

**Surprised by Joy: Stories of New Birth**  
**A Devotional Offering for Grown-ups**  
**The First Sunday of Advent - Zechariah (Husband of Elizabeth)**

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**Profile**

Profession: Priest

Hometown: Jerusalem

Pet Peeves: Angels with an attitude; mimes

Favorite Celebrity: George Burns

Favorite Movie: *On Golden Pond*

**April 16.** Dear Journal. Yeah, I know I'm way too old to be keeping a journal. But I've been forced into it. Here's what happened. Today, I had the honor of going into the Temple sanctuary and making the offering. So I'm in there and - you won't believe this - the angel Gabriel appears! Scares the bejeebers out of me! Well, Gabe tells me that Elizabeth (my wife) is going to be pregnant and that we should name the kid "John." I say, "You're kidding, right? We've never had any kids and, given our age, that ship has sailed." So Gabe goes, "Unbeliever! Just for that, I'm going to make it so you can't talk." Just because I thought he was kidding. I was speechless. Still am.

**August 31.** Dear Journal. Well, Elizabeth is twenty weeks along and showing. Her friends are teasing her about having to take prenatal vitamins with her Geritol. On the other hand, the fact that her husband (that's me) hasn't been able to utter a word in over four months makes her the envy of all.

**January 14.** Dear Journal. This will be my last entry. John was born today. And I think I'm getting my voice back. In fact, I feel a prophecy coming on. (See Luke 1:68-79 for Zechariah's prophecy.)

from ***Crazy Book: A Not-So-Stuffy Dictionary of Biblical Terms***  
Rolf A. Jacobson, Karl N. Jacobson, Hans H. Wiersma

# ZECHARIAH





## Surprised by Joy: Stories of New Birth

### Take Home Advent Devotional (Week 1)

Each week during the Season of Advent, you are invited to remove the cover of your worship folder and take it home, as a devotional guide to use during the week. The interior pages of the devotional guide are especially suitable for use with young children, and the back page offers a special reading for the grown-ups. Throughout the Four Sundays of Advent, we will explore stories of new birth in the Bible and in our lives, today.

**Instructions:** Cut out the symbols below, color them, and use them to help explore this week's story of new birth. You can tape them to the refrigerator or make them into ornaments for your Christmas tree.



Angel Gabriel



Zechariah

#### Key Verse to Remember: Zechariah's Prophecy

"And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High God. You will go ahead of the Lord to prepare the way for him." Luke 1:76

#### Family Devotion:

This Advent season, we are learning about stories of new birth. These stories will help to prepare our hearts and minds for Jesus' birth when Christmas comes. In the first chapter of the Gospel of Luke, we hear from four members of Jesus' family, and all of their stories connect in some way to the surprising joy of new birth.

This week, we focus on the story of Zechariah. Zechariah was the father of Jesus' cousin, John. As the story is told in the Gospel of Luke, Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, were old when the angel Gabriel came by for a surprise visit. They had never before been able to have children, and he can't believe it when the angel Gabriel tells him that they will have a special child to be named John. Because he doubts, the angel causes him to be unable to speak until after his baby is born.

- Read the story of Zechariah in Luke 1:5-20.
- Do you have any stories in your family of children that came at surprising or unexpected times?
- Why do you think that the angel made it so that Zechariah couldn't speak until a week after John's birth? What would you do if this happened to you? How would you communicate?
- When Zechariah's baby, John, was born, he was filled with the Holy Spirit and sang out a song (Luke 1:67-79). What does he sing about? Do you have any stories in your family of what people said about you as a baby?

#### Family Prayer:

Dear God, we thank you for surprising us with new things even when we get sad and can't believe them. In this season of Advent, make our hearts and minds calm so that we can listen for your surprises. Amen.

