

THEME 3

Preparing for Jesus and Welcoming a Baby

In Theme 3, Preparing for Jesus and Welcoming a Baby, a certain family in the Bible prepares for the coming of Jesus, just as we prepare and wait during the season of Advent. Jesus was born into a family that loved him very much. This family observed special celebrations, just as we do today.

This theme includes Unit 4: Nothing Is Impossible with God, Unit 5: A Special Surprise, and Unit 6: Special Religious Traditions of Jesus' Time.

Grade 1—Unit 4

Nothing Is Impossible with God

John the Baptist was born to Elizabeth and Zechariah. Zechariah and Elizabeth were faithful to God’s instructions in naming and raising their son. John, in turn, was faithful in preparing the way for Jesus.

LESSONS

1. An Angel Visits Zechariah
2. Zechariah and Elizabeth Wait
3. John Has a Special Purpose

Unit 4: Nothing Is Impossible with God

Unit Information

SUMMARY

Speaking and listening are themes of this unit, as students recognize that God speaks to people and that people need to listen and wait for God. When they do, things that seem impossible can happen! Communication with God may reveal a special plan for the lives of those who listen. This unit prepares for the Christmas story, focusing on the lives of Elizabeth, Zechariah, and John the Baptist.

KEY BIBLE TEXTS

Psalms 27:14 (main memory verse)

Isaiah 40:31 (memory verse)

Matthew 3:1-18*

Mark 1:1-10

Luke 1:5-25*

Luke 1:57-80*

Luke 3:1-22*

Luke 3:11 (memory verse)

John 1:1-8

John 1:23 (memory verse)

John 3:22-30

**texts used in lessons*

BIBLICAL BACKGROUND

An Angel Speaks to Zechariah

Zechariah and Elizabeth were both descendants of Aaron, in the priestly tribe. Because of his lineage, Zechariah automatically became a priest, as did all of Aaron's male descendants. By Zechariah's time, there were approximately 20,000 priests available to serve the temple! Since there were more priests than duties, they rotated. Each priest served two one-week periods a year, in addition to special religious holidays. For the big holidays such as Passover, the priests drew lots to decide who would have the honor of performing the sacrifices to God.

When the angel Gabriel spoke to Zechariah, he was in the temple, performing his priestly duties. This was most likely the chance of a lifetime. Zechariah had been the priest chosen by lot to offer sacrifices to God.

Zechariah and Elizabeth were growing old and still had no children. Being childless in this culture was considered a valid reason for being excommunicated from the faith. It was also grounds for divorce. Many saw childlessness as a sign of punishment for sins one had committed. Some thought that because Zechariah was childless, he should be barred from performing the duties of priests.

But Zechariah was chosen to perform the priestly duties. He did not give in to public pressure; he followed through with his responsibilities. It is fitting that it

was during his time in God's presence that the angel spoke to him. God sent the message to a priest, one respected by all Jews. By choosing Zechariah, God was identifying with someone who had experienced suffering, ostracism, and the anguish of childlessness. This is symbolic of the way God's acts of grace occur throughout history.

Elizabeth and Zechariah Wait for Their Baby

After his initial unbelief, Zechariah believed the message of the angel. His trust was confirmed when Elizabeth became pregnant. Zechariah believed this child would be special. The accepted belief among Jewish people was that Elijah would return as forerunner of the Messiah. But Zechariah believed that his son would be the Messiah and after John's birth, prophesied accordingly.

In spite of tradition and peer pressure, Zechariah chose to be faithful to the directions of the angel. He named his son John, meaning "God is gracious," even though there was no family history of that name. When Zechariah obeyed, his voice was immediately restored.

John Lives in the Wilderness

The "wilderness," located between the center of Judea and the Dead Sea, is one of the most austere deserts in the world. In the Old Testament, it is sometimes referred to as *Jeshimmon*, meaning "the devastation." The desert is predominantly made up of limestone rocks, hot and blistering. The rocks sound hollow when you walk on them. Because of the limestone base, water sinks through the rocks to create underground streams and reservoirs. Caves are common. The surface is covered by infertile deposits of sand, flintstone, and salt. John would have had shelter, a water supply, and simple food—locusts and wild honey.

