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# Session 1

## WHAT IF I MISSED IT?

Luke begins his Gospel with an angel announcing the upcoming birth of a child. The child in question was not Jesus, but John the Baptist, Jesus's relative and friend who helped set the stage for Jesus's ministry. Like the announcement of Jesus's birth, news of John's birth came as a shock to his future parents, Elizabeth and Zechariah, because they were both very old. At one point in their lives they likely expected to have children and likely had dreams for those children. But they had long since set aside those plans and had settled into a life of humbly serving God.

God, however, had not given up on Elizabeth and Zechariah's dream of having children and chose them to be the parents of John the Baptist, who would "prepare the way for the Lord" (Luke 3:4). Likewise, many of us discover that our lives don't turn out the way that we had hoped or planned. But, regardless of our expectations, God still has plans for us. God blesses us and works through us, often in surprising ways.

In this session, which follows the opening chapter of *An Unlikely Advent*, we'll get to know Elizabeth and Zechariah. We'll consider our dreams and the ways that God changes our plans.

## Session Objectives

This session's readings and discussion will help participants:

- ✦ Reflect on their dreams and plans for the future and consider how God changes their plans for the better.
- ✦ Learn about Elizabeth and Zechariah, parents of John the Baptist, how they had to change their plans, and how they responded to God's call.
- ✦ Consider what is possible as a result of what we have seen God accomplish through God's people.
- ✦ Explore how God is at work on the "rough edges of our story."

## Biblical Foundations

*In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.*

*Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.*

*Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. He will be a joy*

*and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”*

*Zechariah asked the angel, “How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.”*

*The angel said to him, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time.”*

*Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.*

*When his time of service was completed, he returned home. After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. “The Lord has done this for me,” she said. “In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people.”*

*Luke 1:5-25*

## Before Your Session

- Carefully and prayerfully read this session’s Biblical Foundations, more than once. Consult a trusted study Bible or commentary for background information.

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- ✦ Also read and study Genesis 16:1-6 and Luke 3:1-3, 7-18.
- ✦ Carefully read the introduction and first chapter of *An Unlikely Advent* by Rachel Billups. Make a note about topics that you have questions about or want to research further.
- ✦ You will need: Bibles for in-person participants and/or screen slides prepared with Scripture texts for sharing (be sure to note which translation you are using); a whiteboard or large sheet of paper, markers, paper, and pens or pencils (if meeting in person).
- ✦ If using the DVD or streaming video in your study, preview the session 1 video segment.

## Starting Your Session

As they arrive welcome participants to your study of *An Unlikely Advent* by Rachel Billups. Ask volunteers why they are interested in this study and/or what hopes they have for your time together.

Open your time together by discussing some or all of the following questions:

- ✦ Do you set up a Nativity scene in your home (or in your workplace or somewhere else)?
- ✦ Describe your Nativity scene (or scenes).
- ✦ Do you have any pieces in a Nativity scene that are unusual? If so, what are they?
- ✦ Most Nativity scenes include the Holy Family, shepherds, magi, an angel or two, and assorted livestock. What other figures, if any, would you like to see included in Nativity scenes?
- ✦ We don't typically re-create the birth scenes of other revered historical figures. Why, do you think, have Nativity scenes become such a popular Advent and Christmas decoration?

## Opening Prayer

*God, thank you for bringing us together for this time of study, discussion, and fellowship. Thank you for the example of the many people we meet in the story of Jesus's birth. During our time together, open our hearts and minds to what we can learn from these people and grow in our faith. Amen.*

## Video Presentation

Play the first track on the DVD or the streaming session of *An Unlikely Advent*, session 1 (running time is approximately 8–10 minutes). Open the floor for a few minutes of discussion.

## Discussion Questions

### *God-Sized Dreams*

- ✦ What were the earliest dreams you remember having about your future and what life would be like when you were older? (This could involve a future career, an idea or invention you wanted to get off the ground, where you might be living or might travel, or something else.)
- ✦ How have these dreams changed as you've gotten older? (Specifically, you might ask: Which dreams have gotten less ambitious? Which have changed drastically? If you've given up on a dream, why? Was it not realistic? Did you become interested in something else?)
- ✦ When have you found yourself wavering and wondering if your dreams are even possible? What causes you to doubt your dreams?
- ✦ Billups writes about her mother having to let go of her dream to become a missionary because, "sometimes life

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happens.” When has life happened to you, disrupting your plans and dreams?