# Surprised by Joy: Stories of New Birth

## A Devotional Offering for Grown-ups

### The Second Sunday of Advent - Elizabeth (Cousin of Mary)

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Elizabeth was the mother of John the Baptist (though to be fair the whole family was a little on the evangelical side--filled with the Spirit prophesying, and so on.) Like Sarah (Genesis 17:15-21) and Hannah (1 Samuel 1:1-20) before her, Elizabeth was unable to have children and was getting on in years. And like Sarah and Hannah, she had prayed for a child, she wanted one more than anything. Out of the blue--or out of the temple actually--the angel Gabriel appeared to her husband Zechariah and said, "Prayer answered brother-man. You and Elizabeth will have a son and you will name him John." Zechariah couldn't quite believe it, and so

he was made mute until the boy was born. We don't know exactly how Elizabeth responded--the Gospel of Luke doesn't say--but we're guessing Zechariah's muteness tipped her off and, knowing the stories of Sarah and Hanna, she got busy converting the spare room into a nursery.

When she was six months pregnant, Elizabeth entertained her cuz' Mary, who was right at the beginning of her own pregnancy. The unborn baby in Elizabeth's womb started kicking it like the Rockettes at Radio City. Then the Holy Spirit whispered in her ear that Mary's baby was going to be even more special than her own (and just think, Peter usually gets the credit for being the first one to know what a big deal Jesus was going to be).

One woman who had wanted to have a child her whole life, the other who was totally surprised and, let's face it, was pregnant way earlier than she would have planned; both having children who were central (understatement) to God's plan of salvation. Quite a pair.

from ***Crazy Book: A Not-So-Stuffy Dictionary of Biblical Terms***

Rolf A. Jacobson, Karl N. Jacobson, Hans H. Wiersma

(icon by Pauline Gifford, student of Fr. Damian Higgins of the Ukrainian Catholic Church)

# ZECHARIAH

# ELIZABETH

SURPRISED BY JOY:  
STORIES OF NEW BIRTH

A 3D rendering of a wooden manger filled with straw, set against a blue background. The manger is positioned in the center of the frame, with the text 'SURPRISED BY JOY:' arched above it and 'STORIES OF NEW BIRTH' arched below it.



## Surprised by Joy: Stories of New Birth

### Take Home Advent Devotional (Week 2)

Each week during the Season of Advent, you are invited to remove the cover of your worship folder and take it home, as a devotional guide to use during the week. The interior pages of the devotional guide are especially suitable for use with young children, and the back page offers a special reading for the grown-ups. Throughout the Four Sundays of Advent, we will explore stories of new birth in the Bible and in our lives, today.

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Elizabeth & Mary



Angel Gabriel

#### Key Verse to Remember: Elizabeth Greets Mary

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby inside her jumped. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. Luke 1:41

#### Family Devotion:

This Advent season, we are learning about stories of new birth. These stories will help to prepare our hearts and minds for Jesus' birth when Christmas comes. In the first chapter of the Gospel of Luke, we hear from four members of Jesus' family, and all of their stories connect in some way to the surprising joy of new birth.

This week, we focus on the story of Elizabeth. Elizabeth was the mother of John the Baptist, and a relative of Jesus' mother, Mary. The Gospel of Luke tells us that when the Angel Gabriel visited her husband, Zechariah, and told him that she would have a baby that she was already old. Something surprising would happen to Elizabeth. She would not only have a baby in her old age...this baby would be special. During her pregnancy, Elizabeth's cousin, Mary, comes to visit her. As Mary arrives, she calls out for her cousin, and the baby in Elizabeth's womb hears her voice. Both Elizabeth and the child inside of her are filled with God's Spirit. With great joy, Elizabeth sings that she and Mary have been blessed by God.

- Read the story of Mary and Elizabeth in Luke 1:24-45.
- Have you ever felt a baby kick or push from inside their pregnant mother? Sometimes you can see them move. What do you think it looked or felt like when Elizabeth's baby was "leaping" inside of her?
- Why do you think Mary went to visit her cousin, Elizabeth? When you have exciting news, do you go find family or friends to tell?
- Elizabeth says she and Mary are blessed. How has God blessed you?

