



Visiting with Angels

by Heath Lewis, DCE

How would you respond to a visit from an angel?

It is hard for us to think about how we might react if, suddenly, an angel came to visit. Would you run away screaming? Would you be immobilized in fear? Would you think to yourself “WOW! This is the greatest moment of my life!”

In the stories surrounding Christ's birth, we see several encounters people had with angels. Ordinary people, like you and I, were visited with extra-ordinary messages from God. In this series, we will take a look at their stories: the hope that God brought to Zechariah and Elizabeth; the trust that Mary showed in God's promises; the Good News that was given first to the shepherds.

Each lesson contains four main sections:

- **GETTING STARTED:** At the start of each lesson, there is an activity provided to help get your students thinking about the main theme for the day.
- **DIGGING IN:** This is the foundation of the study. This section focuses on the content and context of the story from the Bible. It is set-up in a question-and-answer format, with leader helps provided in parentheses.
- **WHAT ABOUT TODAY?:** In this section, we will try to bridge the gap between the first Christmas and today. This is where the application to your students' lives will take place. This section is also formatted in a question-and-answer style.
- **CLOSING PRAYER:** These activities are designed to challenge your students as they leave the study. During each of these closing prayer activities, students will be doing some simple writing to take with them as they go through their week.

Blessings as you prepare for the celebration of Christ's birth!

[All Scripture references are taken from the New Living Translation unless otherwise noted.]



The Lord has Done this for Me!

In God's promises, we find hope.

Luke 1:5-25

GETTING STARTED: What you want most... (5 minutes)

Get into groups of three or four.

Share the following with your group:

- If you could only achieve one goal in life, what would it be? Why would you choose that goal?
- How would you feel if you were able to achieve your goal?
- How would your life be different if you were never able to reach your goal?

There are things that we want from life – a good job, a family, etc. But if those dreams don't come true, it can make life more difficult – and sometimes it can even seem a bit hopeless.

DIGGING IN: Zechariah and Elizabeth (15-20 minutes)

In today's story, we are going to meet a couple named Zechariah and Elizabeth.

Read Luke 1:5-7.

What do we learn about Zechariah and Elizabeth in this text? (They were considered righteous people; they obeyed all of the commandments God had laid out for His people; they had no children; Elizabeth was not able to conceive.)

Zechariah and Elizabeth were considered faultless among the people of their day – to the point that Luke tells us they were considered “righteous in God's eyes” (vs. 6). But, as we read in verse 7, they were unable to have children. This presented a problem for Elizabeth; childbearing was counted as the highest calling for a woman. To be unable to conceive a child was considered a disgrace for any woman – including Elizabeth.

How would you feel if you were Zechariah and Elizabeth? (Allow time for responses.)

As much of a disappointment as it was for Zechariah and Elizabeth to not have children, they continued to serve the Lord and do what He commanded. One day, while Zechariah was in the Temple, a strange thing happened.

Read Luke 1:8-17.

In verses 9-10, we read about a task given to Zechariah. What was this task? (To go into the temple and burn incense. Zechariah was chosen by lot to perform this task, which was considered an honor. Notice that while the burning of incense took place, a large group of people stood outside, praying. Talk about pressure, right?)

What happened to Zechariah while he was in the Temple? (Gabriel appears to him.)

How did Gabriel greet Zechariah? (“Don't be afraid, Zechariah!”)

Why do you think this was an important greeting for Zechariah at the time? (Allow time for responses.)

Can you imagine what it would be like if you were in your church, maybe serving as an acolyte, and suddenly an angel appeared? How would you react? Now imagine if you were in your church by yourself and this occurred! That is what Zechariah experienced in the Temple!

An experience with an angel could be a terrifying experience – in fact, I'd be willing to bet that most of us would run away screaming if we encountered an angel! The greeting that Gabriel gave to Zechariah was important because it provided reassurance that this was a positive visit! God sent His angel to give Zechariah a message of hope and Good News, even in his old age!

What is the message that Gabriel brought to Zechariah? (“God has heard your prayer. Your wife, Elizabeth, will give you a son, and you are to name him John.”)

