incense, put his hands on the altar, and laid himself down to pray. It was at this point that he sees the angel. The phrase “do not be afraid” is a very typical phrase given to angels in Scripture, as evidently they are entirely terrifying, as are most encounters with the supernatural and the Divine. It is interesting of course that Zechariah was not expecting God to answer his prayers in such a direct way, even though the very act he was performing was built upon the faith that God does hear and will answer prayers.

The fear Zechariah experience is natural, but the angel tells him to not be afraid, because his presence indicates that the LORD has heard and is answering Zechariah’s prayer. The prayer of Zechariah that is being answered is two-fold: he has certainly been praying for a child during his life, and this is a direct answer to that prayer, one which he and his wife had probably given up on in their advanced age; the other prayer is the national prayer for the salvation of Israel that Zechariah was enacting at the altar of incense on behalf of his people. Zechariah was most likely praying for the coming of the Messiah and the Kingdom of God. He had no idea that his own son was going to play a key role in the answer to this prayer.

The prophesied child will be named John, which means “The LORD has been gracious”. When the LORD chooses someone’s name in Scripture, it indicates that the person will be somehow living out the meaning of that name, that God will be revealing himself through that person in a special way. John is described in ways similar to Samson and Samuel, but is specifically given the role of a new Elijah, preparing the way for the Lord. This means he will go to the people of Israel and will call them back to the LORD, back to their covenant, away from their sin, towards peaceful and right relationships with one another, so that there will be hearts ready to receive the Messiah when he comes. John will be great – not in the sight of the world, in which he will be poor, dirty, and eventually persecuted and killed – but in the sight of the LORD, who will see his dedication and will empower him for his task. He was to be set aside for God as a desert prophet, and so some of the normal comforts of life, such as wine, would be denied to him. It was another marker that he was being set aside by God for a certain task, and nothing mattered as much as the fulfillment of that task. John would be filled with the Holy Spirit even before birth to enable him to live the life God set out for him.

Zechariah was struck dumb for two primary reasons. The first is that, like Abraham and Sarah, he questioned the possibility that God could do this thing when his wife was barren and they were both really old. The angel was giving Zechariah a sign that God is sovereign and can do things that seem impossible to us. Zechariah is also struck dumb so as to keep the revelation of John the Baptist secret until the right time. We see this also in Elisabeth’s decision to keep her pregnancy hidden for five months. God’s timetable and revelation are what matter here.