#### Family Prayer:

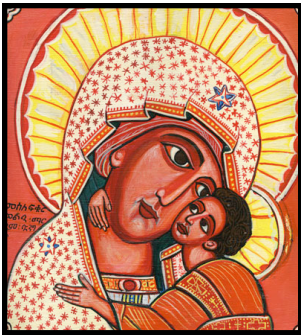
Dear God, when Elizabeth's baby heard Mary's voice, he got so excited that he jumped inside his mother. Help us to listen for your voice. When others speak your love, make our hearts leap for joy. Amen.

# Surprised by Joy: Stories of New Birth

## A Devotional Offering for Grown-ups

### The Third Sunday of Advent - Mary (Mother of Jesus)

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Mary's first appearance in Scripture is a love scene, not a theological treatise. A young girl in the small country town of Nazareth, full of life and health, is anticipating her coming marriage to Joseph, about whom we know little except that he is once called a carpenter.

At any rate, Mary is alone, possibly daydreaming about the approaching wedding, when she is startled by the sudden arrival of a strange visitor. Did the angel Gabriel appear in a blinding light, beating wings that spanned the room? Probably not, since Luke says the girl was troubled by the angel Gabriel's words, not his appearance. He begins by paying her

outrageous compliments: she is "full of grace," he tells her, favored by God, the lucky winner in a sweepstakes she didn't even know she'd entered. No mere mortal in the scriptures is ever addressed in such lofty terms.

The strangers next words are even more fantastic. Most men bent on seduction would have assured her she had nothing to worry about. This one, on the other hand, predicts she will in fact get pregnant, that the baby will be a boy, and that she should name him Jesus--a common enough name in that day, something like Victor in English. Only this time the content of the name is to be taken seriously. The child really will be victorious, indeed a king, destined to restore her country's throne to its rightful owner.

Well Mary may be young, but she's not stupid. She brushes aside the stranger's apparent flattery and glittering promises about the future and pulls the conversation firmly back to the present. "Just how do you expect me to believe all that?" she demands. "I'm not even married yet. And I'm not the kind of girl who fools around." The implication is that she doesn't intend to become one either. Having protected her valuable virginity so far, she's not about to jeopardize it now for some stranger's wild promises.

Gabriel is forced at this point to reveal the principal for whom he's acting: not he, but God himself will be her Lover. And, as if recognizing how incredible this explanation sounds, he offers as proof of his promises the news that Mary's elderly cousin Elizabeth, childless throughout a long marriage, is now miraculously six months pregnant herself.

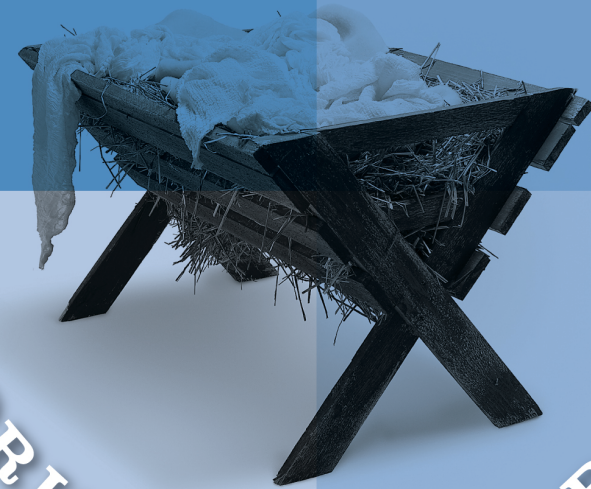
Faced with the stranger's possession of intimate family secrets in specific physiological detail, Mary at last capitulates to Gabriel's wooing. No longer reticent or ironic, not even maidenly demure, Mary surrenders, declaring herself, "the slave of the Lord. Let him do with me what he wants."

