



Surprised by Grace

Goal: To recognize moments of God's surprising grace and share it with others.

RECOGNIZING GOD'S GRACE . . .

. . . In Luke 1:5-25, 57-66

An old man and his wife receive the startling announcement that they will become parents! The angel Gabriel appeared to the priest Zechariah in the temple, announcing that John, whose name means "God is gracious" and who "will be great in the Lord's eyes" (v. 15, CEB), will be born to Elizabeth and him. Through the child John, the loving God gives grace. The child turned out to be John the Baptist, forerunner of Jesus the Messiah. Of John it was said, "Indeed, the Lord's power was with him" (v. 66, CEB).

John's birth was an act of God's pure grace. Although Elizabeth and Zechariah had prayed for a child for a long time, they must have been very surprised about the child God was giving them. They were chosen by God to be John's parents as a wonderful gift of God's goodness and love.

When Zechariah was able to speak, "he began praising God" (v. 64, CEB). His response was praise, thanksgiving, and gratitude. Our response to God's gracious love in Jesus Christ is the same. We praise and thank God, expressing our gratitude by being disciples of Jesus Christ. In faith, we give our lives to serving Christ in response to the grace we receive and the gratefulness we want to express.

. . . In Your Children's Experiences

Elizabeth and Zechariah waited a long time to receive the blessing of John's birth. Remembering the prophecy of the angel, their friends wondered who he would be and what he would become. The story proclaims promise and hope in the face of disbelief, and joy and expectation in the face of barrenness. John's name proclaims to all the grace of God.

Children connect with the story in many ways—in their wanting and waiting, in their hoping and praying, and in their wondering and imagining. Moreover, it can reassure them that God's gracious love is theirs and that they are beloved children of God.

. . . In Your Relationships with the Children

Children love to hear stories of their birth or adoption. They enjoy hearing how they fit into their loving family. This story is confirmed at baptism, when the minister says, "You are a child of God, and you belong to Jesus Christ forever."

As you end your time with the children each week, give each one a blessing, speaking their names and reminding them of the promise of God's love. This week, pray for each child by name, that each one may grow in God's grace and be a blessing in this world.

*Holy God, take me by the hand and lead me
into your promised future by your grace. Amen.*

Supplies

Music & Melodies

bit.ly/GGGMusicMelodies

Stories, Colors & More (SCM) i–iv, 2, 16, 18

basic supplies
(see p. vii)

audio stories (optional)
(see p. vii)

internet-connected
device

Christmas music

purple cloth

four Advent candles

gift-wrapped box with
medium-size bowl
inside

baby doll and biblical
costumes (optional)

Responding

Claiming

copies of **Grace Notes**
(GN) 1

Offering

copies of **GN 2**,
cardboard box

Extra Activity

SCM 2a, 2b

GATHERING IN GOD’S GRACE

Before the children arrive, post **SCM i–ii**, “Your Visual Schedule.” Cut out and glue the arrow marker on a clothespin. Use the schedule to provide clear expectations and a visual cue for the group.

See **SCM iii–iv** for the key to icons (for example, **LG T**) and ways to adapt for children who have special needs or disabilities.

Welcoming and Preparing B MS

Greet the children by name and with the words “Grace and hope be with you.” Prompt them to respond with the same words.

This is the second week of Advent. Play Christmas music as the children arrive. Invite them to help you set up your space. Provide a Bible, purple cloth, and four Advent candles to set on the table.

Invite the children to name what they know about the season of Advent. Explain that Advent means “coming.” During Advent, we remember that Jesus came long ago and promised to come again.

Ask some children to help prepare today’s “Responding in Gratitude” activities and suggest that one or two prepare to lead today’s singing.

Singing

Sing “This Is the Day”—**SCM 16**—to celebrate the gifts of God. If the song is unfamiliar, sing one line of the song to the children and have them sing it back to you. Or you can lead the song while the children sing the echo. Encourage the children to come up with motions to the song.