The Judean Desert, where John waited, is the same desert where Jesus was later tempted. It figured predominantly in Jewish history as the home of the Essene community of Qumran (probably around 200 B.C.), where the Dead Sea scrolls were found. The fortress where Jewish loyalists held out against the Romans in A.D. 70 was at Masada, a natural fortress in the cliffs surrounding the Judean desert.

Elijah had worn a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt (2 Kings 1:8). John did likewise.

John the Baptist Prepares People to Meet Jesus

The emergence of John was like the sudden sounding of the voice of God. Jews were sadly conscious that God had not sent a prophet for over 400 years. John, as prophet, fearlessly denounced evil wherever he saw it. He urgently summoned people to repentance and righteousness. He not only told people what not to do, but what to *do* to live godly lives. His message was three-fold. First, people should share with each other. Second, people should work out their own salvation by serving God wherever God had placed them. Last, John announced that he was preparing the way for the Messiah.

John (and Jesus) used the word "repent" without explanation. Jewish listeners knew the meaning of the word. To the Jew, repentance was central to all religious faith and all relationship with God. Repentance brings healing to the world. The act of repentance opens the gateway to God. Repentance involves turning away from evil and turning toward God. It involves visible change in attitudes toward God and in the way one lives. The Jewish people believed that if Israel could

repent perfectly for even one day, the Messiah would come. It was only the hardness of people's hearts which delayed the sending of God's redeemer into the world.

Baptism was a sign of cleansing. In the time between the testaments, Gentiles who converted to Judaism were immersed in water. It is significant that John the Baptist invited Jews to be baptized, as well as Gentiles. Baptism is a sign of repentance and inner cleansing.

ESSENTIAL UNDERSTANDINGS

- God speaks to people.
- God can make impossible things happen.
- John prepared people to meet Jesus.
- God had a special plan for John, and God has a special plan for us, too.

WORSHIP

1. Have the students spend time listening to God by going on a silent walk outside or around the school building. Before you go, give the student questions to think about, such as, “What does God want me to do today? How can I make someone else happy today?” After you return from your walk, have the students write and/or illustrate the answers to their questions. These may be shared with the class, if desired.

2. Sometimes we need to wait patiently for God. Give students slips of paper on which they can write something for which they need to wait. Sit in a circle and have students put the slips of paper in a box. The slips of paper do not need to be read out loud, but be sure to say a general prayer about the things for which the students need to wait. The box should be kept in a place where students can add strips as they desire.

BULLETIN BOARD IDEAS

Post a map of Judea, which shows the desert, mountains, Dead Sea, and the Jordan River. This will be helpful in the Extend the Lesson activity, Lesson 3. Maps can be found in bookstores such as Provident Bookstore.

MEMORY PASSAGES

This unit offers the following verses for students to memorize. You may copy and clip the following verses for students to take home.

John answered, “The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same.”

Luke 3:11

John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, “I am the voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Make straight the way for the Lord.’”

John 1:23

Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord.

Psalm 27:14

But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength.
They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary,
they will walk and not be faint.

Isaiah 40:31

MEMORY VERSE CONNECTIONS

Make this memory verse connection during Worship Idea #2:

Read Psalm 27:14, “Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord!”

ASSESSING TEACHING / LEARNING

Observing students and their interactions is one of the best ways to discover if students are practicing the lessons. Look to see if they cooperate with each other, if they use caring words, and if they practice peacemaking skills.

A quiz is also included, at the end of the unit.

Nothing Is Impossible with God

LESSON 1: AN ANGEL VISITS ZECHARIAH

Objective

Students will recognize that God speaks to people.

Key Concepts

- God used an angel to speak to Zechariah.
- God can speak to us, too.

Text: Luke 1:5-25

Estimated Lesson Time: 30 minutes

Materials

- Bible

Teacher Preparation

- Practice telling the story of Zechariah in your own words, or from Lesson Step 1.

INTRODUCING THE LESSON

Play “Whisper Down the Lane.” Whisper a simple phrase such as, “This morning I ate cereal for breakfast,” or “I hope everyone has a happy time at school today,” in one student’s ear. That child whispers the phrase to the next child, who then whispers it to the next child. The group must sit quietly so that the ones receiving the whispered messages can hear. When the whispers have traveled around the circle, have the last student say the phrase aloud. Is it the same one that was whispered to the first student? If not, what are the differences? Play the game several times. If your class is large, divide into two groups. See which group is the most accurate after whispering the phrase to the end of the line.

