

Presence in the Manger

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Discussion Guide

Session I: Devotionals 1-7

The Gift of Truth: In our current political landscape, the concept of truth can be a contentious issue! As Pilate said so long ago, “What is truth?” (John 18:38) If you think your group can handle discussing today’s climate around truth without becoming hostile toward each other, invite them to talk about truth in today’s world. How do we know something is true? How do we deal with differing opinions about what we consider true? How do we learn to live together and love as family when we have differing opinions? Help move your group to discussing what Luke meant about truth. In the New Testament world, there were a lot of ideas and opinions developing about Jesus. Some were wacky and some were in line with Jesus’ teachings. Luke is striving to help people understand the true aspects of Jesus’ life and teachings.

Rocks in the Road: Who wants to think about hard and hurtful things when we’re moving toward Christmas? And yet, many of us find ourselves wrestling with those things in a season that is supposed to be filled with joy. Rather than seeming alien to our Christmas journey, many of us will identify with Zechariah and Elizabeth. Ask, “Who are the people, or what types of situations place people in, the same setting as Zechariah and Elizabeth today-- that is, feeling ostracized or looked down on by society, bearing a long running hurt or disappointment that weighs upon the soul?” There should be many examples! How did Zechariah and Elizabeth’s community contribute to the problem? Point out that the common belief that childlessness was brought on by God left Zechariah and Elizabeth alone and isolated. What could the community have done differently? What can we do to positively impact people who are in strained and hurtful situations? Obviously, God did not spurn Zechariah and Elizabeth, so we have no right to sit in judgement on others. You could look at some of Jesus’ teachings on judging others (Luke 6:37-

42, for example) and apply to these situations. Finally, you could ask if anyone finds themselves struggling with feeling isolated and looked down upon. How can we follow Zechariah and Elizabeth's example of keeping confidence in God while going through these difficult times? What can we, as a group, do to help?

Crushing the Soul: This devotional picks up where the last one left off and turns the spotlight to shine more on Zechariah and Elizabeth. It invites us to wrestle with how we deal with disappointments, heartaches, and life's difficult challenges. Ask people to list possible responses to such soul crushing challenges: bargaining with God, depression, anger, withdrawal, resignation, etc. Which are helpful and which are hurtful? Is there one particular response that works: that is gets us what we want? Not likely. Our only real hope is to know that God walks with us, suffers with us, hurts with us, and will never abandon us. What are some ways to stay in touch with God's loving presence when we are hurting?

The Scary Angel: Here, we are invited to consider our relationship with God and the role of prayer in our lives. Sometimes, we think of God as a super Santa Clause. We ask for what we want and expect God to give it. Sometimes, we feel that if we do what we are supposed to do, then God will give us what we desire. When we are in need of something or longing for something in our lives, what is the role of prayer? Is it to get what we want? Do we have to convince God in some way that we deserve, are worthy, or should have what we desire? Should prayer be about getting what we want or building a relationship with God? How do we deal with situations in which we never get what we want? We all find ourselves praying for deep matters in our lives. Sometimes we get that for which we have been praying, like Zechariah, and sometimes we don't. Getting a positive response is not really the purpose or goal of prayer. Prayer is to bring us into a relationship with God, who loves us and hurts with us along life's way. If we discover the love of God in our lives, then we can bear the difficulties, whether we get a yes or a no.

Too Good to Be True?: Ask people to try and picture themselves in Zechariah's shoes. How do you think you would feel during this encounter with Gabriel? It may be helpful to pull up a drawing of the temple in order to understand the configuration and placement of the Holy of Holies. Why do you think the typical human response to the presence of an angel is fear? Zechariah seemed to have difficulty believing that Gabriel's promise of a child would come true. Why do you think this is so? Zechariah's question about how he would know cost him his ability

to speak for nine months! I suggested that this might be symbolic for what happens to us as Christians or to the church when we are not faithful. Ask people whether or not they agree and to share examples of how they may have seen this happen.

More Than We Bargained For: Let's use the discussion over this devotional to explore John's role in the salvation story. If you have time, you could look up some of the stories about Elijah and see how much trouble he got into. Ask the class how they think the news about John's greatness would have left Elizabeth and Zechariah feeling. Is this something we would want for one of our children? Ask people to list what this passage says about John's role in the Gospel story: 1. The idea that he is not to drink wine or strong drink is associated with one who takes a vow as a Nazarite. 2. John will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before birth. The presence of the Holy Spirit in a person's life was one of the primary characteristics of Old Testament prophets. 3. John will turn people. He will turn the hearts of parents to children. He will turn the people to God. He will turn the disobedient to wisdom. All of this turning is to get people ready to receive Jesus. Ask the class how John went about doing this mission of his. (See Luke 3.)

