



WEEKLY STUDY

WEEK 4

We observed the 4th Sunday in Advent this weekend as we prepare to celebrate Christmas Eve next week. Pastor Gary focused our attention on the theme of promises-kept during the Advent season. When God's promises are kept, God's people sing. And when God's people sing, joy is shared. May you sing a song of joy as you recount God's faithfulness this week.

Peace of Christ,
Pastor Mark Youngman

If you are studying with your Providence Small Group or Discipleship Group, you can share from daily readings as well as the additional questions at the bottom of this guide. If you would like to get connected visit prov.church/smallgroups.

Find a time each day to read the passage of scripture and follow the daily prayer prompt.

DAILY STUDY

MONDAY: LUKE 1.57-66 (ESV)

Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. ⁵⁸ And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. ⁵⁹ And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child. And they would have called him Zechariah after his father, ⁶⁰ but his mother answered, "No; he shall be called John." ⁶¹ And they said to her, "None of your relatives is called by this name." ⁶² And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called. ⁶³ And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And they all wondered. ⁶⁴ And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God. ⁶⁵ And fear came on all their neighbors. And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea, ⁶⁶ and all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, "What then will this child be?" For the hand of the Lord was with him.

- The celebration of Elizabeth's neighbors is noteworthy. Another translation says that "they shared her joy". The angel Gabriel has said in verse 14 that the child would be a joy and a delight and that many would rejoice at his birth.

What kind of an event would cause your neighbors to come out of their homes and rejoice with you? How would you imagine your neighbors and family responding to a strange and unexpected

(maybe even controversial?) birth? How would that play out on the neighborhood Facebook page? After John was given his name and Zechariah was able to speak again, not only did John's parents rejoice in God's faithfulness, but all of Judea was spreading the word. **Have you ever held on to good news a little too long? How does it feel to share good news of God's faithfulness?**

- *God, you keep your promises. Even the promises that seem too good to be possible. Thank you for breaking past what I think you can do. Amen.*

TUESDAY: LUKE 1.67-79

And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying,

⁶⁸ *“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has visited and redeemed his people
⁶⁹ and has raised up a horn of salvation for us
in the house of his servant David,
⁷⁰ as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,
⁷¹ that we should be saved from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us;
⁷² to show the mercy promised to our fathers
and to remember his holy covenant,
⁷³ the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us
⁷⁴ that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies,
might serve him without fear,
⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.
⁷⁶ And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
⁷⁷ to give knowledge of salvation to his people
in the forgiveness of their sins,
⁷⁸ because of the tender mercy of our God,
whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high
⁷⁹ to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.”*

- Remember that John has been in silent seclusion for 9 months prior to this song of praise. If you've ever spent an extended period of time in silence, you have probably encountered some deep introspection. It can require a significant amount of time to quiet the sounds and rhythms of our daily lives. For Zechariah, he came out of his long silence to faithfully name his son and then answer the question from verse 66. “What then shall this child be?” He gave praise to God for redeeming his people, and then turned to his own son and spoke words of blessing and purpose. His words prepared the way for the one who would prepare the way for the One who was coming to offer salvation to a broken and hurting world. (read that again!) We are not all called to be the primary messenger but we are all called to play a role in telling the story. **What is your role in telling the story of salvation this Christmas? Who needs to hear it from you?**
- *Jesus, send your Holy Spirit upon me and use me to proclaim the truth of our salvation through your life, death and resurrection. Amen.*

WEDNESDAY: LUKE 1.80

And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel.

- Do you recall how John's father had been in an extended wilderness for 9 months? John followed in that pattern of preparation until it was time for him to usher in a period of repentance and cleansing. People thought he was a little crazy and wild. But when the time came, they heard a message that would get them ready for Jesus, the lamb of God who would take away the sins of the world. **Have you ever experienced what you felt was a time of wilderness? Do you recall growing stronger during that season? What was it preparing you for?**
- *God, thank you for seasons of wilderness and preparation. On my own I wouldn't often choose the hard places, but through your faithfulness, I am being prepared for a bigger purpose. Amen.*

THURSDAY: ISAIAH 7.14 (NIV)

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.

- Pastor Gary shared a series of promises that were made and kept by God. This one from the prophet Isaiah must have sounded very cryptic to the original audience. *A virgin will give birth to a son who will be called God-with-us?* Since we are people who have experienced God's kept promises, we have the benefit of knowing the outcome. A virgin did indeed conceive and give birth to a son, and that son is indeed known as Immanuel. **Is it possible that we also live in-between promises made and promises kept by God? What promise of God are you looking forward to being fulfilled?**
- *Jesus, in you the predictions of the prophets have come true. May the songs I sing and the words I share reveal you to others. Amen.*

FRIDAY: GENESIS 12.2

*"I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.*

- Here is another promise made by God. It was and is still being fulfilled through God's people. For much of history, the fulfillment of this prediction was thought to be a single nation of people in a single region on earth. Through Jesus, we know that God had so much more in mind. *A great nation* is not a political promise but a Heavenly Kingdom-promise. The fulfillment of this promise means that we are blessed to be a blessing to others. **As you think about the blessings in your life, consider how those blessings also bless others.**
- *God of blessings, I praise your name and join the unending hymn of all of your people. You have made a way for me to be in the line of Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David, Mary and Joseph. Thank you God for seeing me and calling me your own. Amen.*

SATURDAY: ISAIAH 40.3

A voice of one calling:

*“In the wilderness prepare
the way for the LORD;
make straight in the desert
a highway for our God.*

- Pastor Gary shared this prediction again from the prophet Isaiah. It gave purpose and significance to an otherwise strange story of old people having a baby. This passage has been quoted throughout the years especially in the days leading up to Christmas. If you pay attention to the punctuation that was added to communicate the original intent of the prophecy, you will notice that the one calling (although John the Baptist had been in the wilderness himself) was making an announcement to people who were *also* in the wilderness. In other words, “You who are in the wilderness, prepare the way for the Lord.” **Do you identify as one who is in the wilderness? How will you prepare the way of the Lord this year?**
- *God, speak through your prophets and if you choose, speak through me. I want to be one who prepares the way for others to encounter Jesus. Amen.*

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

At Providence Church, we mark the weeks of Advent by lighting a series of candles that lead up to lighting the “Christ Candle” on Christmas Eve. In some churches, on the *Third Sunday of Advent*; a pink candle is lit on the Advent Wreath because it is thought to be a color of joy. Read these words from a pastor in Texas.

“Yet so many people feel no joy. In fact, Christmas has a way of multiplying the pain of those grieving the loss of a loved one. It increases the loneliness of those who feel they have no one who cares. Deepens the regret of those who have broken relationships. And causes so many to wish that it would all just be over because every festive party, angel on top of the tree or Christmas carol overwhelms them with a sadness they can’t fix. The result? Far too many people become depressed, self-medicate or sometimes even take their own lives.

This phenomenon has a name. Blue Christmas. I have experienced it. And I suspect that you have as well. Even if you can’t admit it.

If you are experiencing a Blue Christmas, the candles on the Advent Wreath are for you. It’s not [about a] pep talk to make you feel better or guilt you into not feeling exactly what you are feeling or a call for you to fake it. It is God’s promise of Joy that comes in the Christ child. So don’t think you have to be joyful today. It is enough to simply look at that pink candle and cling to the Joy that Jesus brings you. - Pastor Gary Mueller, Plano, TX.

- How does this message of joy in the midst of the difficult realities of life strike you?
- Are you ever tempted to fake joy even when you don’t feel joyful?
- How do you cling to the joy that Jesus brings you when life’s circumstances have you feeling less than joyful?