*Daughters of Eve: Women of the Bible Speak to Women of Today* by Virginia Stem Owens  
(icon of the Theotokos, Mother of God, from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church)

ZECHARIAH

ELIZABETH

SURPRISED BY JOY:



STORIES OF NEW BIRTH

MARY

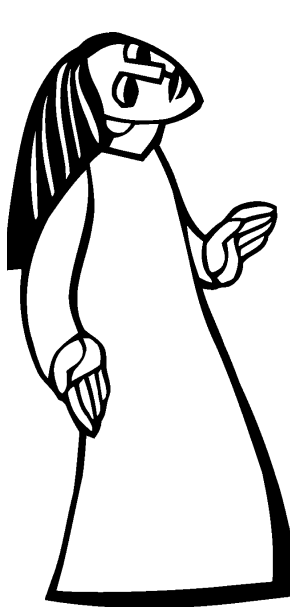


## Surprised by Joy: Stories of New Birth

### Take Home Advent Devotional (Week 3)

Each week during the Season of Advent, you are invited to remove the cover of your worship folder and take it home, as a devotional guide to use during the week. The interior pages of the devotional guide are especially suitable for use with young children, and the back page offers a special reading for the grown-ups. Throughout the Four Sundays of Advent, we will explore stories of new birth in the Bible and in our lives, today.

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Mary



Holy  
Spirit



Elizabeth

#### Key Verse to Remember: Mary's Song

Mary said, "My soul gives glory to the Lord. My spirit delights in God my Savior." Luke 1:46-47

#### Family Devotion:

This Advent season, we are learning about stories of new birth. These stories will help to prepare our hearts and minds for Jesus' birth when Christmas comes. In the first chapter of the Gospel of Luke, we hear from four members of Jesus' family, and all of their stories connect in some way to the surprising joy of new birth.

This week, we focus on the story of Mary. Mary was the teenage mother of Jesus. In the Gospel of Luke, we learn that Mary was visited by the angel Gabriel during the sixth month of her cousin Elizabeth's pregnancy. The angel tells her that she is lucky because God has chosen to put his child inside of her. She will be the mother of Jesus. Amazingly, she chooses to trust God and says okay to whatever God has planned for her.

After the visit from the angel, she goes to visit her pregnant cousin, Elizabeth. There is joy and happiness in their meeting. Mary is so happy that she sings a song. She sings about all the wonderful things that God will do through her baby, Jesus.

- Read Mary's song (the Magnificat) in Luke 1:46-55.
- Mary says that in Jesus God has changed some things. Can you name three things in her song that she says God has changed?
- What do you think it would be like to be Mary? Would you be scared? Excited? Confused?
- Mary trusts God. When is it easy or hard for you to trust someone?

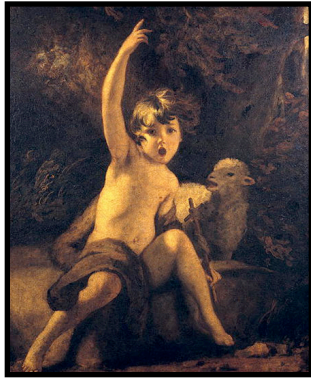
#### Family Prayer:

Dear God, Mary was just a teenager when your angel told her that she was going to be the mother of Jesus. She was not rich or powerful or strong, but she had an open heart and she trusted you. Help us to open our hearts and trust in your Word to us. Amen.

# Surprised by Joy: Stories of New Birth

## A Devotional Offering for Grown-ups

### The Fourth Sunday of Advent - John (Cousin of Jesus)



There is something almost funny about Luke's description of the birth of John. Don't get me wrong, Luke's not making fun of Elizabeth or Zechariah or their contemporaries. But he does seem to construct in this scene something of a "comedy of errors."