Gabriel Rides Again: Point out that Luke has carefully structured his telling of the stories of John and Jesus' birth so that we see that God is at work in both births, but that Jesus has a more important role. Ask the class to compare and contrast Gabriel's appearance to Zechariah and Mary. What is Luke trying to tell us in the differences in location of appearance and in the differences between the people to whom he appeared? What role does Luke's mention of Joseph's heritage play in our understanding of Jesus and John? Early on, there was a group of people who believed John was the Messiah. Luke wants to make sure that we don't make that mistake.

Session II: Devotionals 8 – 15

Introducing Mary: Despite the long history of venerating Mary as the mother of Jesus, when we look at Luke's Gospel we discover that there is nothing exceptional or unexceptional mentioned about Mary. She is simply a person whom God has picked to bear God's Son. Ask the class if it is OK that God picked just an ordinary person, or do we need to ascribe superior qualities to Mary. What are the

implications of God picking an everyday person to bear God's Son? The devotional suggests that God's selection of Mary tells us that God wants us to know that God is not after the great, super pious people of the world, but is interested in each and every one of us. Ask the class to try and put themselves in Mary's shoes and imagine how they would feel when Gabriel appears. How can we explain Mary's sense of calm and curiosity?

Perplexing News: Poor Mary! It's hard to imagine any news that could be more exciting or more scandalous than finding out that you are going to be pregnant with the Son of God out of wedlock. Ask the class to imagine themselves being Mary's parents and listening to her as she explains. What would you think? How would you respond? Why do you think God chose Mary, knowing that it would put her in such a difficult situation? There is the practical consideration that had Mary been married, it would have been easy to attribute her pregnancy to her husband rather than a miracle. But do you imagine people attributed Mary's pregnancy to Joseph, anyway? Looking ahead, one would surmise that Mary and Joseph remained a part of their village since they left from there to go to Bethlehem. Ask the class how they think that could have happened.

Way Beyond Ordinary!: Ask the class to reflect on Gabriel's pronouncement of whom Jesus will grow up to be. How do we see these promises playing out in Jesus' life? (At baptism, the voice from heaven proclaims, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." (Luke 3:22) You could look at the temptation in Luke 4:1-13.) Does Jesus obtain the throne of David and reign forever? How does the setting of Gabriel's announcement and the choice of Mary demonstrate that God is picking a new path for the coming of the Messiah?

It's a Miracle!: Ask the class to discuss the differences in Gabriel's responses to Zechariah and Mary's questions. What does this difference tell us? Why do you think it is important for Luke to show us that Jesus is above John every step of the way? Ask the class to list all of the various explanations they have heard for how Jesus' birth could have come about. Why do we seem to seek scientific explanations for Jesus' conception? Take a moment to discuss whether or not Mary's state of religious perfection matters in God's plan. Should we see Mary as above, better than, the rest of us? Does it lend more credence to God's plan to send Jesus to save us if Mary is a common, everyday sinner like the rest of us?

Amazing Possibilities: Luke presents us with one highly improbable and one impossible scenario regarding John and Jesus' births and asks us to see in them God at work in our world. Does it seem appropriate that God's coming into our world incarnate in the form of Jesus would require an event beyond the realm of possibility? Why or why not? What are some of the possibilities of the meaning of Gabriel's statement, "For nothing will be impossible with God?" (Luke 1:37) The beauty of Mary's response to Gabriel is that she willingly opened herself up to be a conduit for what God wanted to do in the world. Can our responses to God affect what God can do in our lives? How can we be more like Mary in our daily walk with God?

Departing the Norms: The Holy Spirit is active in Luke's Gospel. Talk about how the Holy Spirit is God's presence in our lives and hearts. Ask the class how they see the Holy Spirit working in this passage. Ask, "How have you experienced the Holy Spirit in your lives?" In Luke's writings, the Gospel and Acts, we see women in prominent roles. Talk about how this is a radical statement in the male dominated society of Jesus' time. Ask, "Have we come very far since then? In what ways do we still live in a male dominated society?" In what ways does Luke's focus on women in these birth stories signal the coming of a change in the established order of things? In what ways did Jesus change the established order?

Mary the Believer: Belief is such a simple word, but it becomes very complicated when we are talking about religion! Ask the class to define belief. Look at Luke 1:45 and ask, what all did it take of Mary to do what this verse says? Can we believe and doubt at the same time? How central to salvation is belief? How central to being a disciple is belief? What role did belief play in Abraham's life? Ask the class to discuss how belief went beyond a yes or no for Mary and encompassed accepting all of the changes that Jesus' birth would bring to her life. How does believing go beyond yes or no to impact our lives?

