



SENDTHEFIRE.CA

theme: Birth of the Baptist (Luke 1:57-80)

materials: Bibles, news story, candles

welcome

Can you remember a time when an announcement (maybe of a new movie, the release of an album or book, the birth of a child, or of the start of a war, etc...) either caused you incredible excitement or disturbance? Are you currently anticipating any exciting announcements?

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

This is the second week of Advent. The word *Advent* means "Coming", and it comes from the Greek word *parousia*, which refers to the Second Coming of Christ. This is a time when Christians prepare for the coming of the Messiah, both in remembrance of how he came to earth as a baby, and in expectation of how he will come to us again. The readings during Advent in the *Worship* section will focus on hope, expectation, and patient joy as we look forward to the coming of our Lord. As you have different people read the Scriptures, have someone light two candles. After you are done reading, spend time in silence contemplating what you have heard, and then sing a Christmas carol together.

OT readings: *Isaiah 40:1-5; Malachi 3:1-2*; NT reading: *Hebrews 3:1-6*

word

Read Luke 1:57-80.

Why is John important in this story?

Why does God need someone to prepare the way for his Messiah? How is John going to do this?

For what purpose is Zechariah filled with the Holy Spirit?

Why does Zechariah announce that God has already brought salvation, when the Messiah (Jesus) had yet to be born?

Why do we announce that God's salvation has come today, when there is still sin and rebellion and pain and death and mourning and war?

How are the births of John and Jesus seen as a fulfillment of God's promises to Israel?

How is God bringing about redemption, according to Zechariah?

What does it mean today to be "delivered" or "redeemed"? From what? To what?

What was God's promise to his people Israel?

What is God's promise to his people today?

What does Zechariah's hymn say about Jesus?



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

How are you announcing the coming of the Lord? How are you reminding people of Jesus' incarnation, and of his promise to return? How are you speaking of the redemption and deliverance of the Lord? Ensure this week that someone hears from you about the salvation of the Lord. Use *Luke 1:78-79* as a guide for what to say about Jesus.

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 story of the announcement and birth of John the Baptist is paralleled with the story of the announcement and birth of Jesus. Many of the same elements are involved: unlikely mother, angelic announcement, hymn sung about how the child is a part of God's saving plan for Israel, and general amazement of everyone involved. There was even some discussion later on in John's life about whether he was in fact the Messiah, given his birth, his role, his preaching, his baptising and his authority. But just as John makes clear that it was Jesus, and not he, who was the Messiah, this story makes clear that while John has a remarkable and vital role to play, he is not the Messiah. He is merely preparing the way.

God did not need someone to prepare the way for Jesus. But Israel needed someone to prepare them for what was coming. Throughout God's involvement with Israel, out of His mercy He would announce through prophets what He was going to do, and would call His people to repent of their sins, come back to their covenant (the things they had promised to fulfill), believe in the Lord, and get on board with God's plan of salvation. They could choose to ignore these prophetic announcements, but they could not say that they hadn't been warned. John's role is to prophetically announce that the time of the Lord's Messiah and salvation had come, and to prepare Israel – any who would heed the call – to receive their king. He will announce that the reality and experience of the forgiveness sins is at hand, and that Israel should receive this divine gift of mercy.

Zechariah, having previously been rendered mute for his unbelief, regains his ability to speak after writing faithfully that the baby's name was John, as the angel had announced. This obedience does not just let Zechariah speak again; it makes him available to be filled by the Holy Spirit, who inspires him to worship the Lord and to prophetically announce what the Lord is doing, both through his son, and through the Messiah to



come. He announces God's salvation as having already arrived, of redemption having come because God had raised up a mighty saviour for them, and this in spite of the fact that Jesus had yet to be born. This is hardly a mistake on the part of Luke, the author; Luke is showing the faith of Zechariah, who knows now that God has acted and is acting on behalf of his people, and nothing in the world can stop it. In Zechariah's mind, salvation had already come, though he had yet to see the fulfillment of it in the person of Jesus. In the same way, followers of Jesus have announced for 2000 years that salvation has come, even though we still live in a world beset by sin, pain and death. In the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus, the decisive act of God's salvation has been visited upon our world. Salvation is now here. But there is also more to come, the final fulfillment of everything in the return of the Messiah. For this we wait with expectant hope, living out our lives now with faithful obedience and love, preparing Creation for the return of the King.

Zechariah's great hymn begins by referring to the advent of God's salvation through the coming of the Messiah, and finishes by detailing the role his own son will play in God's plan. The first part of the hymn is one of praise to God for having fulfilled his promise and brought about the salvation for Israel. The second part of the hymn is a traditional blessing of a newborn child, in which John is told who he is and who he will be. He will be a prophet, and his role will be to go before the Lord, preparing the way, preparing Israel for his coming. The last part of the hymn is talking about the Messiah to whom John will bear witness, not to John himself. John is not the bringer of the light, Jesus is.

Zechariah's hymn switches at verse 78 from talking about his son to talking about the Messiah. Jesus is described using messianic symbols (the rising star – Num 24:17) and is announced as light from on high (from God) who is coming to visit humans in darkness and the shadow of death. Because of His tender mercy, He will guide the feet of humanity into the way of peace.

Jesus, the promised Messiah, is the one who brings forgiveness of sins, return from exile, deliverance from slavery (these were all potent symbols for the people of Israel). The actions of God were meant to allow his people to serve him without fear from enemies, so that they could walk in holiness and righteousness. For many Jews this was very much associated with a return to the Promised Land, and a physical deliverance from their enemies (at this time the Romans). Christians have seen these promises to refer to a deliverance from slavery to sin and the world, a redemption from the way of death into the way of life, from darkness into light.