In verses 16-17, the angel goes on to tell Zechariah about the things that John will do. What are some of those things? (Turn many Israelites to God; have the spirit and power of Elijah; prepare the people for the coming of the Lord.)

The message that Gabriel brought was one of hope. Remember, it was considered a disgrace to not be able to bear children in Zechariah's culture. Not only would Zechariah and Elizabeth have a child, but their son would have a great task – to help prepare people for the coming of Christ! Surely, this was a life-changing announcement for the couple!

How would you feel if you were Zechariah now? (Allow time for responses.)

Read Luke 1:18-25.

What was Zechariah's reaction to the news that he and Elizabeth would give birth to a son? ("How can I be sure this will happen? I am an old man now, and my wife is also well along in years.")

Did this response please Gabriel? How did Gabriel react? (No; Gabriel took away his ability to speak until the baby was born.)

Zechariah finally came out of the Temple, and was completely unable to speak. How would you react if you were Elizabeth? Your husband went into the temple fine, but came out and couldn't say anything? (Allow time for responses.)

What was Elizabeth's reaction when she realized that she was pregnant? ("How kind the Lord is! He has taken away my disgrace of having no children!")

WHAT ABOUT TODAY? (5-10 minutes)

We are like Zechariah and Elizabeth. We each face struggles and disappointments in life. Of the main characters in this story (Zechariah, Elizabeth, Gabriel), who are you most like? Why?

Have there been times in your life when you felt like you were "doing everything right", but that God must have forgotten about you? What does this story tell us about those times?

Why do you think Zechariah was so quick to doubt what Gabriel was telling him? How do we doubt the promises of God today?

Have God's promises given you hope in times of uncertainty or despair? How?

CLOSING PRAYER (5 minutes)

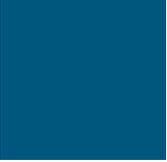
Hand out index cards and writing utensils.

Zechariah and Elizabeth struggled because of their inability to have children. Even after God sent Gabriel to promise a son, Zechariah still questioned that promise!

We all struggle with fears and doubts. On your card, write down one area of your life where you are wrestling with doubt.

This week, take your note card and hang it in a place where you will see it often (on your bathroom mirror, your dresser, the wall above your bed, etc.). Use it as a reminder to pray for strength from the Holy Spirit to trust God's promises for your life.

Close your time together in prayer, leaving a time for silence when students can pray for their fears and doubts silently.



I am the Lord's Servant

Trusting God as His Servant

Luke 1:26-38

GETTING STARTED: Would you trust me? (5 minutes)

Have students find a partner for this activity.

Ask students if they would trust their partner with the following things. Start each sentence by saying, "Would you trust your partner with..."

- your pen?
- your iPod?
- your cell phone?
- your wallet/purse?
- your car (for those who have a car)?
- your life?
- (add others to fit your group)

As the "cost" to trust someone else increases, it can be more difficult to trust someone, right? You had a much easier time saying you would trust your partner with your pen than your life! In our story for today, Mary found herself in a difficult situation with no one to rely on but God.

DIGGING IN: Gabriel Visits Mary (15-20 minutes)

Girls, pretend for a minute that someone told you that you were going to give birth to a child. How would you react? (Allow time for responses.) Now, imagine that an angel came to deliver this news that you were going to give birth to a child. How would you react? (Allow time for responses.)

It may sound strange, but this is exactly what happened to Mary, the mother of Jesus!

Read Luke 1:26-33

How did the angel Gabriel greet Mary? ("Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you!")

Why do you think it was important for Gabriel to greet Mary in this way? (It was important for Mary to know that God's presence was already with her, since she was about to be confronted with a monumental task.)

What was Mary's response to meeting Gabriel? (Vs. 29 tells us that Mary was "confused and disturbed.")

Gabriel continued with the message from God. Gabriel told Mary "Don't be afraid". This is the same greeting we saw in Zechariah's encounter with an angel back in Luke 1:13! Remember, an encounter with an angel could be a very troubling, frightening experience, but in this situation, there was no need for fear! The angel had been sent to bring a message of Good News!