- ✦ What dreams do you now have for your future? Do you think that these dreams are more or less realistic or attainable than those you had when you were young? Why, or why not?
- ✦ How open are you to changing your plans and pursuing new dreams?

## Giving Up on Your Dreams

Invite a volunteer to read aloud Luke 1:5-10.

- ✦ The Advent season is a season of waiting. What things have you had to wait for? What is the longest that you have had to wait for something?
- ✦ What is most difficult about waiting?
- ✦ What do these verses tell us about Elizabeth and Zechariah?
- ✦ What dreams might Elizabeth and Zechariah have had? What dreams or plans might they have changed or given up on?
- ✦ Billups writes about Elizabeth and Zechariah, “I imagine that through the decades this faith-filled couple was wondering, *What if we missed it?*” (page 8). When have you wondered if you missed out on something or if an opportunity had passed you by? How did you deal with this disappointment?
- ✦ Billups writes, “We totally can honor the past and celebrate our achievements. But when the past becomes the pinnacle of the present, we find ourselves paralyzed, staring into a future without possibilities” (page 10). What are the dangers of dwelling on the past and worrying about whether you’ve missed out on something?

## What If I Missed It?

- ✦ Billups refers to a neuroscientist who suggested that our brains are resistant to change. When have you been afraid of change? When have you overcome this tendency by embracing change?
- ✦ Luke 1:6 tells us that Elizabeth and Zechariah “were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commands and decrees blamelessly.” Despite the disappointments they’d suffered, Elizabeth and Zechariah remained faithful to God. How do you remain focused on your faith and on God’s will during times of waiting and disappointment?
- ✦ Invite another volunteer to read aloud Luke 1:12-18.
- ✦ How does Zechariah react to seeing the angel? How does Zechariah respond to the news that he will be a father?
- ✦ How, do you think, would you have reacted to the angel’s announcement if you’d been in Elizabeth or Zechariah’s position?
- ✦ Why, do you think, did God choose this couple instead of a younger couple to be the parents of God’s messenger?
- ✦ When have you abruptly had to change your plans? What sacrifices did you have to make or what challenges did you have to overcome?

### *Scared Speechless*

- ✦ Invite a volunteer to read aloud Luke 1:18-23.
- ✦ Zechariah was a priest known for his righteousness and faithfulness. Yet, when the angel of the Lord appeared to him, he was “startled and was gripped with fear” (Luke 1:12). What, do you think, was so frightening about the angel?
- ✦ Billups writes, “Sometimes we too get so caught up in the religious routine that we forget to expect the unexpected”



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(page 13). What, do you think, does it mean to “expect the unexpected”?

- ✦ Second Timothy 1:7 in the NRSVue says, “God did not give us a spirit of cowardice but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.” How do love and self-discipline equip us to be courageous when we face unexpected news and challenges?
- ✦ When, if ever, is it okay to be afraid?
- ✦ How can fear keep us from the blessings and opportunities that God has in store for us?

## *Cracks Are Where the Light Floods In*

- ✦ Elizabeth and Zechariah’s story parallels the story of Abram and Sarai (later Abraham and Sarah) in the Book of Genesis. Abram was seventy-five and he and Sarai childless, yet God promised that they would be parents of a great nation. Read Genesis 16:1-6. How did Abram and Sarai take matters into their own hands? Who was hurt as a result?
- ✦ When God made a promise to Abram and Sarai, they followed God’s instructions by moving from Ur to Canaan. Twenty-five years later Sarai, now Sarah, still had not given birth to the child God had promised. When have you waited expectantly for something that seemed like it would never happen? Did you give up? If not, how did you stay hopeful?
- ✦ Read Genesis 18:1-15. How did God appear to Abraham? What message did God have for Abraham? How did Abraham and Sarah respond to the visitors?
- ✦ What can we gain from the “rough edges of our story”? How can “pain and confusion” help us “see the beauty and experience the good” (page 15)?

## What If I Missed It?

- ✦ God was faithful to Abraham and Sarah. Sarah gave birth to a son, Isaac, despite her old age. What can we learn from Abraham and Sarah about trusting God amid frustration and uncertainty?