Eight days after Elizabeth gives birth, it is time in Jewish tradition to name the child. And so friends and neighbors come around and, assuming he will be given the name of his father, prepare to name him "John." "No," his mother interjects. (Curious that they don't consult her, but just presume....) "He is to be named John."

Confused silence all around. "Did your father bear this name?" "No." "A brother?" "No." "What about an uncle or grandfather?" "No." "Well has anyone in your family ever borne the name of John?" "No."

Stunned silence all around. And so they consult with Zechariah. (Even more curious that they don't trust the mother's word....) And Zechariah, who as you remember cannot speak, motions for a writing tablet and scrawls out the words, "His name is John." Not "he should be named" or "he will be called," but rather, simply and definitively, "His name is John." It's a settled matter. It was settled, after all, by the angel Gabriel nine months earlier. And Zechariah, it would appear, has learned his lesson.

Their confusion, I think, is understandable. When God gets involved in our lives things often take turns we hadn't anticipated. And though perhaps not all that funny in the moment, our halting, often stumbling attempts to navigate the new terrain God's promise has laid before us will, at a distance, appear even – and maybe especially – to us as humorous. Zechariah, no doubt, once he regained his voice, no doubt looked back at his time of silence, shook his head, and chuckled to himself and his bride, "And to think I asked Gabriel how all this could happen."

There is an ancient Christian hymn – actually, the oldest hymn we know outside the Bible – often sung as part of evening prayer called the Phos Hilaron, a transliteration of the Greek often rendered as "gladdening light" or "joyous light." But the word we translate as "gladdening" or "joyous" is also the root of our word "hilarious." (So also in the Latin version, Lumen Hilare.) Which means that we might sing this song of praise to the "hilarious light of glory."

Why did the early Christians choose such a peculiar song with which to end their days? Because they recognized, I think, that along with the wonder and excitement that comes to those who witness God's activity in their lives always comes a bit of confusion, as things work out in ways we'd never expected, and eventually laughter, the hilarious laughter of those who have seen God choose an old woman to bear the herald of the Messiah, a young virgin to give birth to the Son of God, and an executed criminal born years earlier in a stable to redeem the world. Hilarious, indeed.

From *In the Meantime* by David Lose  
(Painting: *St. John the Baptist in the Wilderness* by Joshua Reynolds, circa 1776)





## Surprised by Joy: Stories of New Birth

### Take Home Advent Devotional (Week 4)

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Zechariah & John

Mother & Child

#### Key Verse to Remember: Zechariah's Prophecy

God's kindness will bring the rising sun to us from heaven. It will shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death. Luke 1:78b-79a

#### Family Devotion:

This Advent season, we are learning about stories of new birth. These stories will help to prepare our hearts and minds for Jesus' birth when Christmas comes. In the first chapter of the Gospel of Luke, we hear from four members of Jesus' family, and all of their stories connect in some way to the surprising joy of new birth.

This week, we focus on the story of John. John was the cousin of Jesus, and the Gospel of Luke tells us that he had a very special purpose. Before he was born, the angel Gabriel visits his father, Zechariah, and tells him that he and his wife will have a special baby. This baby will be filled with God's Spirit and as he grows, he will teach parents how to love their children.

After John was born, his father sang about his special son. With joy, he said that John would be a prophet teaching people how to forgive and preparing their hearts for God, who was coming into the world.

- Read the words that John's dad, Zechariah, sang in Luke 1:67-79.
- The angel Gabriel tells Zechariah that his baby, John, will "teach parents how to love their children." (Luke 1:17) How can kids teach their parents or other adults about love?
- In Zechariah's song, he says that John will prepare the way for Jesus (Luke 1:76). How would you prepare the world for a visit from Jesus?
- How are you getting ready for Jesus' birthday?

#### Family Prayer:

Dear God, you sent John into the world to teach us about forgiveness and to get us ready for your coming to us in Jesus. As we celebrate your birth this week, help us share the gift of your love. Amen.