LESSON STEPS

1. Tell the story of Zechariah. Remind the students how carefully they needed to listen while playing Whisper Down the Lane. Just as they had to listen carefully to each other, we need to be careful to listen to God, as God speaks to us.

Tell the story of Zechariah from Luke 1:5-25 in your own words, or use the following account. Open your Bible to the passage, so the children know the story comes from Luke:

Zechariah was a priest. He was married to Elizabeth, but they did not have any children. Zechariah and Elizabeth loved God and worshipped God.

Zechariah was at the temple one day, praying to God, when an angel suddenly appeared before him. The angel had a special message from God, that Zechariah and Elizabeth would have a baby! They should name the baby John, and John would be a great man of God. He would have a special job, to tell people about God.

Zechariah was puzzled. He asked the angel how this could happen, because he and Elizabeth were old. How could they have a baby?

The angel told Zechariah that his name was Gabriel, and that God sent Gabriel to speak to Zechariah. Because Zechariah hadn't believed what Gabriel said, Zechariah would not be able to speak until the baby was born!

Zechariah left the temple. People wanted to talk to him, but Zechariah couldn't speak! Instead, he had to use hand motions to try to tell them what he wanted. The people realized that Zechariah must have seen a special vision.

2. Respond to the story. Have the students show on their faces how they would react to the following:

- seeing an angel
- hearing the angel speak
- hearing the angel speak surprising news
- finding out that you could not speak
- having a baby

Allow time for students to tell a bit about how they would have felt at the different times throughout the story.

3. How might God speak to us? Talk to the children about how Zechariah needed to listen to the angel, who was a messenger from God. We need to listen closely, too, to what God might want to tell us. Explain that though we might never see an angel, God can speak to us through other people, through hearing Bible stories, and through reading the Bible. What other ways might God speak to us? Invite responses.

4. Communicate without words. Ask the students what happened when Zechariah didn't believe what the angel said. (*He was unable to speak.*) Ask how they would communicate if they couldn't speak. (*Write things down, act things out.*) Have students try to communicate certain phrases without using words, and see if the others can guess what they're saying. Examples: I'm hungry; Let's play together; It's sunny today.

Explain that even these motions are ways to communicate with each other. Ask in what other ways we communicate with each other. (*Talking, body language, and writing are a few possible responses.*)

Just as we use different ways to communicate with each other, God also uses different ways. Review the ways you have discussed.

EXTEND THE LESSON

(These activities will extend the lesson to longer than 30 minutes.)

- **Practice body language.** Have a student use non-verbal communication (body language), while the other students guess what the poses or expressions mean. Guide the exercise so that students are not simply "acting out" communication.
- **Communicate on paper.** Allow time for students to write notes or draw pictures as a way of communicating with each other. Remind them that motions, body language, and writing were the only ways Zechariah could communicate until his son, John, was born.

Nothing Is Impossible with God

LESSON 2: ZECHARIAH AND ELIZABETH WAIT

Objective

Students will understand that sometimes we need to wait for good things to happen.

Key Concepts

- Zechariah and Elizabeth waited for their baby to be born.
- Zechariah and Elizabeth named their baby John.
- We have special names, too.

Text: Luke 1:57-80

Estimated Lesson Time: 30 minutes

Materials

- Bible
- Baby name book
- Special treats, one for each student (sticker, piece of candy, pencil, etc.)
- For Extend the Lesson, option one: chart paper, marker
- For Extend the Lesson, option two: paper, crayons, markers

Teacher Preparation

- Practice telling the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth in your own words, or from Lesson Step 1.

INTRODUCING THE LESSON

Wait for a treat. Tell the students that you have a special treat for them, but they need to wait for it. Ask them if they like to wait for special things. Most likely, the response will be “no.” What kinds of special things do the children need to wait for (*birthdays, Christmas, Thanksgiving, going to a friend's house, etc.*)? Is it hard to wait?

LESSON STEPS

1. Tell the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth. Remind the students that Zechariah and Elizabeth were waiting for something special, too. Does anyone remember what? (*The birth of their baby*)

Opening your Bible to Luke 1:57-66, tell the story in your own words, or use the following:

After waiting several months, Elizabeth finally had a baby boy! The neighbors and family and friends were so happy for Elizabeth and Zechariah that they celebrated the birth, too.