Praying C LD

Invite the children to gather around the Advent candles. Turn on two candles. Remind the children that the candlelight is a reminder of God’s presence and gift of grace to the world. God shines light in the darkness through the saving grace of Jesus Christ. Invite the children to join an echo prayer. Ask for a volunteer to lead the prayer today.

Holy God, /
you are good and great. /
You came to the world /
full of grace and truth. /
We look forward to when you will come again. /
Amen. /

L *Children who struggle with attention may have difficulty with quiet listening activities. To help with focus, suggest listening prompts or provide them with a soothing object to hold.*

Preparing to Hear the Story

Tell the children that grace means that God accepts us and loves us just as we are. Suggest one way to imagine grace: God smiling.

Present the gift-wrapped box. Suggest that seeing a present with brightly colored wrapping paper can help us recognize grace. Wonder what our faces look like when we receive a gift. Wonder what is in the box.

Invite the children to unwrap the gift box and locate the bowl inside. Ask: What is surprising about the contents of the box?

Wonder what kind of gift a bowl is and what a bowl can reveal to us about God's grace. Place the bowl on the worship table and comment that today's story is full of surprises.



Today's story can be found in *Growing in God's Love: A Story Bible*, edited by Elizabeth F. Caldwell and Carol A. Wehrheim (Louisville, KY: Flyaway Books, 2018), www.pcusastore.com.

Surprises include: an angel visiting Zechariah, Zechariah not being able to speak, Elizabeth having a child in her old age, and the child being named "John."

Hearing the Story

M L

Invite a child to find Luke 1 in the Bible and place it on the worship table. Tell the children that the Bible story comes from the first chapter of Luke, a book that tells about Jesus. Explain that this story happened just before Jesus was born and is about relatives of his. Read **SCM 2**. Conclude by saying, "Word of wisdom, Word of grace," and prompt the children to say, "Thanks be to God."

Invite the children to choose a character from the story (Zechariah, Elizabeth, Gabriel, people in the temple, people in the house) and to act out the story as you read the story again. Invite the children to dress in biblical costumes if you have them.

Challenge the children to use the bowl. Give them suggestions, as needed: the bowl could be an artifact in the temple, or even the writing tablet that John uses to write the message.

Repeat the story or have the children tell the story in their own words, if children want to change characters.

Reflecting on God's Grace

L C

Invite the children to name parts of the story that were surprising. Wonder together how God's grace was present in the surprising events.

Provide paper and crayons. Invite the children to write or draw a time when something surprising or unexpected happened this week.

Have them put their papers in or by the bowl. Hold up the papers one at a time and ask, "Where might we see God in this?" After some discussion, ask, "How do you thank God?"

Singing

Sing "He Came Down"—**SCM 18**—to celebrate God's love and grace. Add a verse including the word *grace*. Use repetition.

Turn off the candles.



RESPONDING IN GRATITUDE

Select activities appropriate for your group and for the time available.

Claiming God's Grace



Comment that even today, one of the surprises of grace is that God sends messengers or angels. Children in your group may have their own ideas or experiences of what angels are like.

Ask the children to each make several angels using copies of **GN 1**. Encourage the children's creativity in decorating the angels.

As the children work, talk about the message the angel brought to Zechariah. Wonder what messages of grace the members of the congregation would welcome. Invite the children to write a message on the banner. Have the children cut out their angels and banners, then tape or glue the banners to the angel's hands. Assist younger children with writing and cutting out the shapes.

Use painter's tape to place the angels around your church building. Invite members of the congregation to notice the angels and their messages.

Ask the children to pray for the people who will be surprised by the angels and will receive the messages.

Praying God's Grace

Invite children to suggest simple actions to go with the words of the following litany.

One: When we are like Zechariah and afraid, O God,
All: surprise us with your grace.

One: When we are like Zechariah and we pray, O God,
All: surprise us with your grace.

