



## Surprised by Grace

(based on Luke 1:5–25, 57–66)

Many years ago in the land of Judea, there lived the old priest, Zechariah (zeh-kuh-RAI-uh), and his wife, Elizabeth. They loved God very much. They had prayed to God for children, but they didn't have any. Children were thought to be signs of God's blessing. Zechariah and Elizabeth wondered why they had not been blessed.

One day, it was Zechariah's turn to serve God as priest in the temple. God sent the angel Gabriel to Zechariah. When Zechariah saw the angel, he jumped. It was quite scary.

"Don't be afraid, Zechariah," the angel said. "God has heard your prayers. Your wife will have a son, and you will call him John. The name *John* means 'God is gracious.' God is blessing you and Elizabeth with joy. John will be filled with the Holy Spirit. John will be a great prophet."

Zechariah was amazed. "How am I supposed to believe this?" he gasped. "Surely my wife and I are too old to have children!"

"You don't believe me?" the angel replied. "God sent me to bring this good news to you; but since you did not believe my message, you won't be able to talk until John is born. Everything I have told you is true. It will all happen as God has said." Suddenly, the angel disappeared.

When Zechariah came out of the temple, he couldn't speak. He couldn't make a sound. He couldn't even make a tiny squeak! The people knew something strange had happened, but Zechariah couldn't tell them. He couldn't speak.

Nine months later, Elizabeth had a strong, healthy baby boy, just as the angel had said. Elizabeth and Zechariah felt so happy and blessed. When the baby was eight days old, all the neighbors gathered to celebrate. It was time to choose a name for him. Everyone thought that the baby should be called Zechariah, like his father.

"No," Elizabeth declared. "The baby's name is John." All the people looked to Zechariah. They wondered what he thought, since no one in the family had the name John.

Using a writing tablet, Zechariah wrote, "His name is John."

Suddenly, Zechariah could speak again. In a loud voice, Zechariah praised God! Zechariah and Elizabeth knew that God had been so very gracious to them.

All the people who saw what happened were astonished. In fact, people throughout the countryside talked about it for days. Everyone who heard the story wondered what it meant. "What will become of this child named John?" they asked one another.



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Use one or more activities from each section to explore grace and gratitude with your children this week.

### Recognizing God's Grace

- Advent wreath—When your family is together for a meal this week, read the Bible story, and light the first and second candles of the wreath. Wonder together where God's grace is in this story.
- Invite your child to listen for action words that tell how Zechariah responded to the angel's news and the baby's birth. Read the story again, and encourage everyone to make faces, sounds, or movements for words such as *jumped*, *amazed*, and *gasp*.
- The story says that Zechariah was silent and then he sang a song of praise and thanks in a loud voice. Challenge your child to think of signs and songs that he or she would use to praise and thank God.



### Responding to God's Grace

- Help your child discover the meaning of his or her given names by researching them online or in books at the library. Talk to your child about the day he or she was born—or, if adopted, his or her “gotcha day.” Discuss the decisions made in the naming process. If you have no information about a child's name, identify a gift or skill he or she has that helps people experience God's love.
- Invite each person to create a mirror image of his or her name by folding a sheet of blank paper in half lengthwise, opening the paper, and printing the name above the fold by pressing firmly with a crayon. When the names are finished, refold the papers and rub them with wooden spoons or other solid objects. When papers are unfolded, everyone should have reflections of their names. Invite everyone to think about what it means to be a reflection of God's grace in the world.

### Celebrating in Gratitude

- In gratitude for God's grace, participate in a season of giving by selecting a name from an angel tree at church or from a social-service organization. Pray daily for the person(s). Make plans to save money for buying—as well as wrapping and delivering—the requested gift(s).
- Give with gratitude for Advent by finding one item of clothing or a toy you no longer use to donate to a homeless shelter.
- Pray the following prayer this week:

*Dear God, help us look with hope for your presence in the world. Amen.*