What do we learn about Jesus in verses 30-33? (He will be great; He will be called the Son of the Most High; Jesus will be an ancestor of David; His Kingdom will never end.)

At this point, Mary must have thought she was crazy, right? Not only was she carrying on a conversation with an angel, but now Gabriel is telling her that she – a virgin – would give birth to a child?! And on top of all of that, He would be...the Messiah?!

What do you think was running through Mary's mind at this point? (Allow time for responses; this announcement was difficult in many ways, and Mary was understandably troubled. Despite all the positive things Mary has been told, she was still just a girl, and would be giving birth to a child. She was not yet married, and to have a child out of wedlock meant social disgrace, and possibly even death.)

Let's read on and see how Mary responded.

Read Luke 1:34-38

How did Mary respond in verse 34? ("But how can this happen? I am a virgin.")

The interesting thing about Mary's response is that she never said that she wouldn't give birth to a son! Mary responded, not by asking "Really?", but rather by asking "How?"

What was Gabriel's response in verse 35? ("The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.")

It was apparent, even from the announcement of His birth, that Jesus would be special. Born of a woman, Jesus would be fully human. However, we also recognize Jesus' divinity – a fact that is evident as He is conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit. We also recognize in verse 35 that Mary did nothing to make this miracle happen – it was all because of God's power in this situation!

Gabriel continued by delivering news to Mary regarding the pregnancy of her relative, Elizabeth. Why do you think this was important news for Gabriel to deliver to Mary at this point? (Allow time for responses; perhaps this was an encouragement for Mary as she would be faced with the great task of giving birth to Jesus.)

How did Mary respond in verse 38? ("I am the Lord's servant. May everything you have said about me come true." She responded in humility; she wasn't prideful or boastful about her position of favor as the mother of Jesus. She reacted with a servant's heart and attitude, trusting in God's promises for herself and all of humanity.)

WHAT ABOUT TODAY? (5-10 minutes)

Mary stepped out in faith to serve God. Despite all of the seemingly huge obstacles that Mary faced, she trusted in the promise of God (given to her through the angel Gabriel). Mary believed, as we read in verse 37, that "Nothing is impossible with God."

What obstacles do we face as we serve God?

How do we put our trust in God during difficult times?

When called to serve, how can our response be like Mary's?

Isn't it interesting that God didn't pick the most qualified mother in the world to give birth to Jesus? He picked Mary – a young, unmarried girl – to fulfill His promise of a Savior. God chose someone who would probably not have "all the answers" about raising children. Instead of choosing an experienced mother, God chose someone who would have to rely fully on Him to overcome the huge obstacles that she would face.

What does this say to you about serving God?

How can you be open to God's leading in your service to Him?

CLOSING PRAYER (5 minutes)

Hand out index cards and writing utensils.

Mary was willing to serve God, even though it meant potential hardship for her. She served despite being (seemingly) inadequate for the task at hand. What "qualified" Mary for the task was simple: God had chosen her, and she was humble enough to allow God to work through her. Mary's simple response of "I am the Lord's servant" is one that we can echo as we live our lives of faith today.

Take a moment and write down one or two ways God is calling you to serve Him.

Just like Mary had to face many obstacles in her service to God, we also face struggles in our service. Maybe we have to give something up to serve. Perhaps we face teasing from friends or even family. Sometimes, we just don't feel equipped. On your card, write down some of the obstacles you will have to overcome in order for you to serve God. (Allow time for students to work)

Have students get into groups of three. Share what is on your card with your group.

Sometimes it is difficult for us to serve when there are so many obstacles in the way. But just as Mary trusted, we also place our trust in God to say "I am the Lord's servant."

In your groups of three, take time to pray for the person to your right. Pray that the Holy Spirit would strengthen the person to your right to serve God, and that the obstacles they face in their service may be overcome.

This week, take your note card and, again, hang it in a place where you will see it often (on your bathroom mirror, your dresser, the wall above your bed, etc.). Use it as a reminder to pray for God to use you in service to Him, despite the obstacles we encounter.



I Bring you Good News!

The Gospel is for everyone, not just Christians

Luke 2:8-14

GETTING STARTED: Who would you tell? (5 minutes)

Imagine that the following scenarios have happened to you. Who is the first person you would tell?

