



## On your marks

The great storyteller Luke, on whom we rely for most of the details of the Christmas story, doesn't just tell us about Mary and Joseph. He devotes an equal number of verses to what happened to Zechariah and Elizabeth, who also experience a miracle birth. Luke was writing for a non-Jewish audience and needed to explain how the birth of Jesus was part of a promise given long ago to the people of Israel and signposted throughout the Old Testament. So, he offers this great history lesson in the form of a story that weaves its way around the events surrounding the more well-known narrative about Mary and Joseph.

## Get set

The following template for a storytelling session is ideal for an all age-setting. You can find a retelling of the story in the Barnabas Children's Bible (stories 241, 243, 244).

For royalty-free pictures to accompany the story, [click here](#). Alternatively, the following series of objects/activities could be used as visual aids for each section of the story:

*A Bible* - Zechariah is a name from history

*A kafir* - a Middle Eastern headscarf - Elizabeth had links with the tribe of Levi

*Prayer hands* - their longing for a child

*A model/picture of the Ark of the Covenant* - Zechariah goes into the Holy of Holies

*A bright light* - the angel appears

*Use/teach some British Sign Language* - for the words 'help', 'angel' and 'baby'

*A baby doll* - the birth of John

## Go!

### The story

Zechariah was an old family name. There'd been Zechariahs in the family all down the generations. Some claimed they could trace the name back to the great Zechariah, the prophet whose sayings and visions were recorded in the Holy Scriptures of Israel. He had been one of the last great prophets of Israel. Zechariah was a name full of history, authority and promise. So, no wonder Zechariah the priest, who lived near Jerusalem, was proud to bear that name.

And Zechariah wasn't the only one with an historic past. His wife Elizabeth was part of the family of Abijah, from the tribe of Levi, descended from Aaron himself, the brother of Moses. Elizabeth and



Zechariah the priest couldn't be better connected - they were practically priest royalty!

But Zechariah and Elizabeth were nevertheless sad, as they had no children. There would be no one to whom they could pass on the family name. No more Zechariahs in the family. It seemed that all that history, all that authority and all that promise would end with them. No wonder they had prayed so hard for a child - in particular for a boy. But time was now against them. It seemed, as it so often does, that God's answer was 'no', or at least 'not yet', and God had his reasons.

Once, in the great city of Jerusalem, something very special happened to Zechariah. From among all the hundreds and hundreds of priests who took their turn in serving in the great temple, Zechariah was chosen to go into the Holy of Holies, to lead the worship and to help bring the people close to Almighty God. This was a huge privilege and a once in a lifetime opportunity for any priest. Zechariah would go into the holiest part of the temple and pray there on behalf of the whole nation; he was to stand before God as a representative of Israel. He'd never thought he would get to do this but now his chance had come. Zechariah was priest of the day. Just think how he must have felt. Just imagine how he and Elizabeth looked forward to that great day.

So, in he went... into the Holy of Holies of the temple... close to the very heartbeat of God. And then it happened - in that very place, something incredible occurred.

Suddenly, the dim light began to glow brighter and brighter, until finally it filled the place with an overwhelming, startling blinding glare. A shining person was there with him. It was as if heaven's door had opened and Zechariah was looking straight into the throne room of God.

The angel spoke: *Don't be afraid! I have good news. You and Elizabeth will have a son. He will bring people back to God. He will turn the hearts of children to their fathers again, and fathers to their children. He will prepare the way for the One who is to come. And you shall call him John.*

*John, John, thought Zechariah, what sort of name is that? This can't be right! I need proof!*

A trace of doubt had crept into the old priest's mind and Gabriel saw it: *I am Gabriel, he declared, and I will give you a sign. You will be speechless and will have to live by signs until the baby is born.*

The people outside were growing restless. What had happened? Why was Zechariah so long? And then he stumbled out... pale, shattered and humbled. He tried to tell them what had happened but not a single word came out. He couldn't speak. All he could do was make signs. They understood that something overwhelming had happened to him. Speechless Zechariah was helped home that day while everyone wondered about what he must have seen.

And God kept his promise. Elizabeth did conceive a child: a special baby, who was filled with the Spirit from the moment his life began; a child that even leapt inside the womb, when Mary visited. Finally, that baby was born.

On the eighth day after the birth, all the family were gathered for the naming ceremony. They



expected him to be called Zechariah, as, after all, this was the great family name. But strangely Elizabeth kept insisting that he must be called John. John? There'd never been any Johns in the family. What is going on? It was then that Zechariah himself scratched out the words on the slate: his name will be John. And from that very moment he could speak again. He broke into song – words of praise that came out of a long silence: *Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, who has visited and redeemed his people...*

### **The song**

Here's a simplified version of Zechariah's song that has both rhythm and rhyme, and with which you could invite everyone to join in:

*God is great, God is good  
He'll save his people like he said he would.*

*God is kind, God is fair  
Welcome soon King David's heir.*

*God is holy, God is true  
Abraham and the prophets knew.*

*John my boy, John my son  
God wants you to be the one.*

*Show the way, put things straight  
God is coming, not long to wait.*

*God forgives, God is love  
All because of God's own Son.*

### **Wondering questions**

- I wonder why Luke chose to include this sometimes forgotten story of Christmas. It's just as long as all the parts about Mary and Joseph put together!
- I wonder why Mary, who was probably the source for Luke's storytelling, wanted this story to be included.
- I wonder why Luke begins and ends his story of Christmas in the temple.
- I wonder why Zechariah's story is important.
- I wonder why Zechariah couldn't believe the angel's message.
- I wonder what Zechariah's song has to say to us today.

Zechariah sings about the best-kept, longest-kept promise in the Bible.

- Are we prepared to wait that long for God's promises?
- Can we trust God that much?



- Do we believe God will keep his promises?

Zechariah's song (the 'priest's' song) is one of the true carols of Christmas. It goes alongside the 'prophet's' song (in Isaiah 9), the 'peasant girl's' song (Mary's Magnificat), the 'angels' song (for the shepherds on the hillside) and the 'old man's' song (Simeon's song in the temple) at Christmas.