

bible⁺study: december 2021

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Based on the scripture lessons of Cokesbury's Adult Bible Study Series

December 5, 2021 Text: Luke 1:5-25, 57-58 “Elizabeth and Zechariah’s Long Wait”

The next several lessons will emerge around the theme of “waiting.” This week’s study text tells about a husband and wife (Zechariah and Elizabeth) who waited almost their entire married life before they finally had the baby they had always wanted.

If you ask a dozen ten year olds to draw a picture of a scene from the Christmas story, you will probably get sketches of Mary, Joseph, an angel or two, shepherds, wise men on camels, a manger, and a glowing star. It is not likely that you will get a picture of John the Baptist or his parents. (Come to think of it, you are not likely to get very different results from adults. Go ahead. Try it on your pastor...just don’t say that I suggested it.)

But, after a brief introduction, that’s the way Luke begins his gospel account. As Luke reports it, Daddy Zechariah probably would not have included himself in a drawing about the coming of the Messiah. When he heard the news of his forthcoming baby, he didn’t even believe it (Luke 1:18). But, maybe we can get a clue in his name: Zechariah in Hebrew means “Yahweh has remembered.”

If God gave me a choice of being in charge of “what was going to happen” or being in charge of “when it happened,” I think I’d choose to control “when it happened.”

December 12, 2021 Text: Luke 2:19, 22-40 “Mary’s Pondering”

After Jesus was born (Luke 2:7), shepherds came to Bethlehem to check out for themselves what they had been told by an angel (literally, messenger): “Your savior is born today in David’s city. He is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:11). When they got to the manger, they reported what the angel had said (Luke 2:17).

Translators struggle to describe how Mary handled this announcement (Luke 2:19). She “considered them carefully” (Common English Bible). She “pondered them in her heart” (New Revised Standard Version, King James Version.) She “mused upon it” (Moffatt: A New Translation). She was “often dwelling on them in her mind” (Weymouth). She “gave much thought to them” (The New Testament in Basic English). She “clung to all these words” (Cotton Patch Version). She “turned them over in her mind” (J. B. Phillips). She “kept all these things to herself, holding them dear, deep within herself” (*The Message*).

If I had to paraphrase this verse, I’d say: “It took a while for it all to sink in.”

In light of all this, can you imagine how Mary and Joseph felt when Simeon (Luke 2:25-35) and Anna (Luke 2:36-38) showed up for the ritual leaning ceremony (Luke 2:27) and proclaimed that in seeing this child they had seen their salvation (Luke 2:30, 38)! (This is part of next

December 19, 2021 Text: Luke 2:25-38 “Waiting for Prophecy to be Fulfilled”

When I was a student at Drew Theological School, each day the service of evening prayer closed with someone reading the Nunc Dimittis, Luke 2:29-32. Those verses are the prayer of Simeon, a man who had been told he would not die until he had seen the Lord’s Christ (Luke 2:26). Now, as he held the baby Jesus in his arms, he realized that he had indeed lived to see the Savior (Luke 2:28). Each time we left the service, we had that reminder that this was still true and still happening.

We were introduced to Simeon and Anna in last week’s focal text. Both of them were very devout (Luke 2:25, 37), waiting expectantly for the redemption promises of the Lord to be fulfilled. God blessed that waiting with the gift of the presence of the Savior.

God works in multiple ways. The shepherds weren’t expecting anything when the angel appeared with the surprising news of Jesus’ birth. Simeon and Anna, on the other hand, were pious, searching, waiting people of faith. God came to both settings.

Why is waiting so hard? Is it the way that doubt begins to creep in? Is it wanting to show others what a good prognosticator I am? Is it that I am super eager to get to the good stuff? (How hard is it to wait for the “bad stuff”?)

Everyone assumed that Elizabeth and Zechariah’s son would be named after his father (Luke 1:59). No, the parents wanted the boy named “John.” (Luke 1:60, 63) That name comes from a Hebrew word meaning “Yahweh is gracious.”

Waiting. Elizabeth and Zechariah waited for their son, John. John the Baptist pointed to the Messiah for whom the people had waited. And now, we wait for His coming again. Waiting.

What Someone Else Has Said:

Writing of John the Baptist, T. W. Manson (*The Servant-Messiah*, Cambridge at the University Press) put it this way: “This ministry has two distinctive features: it is a clear call to moral renewal and it has a clear reference to the Jewish Messianic hope.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “God of saving power, You send those who prepare the way. Open my heart and mind to receive with faith the promise that they make and stay with me as I wait...”

week’s study also.) Again, translators try to find a word that fits the moment for Mary and Joseph (Luke 2:33): “amazed” (CEB, NRSV), “marveled” (KJV), “speechless with surprise” (The Message), “full of wonder” (New English), “surprised” (CEV), “lost in wonder” (Rieu).