- You got an "A" on your calculus test.
- You just got in a car accident.
- You made the varsity team.
- Your parents are getting a divorce.
- You had a great date on Friday night.

How did you decide who you would tell in each of these situations? (Allow time for responses.)

Who we share the news of our lives with tells us a lot about the relationships we have in life. Sure, sometimes we just can't hold the news in and we end up telling the first person we see. Most of the time, however, the people we share our news with are the people we care about the most. When Jesus was born at Christmas, God sent an angel to share the Good News. His selection of who to tell first might, however, raise some eyebrows...

Let's dig a bit further into Luke to see how God began to spread His Good News!

DIGGING IN: The Angel Visits the Shepherds (15-20 minutes)

What do you know about shepherds? (Allow time for responses.)

The life of a shepherd wasn't really all that glamorous. Think about it: you are out, tending the fields, making sure that your sheep and goats aren't doing something stupid. Most of your time was spent outdoors taking care of the animals, and you had to be ready at all times to fight off a robber or a wild animal. The shepherd's status in society was considered low by the ruling authorities, and they were seen as little more than peasants.

In Luke 2, the Bible tells a story about some shepherds. They were out in their fields, tending to their flocks. Then something strange – miraculous, even – happened!

Read Luke 2:8-14.

How did the angel greet the shepherds in verse 10? ("Don't be afraid!" This is now the third time we have seen an angel sent from God greeting people with this statement!)

What was the message that the angel brought to the shepherds? (The Good News that the Messiah has been born. The angel also gave a sign that will help the shepherds find Him – He would be wrapped in cloths, and lying in a manger.)

Why do you think God sent his angels to visit the shepherds first? (Allow time for responses)

In verse 14, we hear the resounding message proclaimed by the heavenly host: "Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased." (NIV) How is this statement a summary of the entire Christmas story? (Only in Christ are we reconciled to God – without Christ, it is impossible to "please" God. And, only in Christ, can we find true peace and joy!)

How do you think this message changed the lives of the shepherds? (Allow time for responses.)

Read Luke 2:15-20.

The shepherds were so taken by what they had seen and heard that they left their flocks and hurried to see what the angel had told them about. What do you think motivated their journey? (Allow time for responses)

What did the shepherds find when they got to Bethlehem? (They found everything, just as the angel had told them.)

God kept His promise to the shepherds. Through His angel, God told the shepherds that they would "find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." (vs. 12) That is exactly what the shepherds found when they arrived in Bethlehem! Even more than this, God kept His promise to all of humanity that He would send a Savior to rescue them from the powers of sin, death, and the devil!

WHAT ABOUT TODAY? (5-10 minutes)

The first people God told about the Messiah's birth weren't the religious elite, the upper-class of the day, or anyone like that. They were shepherds – ordinary, everyday working-men, the “lowest of the low” in their society. What does God's decision to tell the shepherds first show you about God?

If Jesus' birth was taking place today, who do you think God would send His angels to first? Why?

After being told the Good News, the shepherds went and found Mary, Joseph, and Jesus – just as they had been told they would find it! God kept His promise to the shepherds! How has God kept His promises to you?

Upon seeing Jesus, they went out and spread the news that the Savior had been born. As Christmas approaches, how are you spreading the Good News of the Savior's birth?

CLOSING PRAYER (5 minutes)

Hand out index cards and writing utensils.

God's choice to announce the Good News of Jesus' birth to the shepherds shows God's love for all people, including the lost. The Gospel is for everyone, not just those who come to church on Sundays, read their Bibles every day, or are confirmed in our church!

Think of someone you know who doesn't yet know Jesus. Write their name on your index card. Don't share your response; this is just for you to see.

Just like the shepherds went out and told people the Good News about the Savior's birth, we too can share that message of hope! This week, take your note card with your person's name on it and hang it in a place where you will see it often (on your bathroom mirror, your dresser, the wall above your bed, etc.). Use it as a reminder to pray for this person throughout the week. Look for ways to share the message of Christ with this person.

Close your group's time in prayer, leaving time for students to pray silently for the person on their card.