One: You give us times of joy and gladness, and times to be quiet and think. In happy times, in quiet times,
All: surprise us with your grace, O God.

One: In Jesus' name,
All: Amen.

Prompt the children to repeat the refrain: "surprise us with your grace." Do the actions together while you or volunteers read the litany.

Ask the pastor or worship committee to invite the children to lead the prayer with motions in an upcoming worship service.



Offering God's Grace

F LG A

Wonder how to surprise people with grace. One way is to help one another and show God's love. Explain to the children that they can collect food donations for people who are hungry. Talk about what kinds of foods are needed at food pantries—proteins, such as canned meats, fish, and nuts; grains, such as low sugar cereals, oatmeal, and rice; and healthy snacks, such as granola bars, popcorn, and packaged fruits (no sugar added). See the list on **GN 2** for more suggestions.

Suggest that they make a donation station out of a cardboard box. Invite them to decorate the box and make a poster with pictures and a list of the foods people need. Encourage the children to name ways they can surprise people who are hungry for God's grace.

Ask children to brainstorm what they would want to say in a notice for your church newsletter or bulletin about the food collection project. Write a short notice using their suggestions. Use copies of **GN 2** to encourage children, their families, and the congregation to contribute.

Place the collection box in a prominent place in the church. After the next session, deliver the food to a local agency. Ask for parent volunteers to drive and chaperone. Send a copy of **GN 2** home with each child.

B *Children with behavioral issues (and even some without) may struggle with a long list of complicated rules. Keep guidelines broad and simple, such as: try your best, respect others, be polite.*

Extra Activity

MS A B LD

Tell each child to write their name on a slip of paper, fold the paper in half, and place the slip in a pile. While they are writing their names, cut and tape together **SCM 2a** and **2b**: “Alphabet Movements.”

Remind the children that Zechariah could not speak, but he needed to communicate to the people what the baby's name would be. He wrote the name on a tablet. Tell the children that instead of a tablet, they will play a silent game to spell out names.

Post the Alphabet Movements chart. Invite each child to pick up a slip of paper from the pile. Have the children take turns spelling out the name they drew by doing the movements listed on the chart for each of the letters in the name. Help as needed.

Allow the child doing the movements to finish spelling the name before the other children guess who it is. Celebrate that God knows each of their names and smiles upon them—a gift of grace.



Ask parents and caregivers for their email addresses so that you can provide them with the link to www.pcusastore.com/GGGdownloads, where they can download coloring pages, *Grace Sightings*, audio stories, and songs (see p. vii).

LOVING AND SERVING GOD

M L C T

Sing the second stanza of “He Came Down”—**SCM 18**.

Remind the children that this is the second week of Advent and that for each week until Christmas you will light one candle. Last week you looked for ways that Jesus brings peace and today you learned about God’s surprising grace.

Use the prayer litany in “Praying God’s Grace”—again or for the first time—as a closing prayer.

Send each child with a blessing. Say to each one: “(Name), the grace of God is with you. Tell your friends and family how surprising God’s grace is!”



Dear _____,

Our children are growing in grace and gratitude by collecting food for people who are hungry in our community. The children have placed a collection box in _____ of our church building.

Please consider making a food donation. The last day to contribute is next Sunday. The food will be delivered to _____ after that date. Thank you.

Basic Food Needs

- meals in a can (stew, chili, soup)
- canned tuna, salmon, and chicken
- peanut butter
- canned foods with pop-top lids
- low-sugar cereals
- oatmeal
- 100% fruit juices in single-serving boxes
- shelf-stable or powdered milk
- packaged fruit packed in juice (no sugar added)
- canned vegetables (low salt)
- snack items—100% fruit rolls, raisins, graham crackers, unsweetened applesauce, cheese and crackers, microwave popcorn, pretzels, granola bars (without nuts)
- holiday items—canned yams, cranberry sauce, stuffing mix



