

December 17. Read Luke 1:5-25. Zechariah was one of perhaps 18,000 priests and Levites. To be chosen by lot to burn incense in the Temple was a privilege that might come only once in his lifetime. Like Abraham and Sarah, he and Elizabeth were elderly and childless. But Gabriel was God's messenger to bring them news of an astounding, unexpected change in their lives. In Luke 1:30, God's messenger said, "Do not be afraid, Mary." Today we see that months before, he said, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah" (verse 13). In fact, "do not be afraid" is the most common command in the entire Bible. What scares you most right now? This Advent, in what part of life do you most need God's message "Do not be afraid"? Luke's story was no "once upon a time" tale. It was about real people and places. So he began "In the time of Herod king of Judea." Does it help you to trust Luke's story that he gave many names and dates that people in his day could easily have verified? Why or why not?

December 18. Read Luke 1:1-4. Like other ancient history writers, Luke began his narrative about Jesus with a formal Greek prologue. In it, he told us several important things. He said his writing was the result of careful personal investigation. And he let Theophilus, and us, know what his primary sources of information were—"those who from the first were eyewitnesses." Ancient historians highly valued eyewitness testimony. Only one or two people saw many parts of Luke's Christmas story. Who could have told Luke about Gabriel's visit to Zechariah or Mary? Christian tradition says Mary lived in Ephesus, where Luke went with Paul. Have you ever thought that Luke might have learned the Christmas story directly from Mary, who lived it? Luke addressed his two historical books (Luke and Acts) to "Theophilus." The title "Most Excellent" usually meant he was highly placed in Roman society. Write an "eyewitness account" of Jesus' impact on your life. Consider who you could share it with.

December 19. Read Luke 1:39-56. When Gabriel told Mary she would bear the Messiah, he vouched for the truth of his words by saying that Elizabeth was also pregnant. Much remains unspoken in this passage. It seems likely that Mary, facing distrust and disapproval in Nazareth, yearned to be with a woman who could understand her experience. In any case, she went to Judea (several days' journey), and spent time with Elizabeth. Mary's Magnificat (in Latin, the first word of her song in verse 46) was not bland "church talk." In verses 52-54, this peasant girl in an occupied land praised a God who scatters the proud, brings down rulers and feeds the hungry. How does Mary's song offer you hope and challenge (whether you feel rich or poor, powerful or powerless)? Imagine the day-to-day support and understanding these two women gave each other during their three months. Who has blessed you with understanding and love when you really needed it? Is there someone who needs your support this Advent season?

December 20. Read 1 Samuel 2:1-11. Long before Elizabeth and Mary, a childless Hebrew woman named Hannah prayed for a child. When God heard her prayer and gave her a son, she dedicated him to God's service. He was the great Israelite leader and Prophet Samuel. Then she offered this psalm in honor of God, a poetic prayer much like Mary's expression of praise when she met Elizabeth. Hungry no more....The Lord...raises the poor from the dust." God came to earth, and was born, not in a palace, but in an animal shelter. How can you, as a Christ-follower, more fully live into God's attitude toward material wealth and poverty? 1Samuel 1 says Hannah's husband had another wife, Peninah (common in that day). She had children, and taunted Hannah, causing her great pain. Do some parts of Hannah's song carry at one of triumph over her rival that wasn't in Mary's? How do you see the difference between healthy joy in God's goodness and hurtful gloating?

December 21. Read Luke 1:57-66. When Elizabeth's son was born, her neighbors and relatives shared her joy. Her joy was even greater because so many believed childlessness was a sign of God's disapproval. Now she felt God had finally lifted the cloud she had lived under. When they named the baby John as the angel had said (Luke 1:13), Zechariah was able to speak again. Last week we saw that Joseph gave up the privilege of siring his first-born son to obey God. Zechariah here gave up the privilege of naming his son after himself. John was called, not to follow his father as a priest but to challenge that set of religious leaders. How did his father's submission to God point the way for John's life mission? "All the neighbors were filled with awe...throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things....asking, 'What then is this child going to be?' "We'd say there was "a lot of buzz" about John's birth. How did God use human curiosity (even our urge to gossip!) to add impact to John's later ministry?