

THE BENEDICTUS

CHECKLIST: WHAT YOU NEED

- Copies of the downloadable 622 service booklet
- Copies of the lesson handout
- Copy of the leader's notes – *note fifth page re opening activity, you may want multiple copies*
- OPTIONAL: Bibles (ESV or similar recommended)
- OPTIONAL: A white board, easel pad, or chalk board with markers/chalk
- OPTIONAL: Have notebooks on hand for teens to take home and use as prayer journals if they wish

OPENING ACTIVITY: DRAMA AT THE TEMPLE

As the teens arrive have them clear a space in the room to act out a skit. They will be acting out the narrative around the nativity of St John the Baptist from Luke 1: 5-25, 57-80. (The text is provided on page five and omits the canticle, which will be examined in today's lesson. The opening activity will help provide context for that discussion.) The suggested roles for this activity will work differently depending on your group size; see the suggestions below. Assign roles, distribute the text, allow a few moments for coordination, and – action!

- For groups of one or two, assign only a narrator and an actor, playing one of the roles yourself if need be. The narrator reads – and mimes – all of the narration, and the actor reads *expressively* everything in quotations.
- For groups of three to six, you can assign different actors for each of the parts with lines: Zechariah, the angel Gabriel, Elizabeth, (if there are five or six in your group you can add various onlookers as a separate role), plus the narrator. Each one's task is to both read expressively and mime or act out the parts related to their character (or in the case of the narrator, use gestures to illustrate).
- For groups of seven to twelve, divide those four/five parts (narrator, Zechariah, Gabriel, Elizabeth, and the crowds) into speakers and actors. So the speaking narrator reads the parts while the acting narrator mimes them. In the case of the characters, the speaking character reads the lines while the acting character acts them out.
- For groups of more than twelve, split the group and have each team perform for the other(s).

622: BEGINNING WITH PRAYER

Begin the formal part of the lesson by saying together the first part of the order of service for young people in the booklet, up to the middle of page 4.

AT THIS POINT IN THE LESSON, ASK IF THE TEENS SUCCEEDED IN DOING LAST WEEK'S CHALLENGE, HOW IT WENT, AND WHETHER THEY HAVE ANYTHING TO SHARE.

DISCUSSION: FEELING FORGOTTEN

As an introduction to the lesson ask the teens to discuss the following questions.

DEPENDING ON THE COMFORT LEVEL FOR SHARING IN YOUR GROUP, IT MAY BE EASIER TO HAVE THEM VOLUNTEER ANSWERS WITH ALL RESPONSES WRITTEN TOGETHER ON A BOARD.

- Have you ever given up on something you really wanted? Why did you give up?
- When you don't get something you want, how do you react?
- Have you ever felt like your prayers were ignored?

OUR BACKSTORY:

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A few things worth pointing out (if they don't otherwise arise during the discussion):

- *We all have experienced situations where our efforts to bring something about are unsuccessful and we become frustrated or lose hope that it's either worthwhile or possible, whether it's getting an A in math or developing a relationship with someone we admire.*
- *Our disappointments can lead us in different directions. We may redouble our efforts. We may become bitter and resentful. Or we might let go of that specific aspiration, but refocus our energy in a new constructive way. We react to every situation differently, and sometimes there is a progression in our reaction. Some situations may warrant stronger effort, while others warrant resignation – so there is no one-size-fits-all answer here. However, bitterness, hopelessness and pessimism are never good answers.*
- *God always hears, even when we feel like he doesn't. The thing to remember is that he doesn't always answer the way we want him to – with an immediate “yes.” Sometimes his answer is “no,” and sometimes, like in the case of Zechariah and Elizabeth, his answer is “wait” (and it might be a long wait).*

THE LESSON: THE BENEDICTUS

The first part of the lesson provides a bit of context for the Benedictus (our lesson text) which can be read aloud. Then the teens are asked to read the Bible text (either silently to themselves or aloud together), followed by some additional questions for discussion.

Throughout Old Testament times, numerous prophets appeared with the mission of turning God's people back to him. Many of the prophets also spoke about a promised Messiah who would come to save God's people. The New Testament tells the story of God fulfilling that promise through Jesus. But there was one last late-appearing prophet who arrived on the scene to point the way to Jesus more directly, and that was John the Baptist.

The canticle we know as the “Benedictus” (Latin for “Blessed be”, the first words of the song) comes from John the Baptist's father, a devout man named Zechariah. “Zechariah”, a fairly popular name in the Old Testament, means “the Lord remembers”. In a sense, the whole story we're looking at today is about God remembering, even when his people were past hoping that he would.

Consider the story we acted out in the opening exercise. The angel Gabriel appeared with the words “Your prayer has been answered”, and yet this prayer was clearly not a recent one, because Zechariah had stopped believing it to be possible! So God's “yes” to Zechariah and Elizabeth's prayer for children was coming very late. And yet God remembered. Not only was God specifically remembering Zechariah and Elizabeth, but through their son and their son's mission of pointing to Jesus, God was remembering the promises that he had made to all of Israel.

As we read through Zechariah's prophetic song, pay special attention to the words that give us a clue as to Zechariah's understanding of what God is like.

Refer to Luke 1:68-79.