What Mary Said: Literarily, there is such a contrast between the simplicity of Luke's introduction of the Magnificat and the grandeur of the canticle, that the introduction actually helps one experience the canticle. Ask the class to discuss what it means for Mary's soul to magnify the Lord. Talk about the symbolism of Mary giving birth to a physical being, God incarnate, and how that magnifies the Lord from the invisible to the visible. In what ways can we magnify the Lord?

Session III: Devotionals 16 - 22

A Heart for the Lowly: Think about the irony of Mary being elevated from her low status in society to the greatest position a human being has ever achieved. How is that symbolic of what God does for each of us in Jesus? Pride and arrogance are great blocks to spirituality and developing a relationship with God. Why do you think that is so? Ask the class to discuss how pride and arrogance get in the way of being a disciple. On the other hand, humility and lowliness seem to be helpful in our lives as disciples. Why do we think this is so? If you have time, you could trace some of the biblical examples listed in the devotional and look at how the lowliness of the person helped enable faith and trust. Ask the class to share ways in which they have found humility and lowliness bringing them closer to God.

The Problem with Pride: America seems to be becoming a very caustic society. Demeaning, stigmatizing, and badgering anyone who is different from my position seems to be becoming the norm. We seem to no longer be able to disagree, we have to disagree and then stomp on the other person. Ask the class to discuss how this is playing out in the world around them, in sports, at work, in politics, and on social media. What does Luke 1:51 have to say about our current situation? If God's people are called to be humble and lowly, then what role do Christians have to play in today's America? Is it more important to win at any cost or to come together? Ask the class to step back, way back, and take a look at America today from God's perspective. What do you think God sees, thinks, feels about what is going on?

More Bad News: A strong theme in Luke's Gospel is the idea of divine reversal: In Jesus, God will reverse the human established order so that it is more in line with God's Kingdom. This is good news for the broken and downtrodden and hard news for the elite. Ask the class to discuss what they think God's purpose is in this divine reversal. Ask the class to point out any passages in Luke's Gospel they can remember as examples of this divine reversal. How does God's plan to bring down the powerful and lift up the lowly play out in our lives? As Americans, we tend to be the haves, the powerful of the world. What does this verse mean for us? What would a world in which God has accomplished this divine reversal look like? What do the powerful gain from this divine reversal?

Gone from Preaching to Meddling: Now God is taking aim at our wallets! What are we to do?! Ask the class to discuss how the examples listed in the devotional act out Luke 1:53. If you have time, assign some of the other passages in the footnote to groups and have the groups discuss them in light of Luke 1:53. Ask the class, “How does our attitude toward money impact our lives as disciples today?” Can anyone list modern examples? For Luke, money seems to be a tool to use to enhance another person’s life. It is another way of expressing the love God seeks to instill in our hearts. Can this be true? How are we as a church living out God’s call to use what we have as a tool to improve the lives of others? How are we doing this as individuals? I think Luke would say that it’s not how much a person gives away, but the attitude with which it is given. Which attitudes toward money and possessions would be a hindrance to faithful living and which would be helpful?

Covenant Life: Take a moment to read the covenant with Abraham in Genesis 17. Ask the class to describe the terms of the covenant, the responsibilities and promises of each party. Ask the class, “How is the new covenant with Jesus different?” (The new covenant is worldwide, encompassing all people, substitutes baptism for circumcision as the physical mark, and focuses on love rather than land.) Take some time to discuss the new covenant. What are the terms of the new covenant?

What’s in a Name?: Ask the class to imagine the scene of going to have John circumcised and named, including having the friends suggesting names. Ask the class to try to describe some of the thoughts and feelings the various characters might be having. It had been nine months since the angel appeared to Zechariah. Do you think he and Elizabeth had any second thoughts about naming their baby John? It seems like such a little thing, so why do you think it was so important for Zechariah and Elizabeth to get the name right? What was at stake? The meaning of “John” in Hebrew is “God is gracious.” How does this fit in with Luke’s story of John and Jesus’ births?

Blessed Be the Lord: If you are interested in learning more about the berakah, an internet search will offer several websites. Examples of berakah for different foods can be found at <http://www.berachot.org>, Take a moment to discuss the purpose of saying a blessing before a meal. Is there value to the idea that we say a prayer that is directed totally to blessing God for what God has done? Ask the class to imagine themselves in Zechariah’s position, finally being able to

speak and realizing that he is standing at the very point in which God's plan of salvation begins. What must that have felt like? Talk about restoring a piece of furniture and ask the class to list all the steps that go into preparing to put on the new coat of paint or stain. John is coming to prepare people for salvation. What are the steps that go into that preparation? What are the consequences of trying to enter into salvation without going through the steps of preparation?

Session IV: Devotionals 23 - 29

The Joy of Light: Take a moment to recall examples in your life of when God's tender mercies have broken through the darkness. Ask someone to read Luke 1:78-79. Ask the class to share examples of how this passage has played out in their lives. You may need to get it started by sharing an example from your life. How is Jesus a fulfillment of this promise? Ask people to share what it means to have God walk with them as a light in the darkness.

A World Changing Event: Take a minute to talk about Luke's rationale for setting Jesus' birth in a historical context and review some of the date issues. Ask the class to consider the irony of Emperor Augustus sitting in his palace writing a decree to register the whole world versus Joseph and Mary traveling to fulfill this census while bearing the Savior and King of the whole world. In all of his regalia, Augustus thought himself to be the ruler of the world. In all of his humility, Jesus IS the King of the Universe.

Jesus Is Born: Take a moment to have someone read Luke 2:5-7 and note just how simply the birth of our Savior is told. Ask the class to discuss the significance of Luke's mention of Jesus being wrapped in bands of cloth. How does it show his humanity and divinity? Ask the class to discuss the symbol of the manger. What does it represent? Read Isa. 1:3 and ask, "How does this fit with Jesus' birth? What does Luke 1:7 say about our openness to Jesus coming into the world? Can humanity really be so hard hearted that we don't have room for the very God who loves us and created us? How does this theme play out in the rest of Jesus' life? (His rejection at Nazareth, the Pharisees' ongoing battle to subvert and finally arrest him, Peter's denial, the crowd shouting to crucify him) Ask the class if they can identify examples of how we are unwilling to welcome and make room for God in today's world. Finally, our Advent task is to reorient our hearts so

that we can welcome Jesus rather than push him out. What are some ways we can do this?

The Birth Announcement: Ask the class to share how we announce the birth of a baby today. Mailed cards? Phone calls? Facebook? Instagram? We usually want everyone to know! Ask the class why they think God sent this amazing angelic announcement to a few shepherds out in the field. If you have time, look at 1 Samuel 16:1-13 and discuss how this passage relates to Luke's description of Jesus' birth. Ask the class to discuss what God's emphasis on the lowly instead of the privileged means for the Gospel. Is God really starting something entirely new in Jesus? Read Luke 2:10 and point out that the angel says that this good news of great joy is for all people. Ask the class what they think the angel means that Jesus is coming for all people. How does that impact our understanding of the Gospel and how we do church? If Jesus is really coming for all people, is there anyone we can leave out? The devotion points out that Jesus' coming will renovate our hearts. Ask the class to discuss what they think the author means by this. How can we help this renovation to happen?

A Message from Heaven: Ask the class to imagine what it must have felt like for the shepherds to have seen and heard the angels. Ask the class to discuss how Jesus' birth is subversive to the status quo of his day. How is Jesus' coming subversive to the status quo today? If our goal is to get to the Kingdom of God, how far do we have to go? The devotion makes the claim that God loves every human being. What does that mean for our lives as individuals? What does that mean for the church? Have someone read Luke 2:14 and ask the class, "What do the angels mean by peace?" What will peace look like in today's world? If Jesus came to empower us to love everyone, what does that mean for my life? Ask the class to reflect on how far they have come in their capacity to love? What are the signs of a person who has learned to love? What are some things we can do to help advance ourselves down the path of loving everyone around us? Is love really the ultimate goal of discipleship?

The Kernel of Christmas: Ask the class to think about all of the layers and fluff surrounding Christmas. Ask them to try and pick out three or four of the most important things, the most meaningful things, about how they celebrate Christmas. You may be able to prompt sharing among the group by offering your own three or four items. Ask the class to try and put into words for themselves what the true

kernel, the true meaning of Christmas is. You might try asking the class to close their eyes and imagine while you read, beginning at the second full paragraph on p. 69. Ask people to share what they felt, what they thought as they imagined participating in going to see the newborn Jesus. What is the impact of discovering Jesus in our lives?

The Presence Is Here! If you have time, review the parallels between John and Jesus' stories as presented by Luke. (There is a time setting, visit from an angel, an important response by the one visited, the promise of an improbable/impossible birth, both have canticles, the birth, and the naming.) Talk about how Jesus is both human, just an ordinary baby, and divine, with the list of titles attributed to him. Ask the class to discuss just how much our lives and happiness depend upon Jesus. Point out that Jesus came to build a relationship between God and us. We can't have that relationship by thinking the right thoughts or knowing the right answer. To have a relationship with God requires that we get down to the heart level and interact. Ask the class to discuss the differences in relationships through social media and digital devices versus in person. What do we get out of person to person interactions that we can't get with digital devices? Christmas is God's invitation to put down the digital devices and have a real relationship. How does having a real relationship with Jesus impact our relationships with other people?