When their baby was eight days old, Elizabeth and Zechariah took him to a special ceremony and named him John. Babies were usually named after family members, so people were surprised. There was no one in Elizabeth and Zechariah's families named John. But they insisted that their baby's name would be John,

because that is what the angel told Zechariah to name him. And as Zechariah wrote their baby's name for all to see, he was suddenly able to speak again!

2. Respond to the story. Elizabeth and Zechariah obeyed God and named their baby John. The name John means "God is gracious." Remind the students that God had special plans for John.

Ask them if they know what their own names mean. Were they named for someone in their families? Did their parents choose that name for a special reason? Allow time for sharing. Check the baby name book so that students can learn what their names mean.

3. Enjoy a treat. Just as Elizabeth and Zechariah needed to wait for their wonderful surprise named John, so the students have also had to wait for their surprise today. Pass out the treat that you prepared earlier. Comment that sometimes we need to wait for good things to happen, just as Elizabeth and Zechariah had to wait for John to be born.

4. God's special plan. Remind the children that God had a special plan for John. Read Luke 1:76-79. Point out the different prophecies about John: will be a prophet; will prepare the way of the Lord; will tell people about salvation; will give light to those in darkness; and show people the way of peace. Be sure to explain in simpler terms what each of these prophecies means.

Comment that no matter what their names mean, God also has a special plan for the students. They may have to wait to discover God's plans, but God has something special for them.

EXTEND THE LESSON

(These activities will extend the lesson to longer than 30 minutes.)

• **Students are special, too.** Use Lesson Step 4 to make a chart about the prophecies about John—things that made John special. In the second column, have students suggest things that they could do to be special today.

Example:

JOHN	STUDENTS
Will be a prophet	Will be good students
Will give light to those in darkness	Will do kind things for others
Will show people the way of peace	Will try to solve problems peacefully

• **Decorate your names.** Give students pieces of paper on which to write their names in large letters. Invite them to decorate the letters, and the space around their names, with illustrations of the meaning of their names.

Nothing Is Impossible with God

LESSON 3: JOHN HAS A SPECIAL PURPOSE

Objective

Students will recognize that God has special plans for their lives.

Key Concepts

- John spent many years living in the desert.
- John prepared people to meet Jesus.
- God had a special plan for John.
- God has special plans for us, too.

Texts: Luke 1:80; Luke 3:1-18; Mark 1:7; Matthew 3:1-12

Estimated Lesson Time: 30 minutes

Materials

- Bible atlas with maps of Judea
- Modern world map
- Pictures of the desert
- Bible
- Honey, wheat bread or crackers for snack
- For Extend the Lesson, option one: desk-sized shallow box with sand, plastic spoons or scoops, twigs to make desert plants, stones
- For Extend the Lesson, option two: “Story of John” activity sheet (p. 158)

Teacher Preparation

- Look up facts about the desert to tell the students.
- Practice telling the story of John in your own words from the Bible texts, or from the paragraphs in Lesson Step 4.
- If using Extend the Lesson, option two, make copies of the activity sheet, one per student.

INTRODUCING THE LESSON

Find where John lived. Show the students the Bible atlas. Look at the maps of Judea and note that this is where Elizabeth, Zechariah, and John lived. Point out regions such as the desert, the Dead Sea, and the mountains. Use a modern world map to show where Judea is today, in relation to where you live.

LESSON STEPS

1. Life in the desert. Explain that John lived in the desert for many years. Show the students pictures of the desert. Point out the sand, the rocks, and the vegetation. Add a little about the climate, noting that it is hot and rains little.

2. Learn about John. Tell the students that while John was in the desert, he listened to God and prepared himself for the special things God had planned for

him. Read Matthew 3:4, so that students know how John lived in the desert. Imagine with your class what it must have been like to wear clothing made out of camel's hair and to eat locusts and honey.

3. Eat a “desert snack.” Serve honey on wheat bread or crackers so that students can taste what John ate.

4. Read the story about John. While the students are eating, tell them about the special plan that God had for John. Opening your Bible to one of the texts, tell the story in your own words, or use the following:

John spent time in the desert listening to God, so he would know what to do. God had a special plan for John. After a lot of time in the desert, John began telling people things that sounded kind of strange. He told them they were to get ready for the Lord! John told the people they needed to repent and to leave their sins behind. Many people from all over gathered around John to listen to him talk. When people repented of their sin, John baptized them in the Jordan River. John became known as John the Baptist, and people knew he was a man of God.