(THE TEXT IS PROVIDED ON THE BACK OF THE HANDOUTS AND IN THESE LEADERS' NOTES SO THAT EVERYONE CAN MARK IT UP AND MAKE NOTES ON IT IF DESIRED. ALTERNATIVELY, YOU CAN READ OUT OF A BIBLE OR THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER, PAGE 9).

Read through the text.

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Ask two quick questions to ensure comprehension:

- When Zechariah says, “You, child...” in verse 76, who is he referring to? (*John the Baptist*)
- When Zechariah talks about the “horn of salvation... in the house of his servant David”, “the Most High”, “The Lord”, and “the sunrise” (or “day-spring” as it says in the BCP), who is he referring to? (*Jesus*)

Then ask the teens to respond to what they’ve just read. Here are some questions to help guide discussion.

- Based on this canticle, what is Zechariah saying God is like?
- What do you think we can learn from Zechariah?

A few notes and reflections for reference:

- *According to Zechariah’s canticle, God cares about his people, he remembers his promises, and he is merciful.*
- *Zechariah’s story teaches us to trust God. Zechariah and Elizabeth set a wonderful example of leading godly lives, even though it seemed like God had ignored their prayer for a child. Their story shows that God heard, he cared, and he remembered. Zechariah’s response to God’s blessing both of his family and of his people, was to offer praise, acknowledging all that God had done. And God was able to use Zechariah and Elizabeth to begin to spread the word through “all the hill country of Judea” that something amazing was about to happen.*

DURING EACH LESSON, IF THE TEENS RAISE THEOLOGICAL OR BIBLICAL QUESTIONS THAT YOU DON’T FEEL CONFIDENT ABOUT ANSWERING, SAY SO, BUT LET THEM KNOW THAT YOU’LL FIND THE ANSWER AND RESPOND AT THE NEXT MEETING.

PREVIEW: AT-HOME CHALLENGE

Take a brief moment to look at the at-home challenge together.

THE WEEKLY “AT-HOME CHALLENGE” IS TYPICALLY A SIMPLE ASSIGNMENT TO SPEND SOME QUIET TIME IN PRIVATE PRAYER. ENCOURAGE THE TEENS TO GET NOTEBOOKS THAT CAN BE USED AS PRAYER JOURNALS. ASSURE THEM THAT THEY WILL NOT BE REQUIRED TO SHOW THEIR JOURNAL OR THEIR PRIVATE PRAYERS TO ANYONE.

Take a few moments to ask yourself whether there is a prayer that you have given up hope that God will hear. Remember the angel Gabriel’s words to Zechariah, “Do not be afraid... your prayer has been heard...” Offer your prayer afresh to God, remembering that he may say “yes”, “no”, or “wait”. Ask for his help to trust that he hears and cares.

- AND/OR -

Take some time to pray through this collect, pausing to reflect after each phrase.

O Lord, we beseech thee mercifully to receive the prayers of thy people which call upon thee; and grant that they may both perceive and know what things they ought to do, and also may have grace and power faithfully to fulfill the same; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

(COLLECT FOR THE FIRST SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY, BCP PAGE 123)

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Close with any prayers that might be appropriate in the context of the discussion of the day.

AT THE END OF EACH LESSON, IF YOU FIND THAT YOU STILL HAVE LOTS OF TIME REMAINING, YOU MIGHT CHOOSE TO TAKE SOME TIME TO EXPLORE THE "PRAYERS AND THANKSGIVINGS" SECTION IN THE BCP (PAGES 39-62, OR YOU CAN USE THE DOWNLOADABLE BOOKLET). AS YOUR GROUP MEMBERS COME ACROSS PRAYERS THAT THEY FIND RELEVANT, PAUSE AND PRAY THEM TOGETHER. IF YOU'RE PRESSED FOR TIME, YOU MIGHT CLOSE WITH THE THEMED PRAYER FROM THE AT-HOME CHALLENGE.

Then finish with the "Grace", the final prayer in the booklet.

LUKE 1: **GOD HAS REMEMBERED**

⁶⁸"Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them. ⁶⁹He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David ⁷⁰(as he said through his holy prophets of long ago), ⁷¹salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us— ⁷²to show mercy to our ancestors and to remember his holy covenant, ⁷³the oath he swore to our father Abraham: ⁷⁴to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear ⁷⁵in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. ⁷⁶And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, ⁷⁷to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, ⁷⁸because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven ⁷⁹to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace."

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OPENING ACTIVITY: LUKE 1:5-25, 57-80

In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.

Now while Zechariah was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. But the angel said to him, *“Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.”*

And Zechariah said to the angel, *“How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.”* And the angel answered him, *“I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time.”* And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple. And when he came out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the temple. And he kept making signs to them and remained mute. And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she kept herself hidden, saying, *“Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people.”*

Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child. And they would have called him Zechariah after his father, but his mother answered, *“No; he shall be called John.”* And they said to her, *“None of your relatives is called by this name.”* And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called. And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, *“His name is John.”* And they all wondered. And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God. And fear came on all their neighbors. And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea, and all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, *“What then will this child be?”* For the hand of the Lord was with him.

And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying *THE BENEDICTUS!*...

And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel.