

The birth of John the Baptist – Mary and Elizabeth



Luke 1: 1–25, 57–80

82

Zacharias was one of the priests in the temple. One morning, whilst he was preparing the incense offering there, an angel of the Lord appeared to him. This angel promised him a son. Zacharias was startled and confused. Because he did not believe the angel, as he and his wife were already quite old, God struck Zacharias dumb until the child, John the Baptist, was born.

About six months after Zacharias received this heavenly message, the same angel promised Mary that she, too, would bear a son and that she should call him Jesus.

Elizabeth and Mary were related. Mary lived with Elizabeth for three months; both looked forward to the birth of their children.

The children learn that God keeps his promises.

B

efore Jesus Christ entered the world, another child had been promised by God: John the Baptist. The following story tells us about him.

It is dawn and the sun is only just coming up. Its first rays herald the coming of another day in the city of Jerusalem. Many people are already on their way to attend the morning prayers in the temple. They gather in the forecourt of the temple and wait for the priest to come out of the holy place to pray with them.

An old priest is standing at the altar in the temple. His name is Zacharias. He is preparing an incense offering: He sprinkles pieces of resin (gum) of a special tree onto the glowing coals of the altar. The resin burns slowly on the coals and causes a strong, pungent scent. While Zacharias is deeply engrossed in this task, an angel of the Lord appears next to the altar where the incense is burning. Zacharias is startled, but the angel calms him: "Do not be afraid, Zacharias. God has heard your prayer. Your wife Elizabeth will soon bear a son whom you must name John. God has chosen this child to prepare the way for Jesus Christ, the Redeemer. He shall be great before the Lord."

Zacharias had always wanted a son but he is too old now. His wife is also past child-bearing age. Zacharias shakes his head in bewilderment, he cannot believe the angel. The angel carries on: "I am the angel Gabriel. God has sent me to bring you this message. But because you do not believe my words, you will be struck dumb until this promise has been fulfilled."

With this the angel disappears. Many faithful are waiting impatiently in the forecourt of the temple for the priest to come out. At last he appears. Zacharias wants to pray and pronounce the blessing, but he cannot speak. The people realize that something extraordinary must have happened in the temple.

A little later Zacharias leaves the temple and hurries home to his wife Elizabeth.

He is dumb as the angel has foretold. Also the other promise is fulfilled for Elizabeth, his wife, is pregnant.

1

Some weeks later the angel Gabriel appears to Mary in Nazareth, a young and believing woman. She is alone at home when the angel appears and says to her: "Do not be afraid, Mary: You will bear a son and you shall call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High." Mary is bewildered and finds it difficult to understand. But then the angel announces another miracle: "And even Elizabeth, your relative, is going to have a child despite her

old age. For nothing is impossible with God." Mary asks no more questions, she only says: "I am the handmaid of the Lord, may it be as you have said." The angel then disappears.

2

Mary is so excited that she has to speak to someone about her great joy. But to whom? Joseph, her fiancé, and the rest of her family, will never understand what has happened. It is all so mysterious! Mary decides to go to her cousin, Elizabeth. After a tiring journey, Mary finally arrives at Elizabeth's house and is happy that she can finally speak to someone about all that has happened. When Elizabeth hears Mary's greeting, she embraces her and, inspired by the Holy Spirit, exclaims: "How blessed you are and blessed is the child you will bear. How



*An angel announces to Zacharias:
"Your wife Elizabeth will soon bear a son whom you must name John."
John became the way-preparer for Jesus Christ.*

happy I am that the mother of my Lord should come to me!" Mary is amazed and overjoyed that Elizabeth already knows everything. Spontaneously she bursts into a beautiful hymn of praise (Luke 1 : 46–55). Mary stays with Elizabeth for three months. With no one else could she have shared her happiness.

Shortly after Mary has returned to Nazareth, Elizabeth's son, John, is born. The aged parents are overjoyed. Zacharias, who can speak again, glorifies and praises God.

3



- 1** We look at the large picture with the children. In the story we have just heard, Zacharias and the angel spoke to each other. What did they say? (cf Luke 1: 13–20).
- 2** We look at the smaller picture with the children depicting the angel's announcement of the birth of Jesus Christ, and discuss it. Although Mary does not understand everything the angel tells her, she believes it.
- 3** We compare the two pictures. Both children were promised by an angel of the Lord, and both promises were fulfilled. Mary believed what the angel said, Zacharias did not. God's promises are also made known to us. Our Advent is a time of preparation for the return of Christ. Christmas is a feast of joy. The first resurrection will be the beginning of indescribable joy.