John the Baptist told people that one day someone more powerful than he would come. The other person would be so important that John the Baptist would not even be worthy enough to tie his shoes! John the Baptist said, “I baptize people with water, but the one who is coming will baptize people with the Spirit.”

5. Talk about the story. You may need to explain words like “repent” (to tell your sins to God) and “baptize” (a symbol that one has chosen to follow God). Talk about how, even though John was in the desert, God was with him and God still had a special plan for his life. John’s purpose was to prepare people to meet Jesus. Tell the students that God has a special plan for their lives, too, and that God is with us no matter where we are: at home, at school, with friends, or even in a desert.

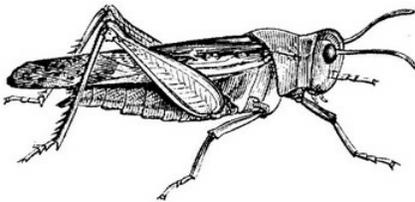
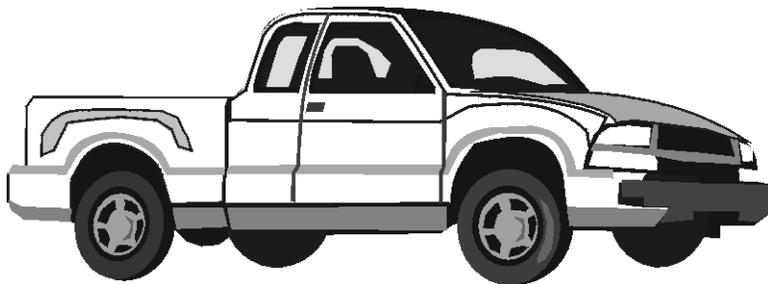
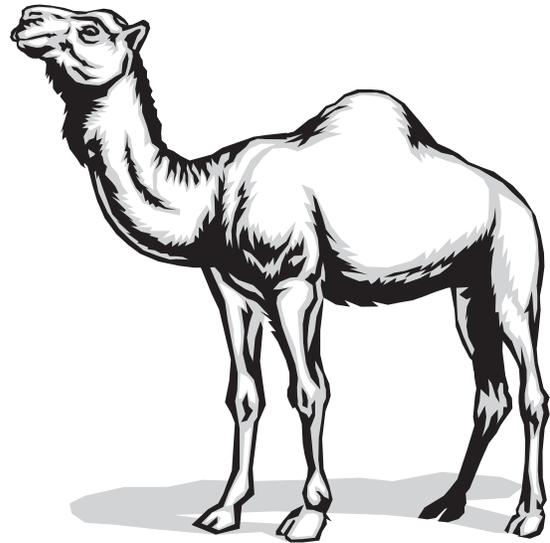
EXTEND THE LESSON

(These activities will extend the lesson to longer than 30 minutes.)

- **Create a desert.** Fill a large, shallow box with damp sand and let the students create a desert. Look at the map in the Bible atlas to know where to create the mountains, the Dead Sea, and the Jordan River. Add stones and twigs for rocks and desert plants.
- **Do an activity sheet.** Hand out copies of the “Story of John” activity sheet. Children may circle the pictures that help to tell the story of John and color them.

The Story of John

Circle the pictures that help to tell the story of John, then color them.



Unit 4 Quiz

Name _____

Circle the correct answer:

1. Who told Elizabeth and Zechariah that they would have a baby?
 - a. Angel
 - b. Friend
 - c. Priest
2. Why didn't Elizabeth and Zechariah believe they would have a baby?
 - a. They were too old
 - b. The angel was too young
 - c. The angel was not real
3. What happened to Zechariah because he did not believe they would have a baby?
 - a. He got sick
 - b. He could not speak
 - c. He could not walk
4. What did Elizabeth and Zechariah name their baby?
 - a. Jesus
 - b. John
 - c. Daniel
5. Where did John live?
 - a. By the ocean
 - b. In the city
 - c. In the desert
6. What was John's purpose in life?
 - a. To tell others about Jesus
 - b. To be a priest
 - c. To build houses

Answers to Unit 4 Quiz:

1. a. Angel
2. a. They were too old
3. b. He could not speak
4. b. John
5. c. In the desert
6. a. To tell others about Jesus