Reading these verses has got me to thinking that maybe we have grown too accustomed to the marvelous miracle that all this is. Has this Advent season become more or less ho-hum? Perhaps we are more captured by the seasonal excitement than we are by the absolute shock that this baby will save us.

What Someone Else Has Said:

In *God in Gotham* (Belknap Press of Harvard University), Jon Butler has written: “By the mid-twentieth century—in part due to the writings of one of Manhattan’s most famous intellectuals, the German émigré theologian Paul Tillich—some New Yorkers also might have said that religion was what constituted their ‘ground of being’ or ‘ultimate concern,’ the essence of what they lived for and what shaped their individual lives and collective existence.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “O Lord Christ, You are the foundation of all and You are the glue for my life, yet I confess that sometimes I take You for granted and fail to be in awe of this wonder...”

(Maybe I can learn that your spiritual experience and my spiritual experience do not have to be the same.)

Here’s a side-trip that helps me understand what is going on in this text. Some time ago, I put some dirty clothes into my washer. Just now a chime rang out, signaling that the wash cycle is completed; the clothes are clean. Mary has come for the ritual cleaning called for in Leviticus 12:4. The chime rings! Simeon has come and suddenly knows that the Savior has come. The chime rings! Anna has brought her fasting and praying and suddenly the chime rings! I can bring my dirty self and by the gift of grace I can know that I have been cleansed. The chime rings!

God gave the gift of faith to Simeon and Anna. The 33-day old baby Jesus did not have a sign around his neck reading “I’m the Savior.” It was God’s gracious intervention that led these two to know that the infant was God’s promise coming true. My acceptance of Jesus as

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Lord and Savior is equally a gift. During these final days of Advent, let us come with expectancy. God is awfully good at fulfilling promises!

What Someone Else Has Said:

Laurence Stookey (*Calendar*, Abingdon) observes: “It is necessary that the liturgical year begin with the focus on a central, holy intention; for otherwise the story of Jesus, which is about to be rehearsed from con-

ception and birth to death and resurrection, may seem less than what it is: the deliberate fulfilling of divine purpose, worked out through historic processes.”

Prayer: As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Come, Lord Jesus...”

December 26, 2021 Text: Revelation 3:20-4:8; 6-10 “Jesus is Waiting at the Door”

Are you as surprised as I am that the assigned study text for the day after Christmas is from the Book of Revelation?

There are two images of doors. One is of the door that Christ waits for us to open to welcome him in. (Revelation 3:20). That puts an amazingly important matter into our hands, what some theologians call “free will.” The other door is the one that opens to show what heaven is like (Revelation 4:1). The apocalyptic vision is packed with symbols and signs of those who come before the throne of God.

The title of this lesson suggests that Jesus is at both doors; in one case, He waits for us to let Him in; in the other case, He waits for us to come through His open door. We experience Him both ways. And in the picture of the heavenly realm, there are those who ask God an important question: How long will You wait? (Revelation 6:10)

If you are reading this before Christmas Day, do you have some gifts under the tree that are you eager for the family to open? If you are reading this after Christmas Day, do you have any gifts that you have not opened yet? Think of those gifts as doors. If you are excited and ready for someone to open a gift you have given, can you imagine how eager our Lord is for us to open the gift He has for us? If you have a gift you have not yet opened, can you imagine how Christ Jesus waits for us to open the gift—enter the door—He has for us?

Chapters 6 through 10 of the Book of Revelation are packed with strange appearances. Revelation 6:10 captures a question that the faithful often raise: “How long, O Lord?” Do you remember how the prophet Habakkuk opens his writing? He pens “Lord, how long will I call for help and you not listen?” The Book of Revelation was written at a time when there was major persecution of Christians. They too must have wondered, “How long?”

God’s timetable is not the same as ours. In fact, Hebrews 13:8 reports, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.” Paul gives a hint as to what time it is for us. “As you do all this, you know what time it is. The hour has already come for you to wake up from your sleep” (Romans 13:11). So, Merry Christmas! God has a gift to give you!

What Someone Else Has Said:

In *Sanctity Without Starch* (Bristol), Robert Tuttle, Jr. tells of a small child who said: “Let’s see if I’ve got this straight. It is Jesus’ birthday, but I get the presents, right? ... Is this a great religion or what!”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “You are the gift, O Christ...”



In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them. And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.” When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.