### *Set Your Hopes High*

- ✦ What do you know about the meaning of your name? (This could involve the meaning of your name in its language of origin or the reason why your parents chose this name for you.)
- ✦ If you have had opportunities to choose names (whether for children, for pets, for yourself, or for someone or something else), how have you decided on them? How important was it that the names be meaningful?
- ✦ Read aloud Luke 1:57-64. Why do Elizabeth and Zechariah go against tradition by naming their son John?
- ✦ *John* in Hebrew means “God is gracious.” What does it mean for God to be gracious? How have you experienced God’s grace? How did Elizabeth and Zechariah experience God’s grace?
- ✦ Look back at Luke 1:13-15. What expectations does God have for John the Baptist? Why, do you think, does God have these high expectations for John? (*Note:* This commitment to avoid all fermented drinks is part of the Nazirite vow described in Numbers 6. Nazirites—not to be confused with Nazarenes, or people from Nazareth—made a commitment to holiness and avoiding certain behaviors. John may have been a Nazirite.)
- ✦ Read aloud Luke 3:1-3, 7-18. John, Elizabeth and Zechariah’s long-awaited child, played an important role in Jesus’s ministry. What do these verses tell us about John?

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- ✦ What does it mean that John prepared the way for Jesus? How did he do this?

## *Dream Forward*

- ✦ What, do you think, does Billups mean by “teaching our people how to dream” (page 25)?
- ✦ One way to teach people to dream is to show them what is possible. How does our congregation show people what is possible with God?
- ✦ Billups asks whether “our people have permission to dream forward” (page 25). How might we, without intending to, discourage people from dreaming or pursuing “God possibilities” ?
- ✦ How do we, or can we, equip people to pursue their dreams? (For instance, how does, or should, a congregation support new ministries and give people the tools they need to make those ministries successful?)

## *Contagious Hope*

- ✦ Billups mentions a conversation with a Palestinian Christian who was frustrated by “blind faith” among American Christians. He said, “Hatred is fueled by blind faith” (page 28). What is blind faith? How might blind faith fuel hatred?
- ✦ How do we embrace a faith that is not blind but that is grounded in experience?
- ✦ What are some situations or challenges in our world that are particularly difficult to be hopeful about?
- ✦ Considering the situations and challenges in the previous question, what have you seen or experienced that gives you hope for the future?

## What If I Missed It?

- ✦ Billups writes, “Hope is contagious... When we listen to one another’s stories... It gifts us hope and, in the process, we are changed. We begin to believe that if God can rewrite the stories of other people, God can rewrite our unlikely stories as well” (pages 28–29). What stories have given you hope?

### *Optional Activity*

Write the following statement, with the blanks, on a whiteboard or large sheet of paper.

I have hope that \_\_\_\_\_  
because \_\_\_\_\_.

Hand out paper. Then instruct participants to fill out this statement as many times as they’d like by identifying a) something they are hopeful for and b) a reason why they are hopeful that this thing can happen.

For example, “I have hope that we can raise money to pay for our upcoming mission work because I have seen our congregation come together to make things happen”; or “I have hope that there will be a cure for cancer in my lifetime because I know how much progress has been made in medical research in recent decades.” These statements can express hope for things that are personal (such as a group or team you’re a part of achieving a goal) or global (such as ending hunger or eradicating diseases). For all of these hopes, focus on *what you see other people doing* that gives you hope.

Allow participants a few minutes to work. Then allow everyone to read aloud one or more of their statements.

Discuss:

- ✦ What is a statement from another person in this group (not yourself) that makes you especially hopeful?

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### Your Unlikely Story

- Billups writes, “God is no cosmic Santa Claus. Humans do not receive everything we have ever wanted, yet there are dreams in our head and in our hearts that God wants to creatively partner with us to make happen” (page 30). What, do you think, does she mean by saying that God is not a “cosmic Santa Claus”?
- While God doesn’t give us everything we ask for, God blesses us and gives us gifts, even if they aren’t always the gifts we want or expect. What gifts has God given you? How can you use these gifts in service of God and others?
- What can we learn from the example of Elizabeth and Zechariah about God’s gifts and how God makes dreams a reality?

## Closing

Discuss:

- What is one thing you learned during our time together that you didn’t know before?
- What is one thing that you will do in the coming week as a result of what we learned or discussed?

## Closing Prayer

*God, thank you for bringing us together for this time of study and discussion. We know from the story of Elizabeth and Zechariah that, through you, all things are possible. Open our hearts and minds, eyes and ears, to all the ways that we can answer your call even if it requires us to change our plans. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.*