



The Angels of Christmas

Hearing God's Voice in Advent
Week 1



Opening Prayer

O God, at this time every year, we prepare ourselves in mind and spirit to be ready for the arrival of the Christ Child and what your remarkable intervention into human history meant and still means for our world. Kindle in us a spirit such that our preparations are not simply superficial, not simply going through the motions, not an observance that is reduced to nothing more than tradition. Just as we would make preparations for a special guest in our homes, help us change our hearts to make them a welcoming place where you can always stay. And help us to be more aware of and attentive to the messengers you send throughout our lives - the angels that are among us always. Amen.



What Matters Most

God reaches out to us through messengers, whether they're heaven or purely human, complete strangers or people we know well. "God is trying to tell you something!"

The angels of Christmas came to deliver important messages to people who were hoping for God to intervene in a mighty way, both in the fears and darkness of their personal lives and in their world.

What is Advent?

“Adventus” meaning “visitation” - especially referring to a visit by the emperor.

- ★ What preparations do you need to make for the arrival of the Messiah?
- ★ What “structures” need to be changed/improved?
- ★ How might you need to be spiritually “refurbished” to be ready for the Christ Child?

What is an angel?

- ★ What images/actions/stories come to mind when you think of angels in the Bible?







Biblically accurate Angel food cake



What is an angel?

- ★ Angelos - messenger of God
- ★ Bearer of good news: comfort, announce, commission
- ★ Bearer of bad news: flaming sword at Eden, blocks Balaam's path, ensure destruction of Sodom
- ★ Name all the examples you can think of appearances by angels in the Bible.
- ★ Name examples of angels in pop culture.
- ★ Why do you think people are so fascinated by angels?
- ★ Do you believe that angels are among us today? Why or why not?

Standing in the Presence of God

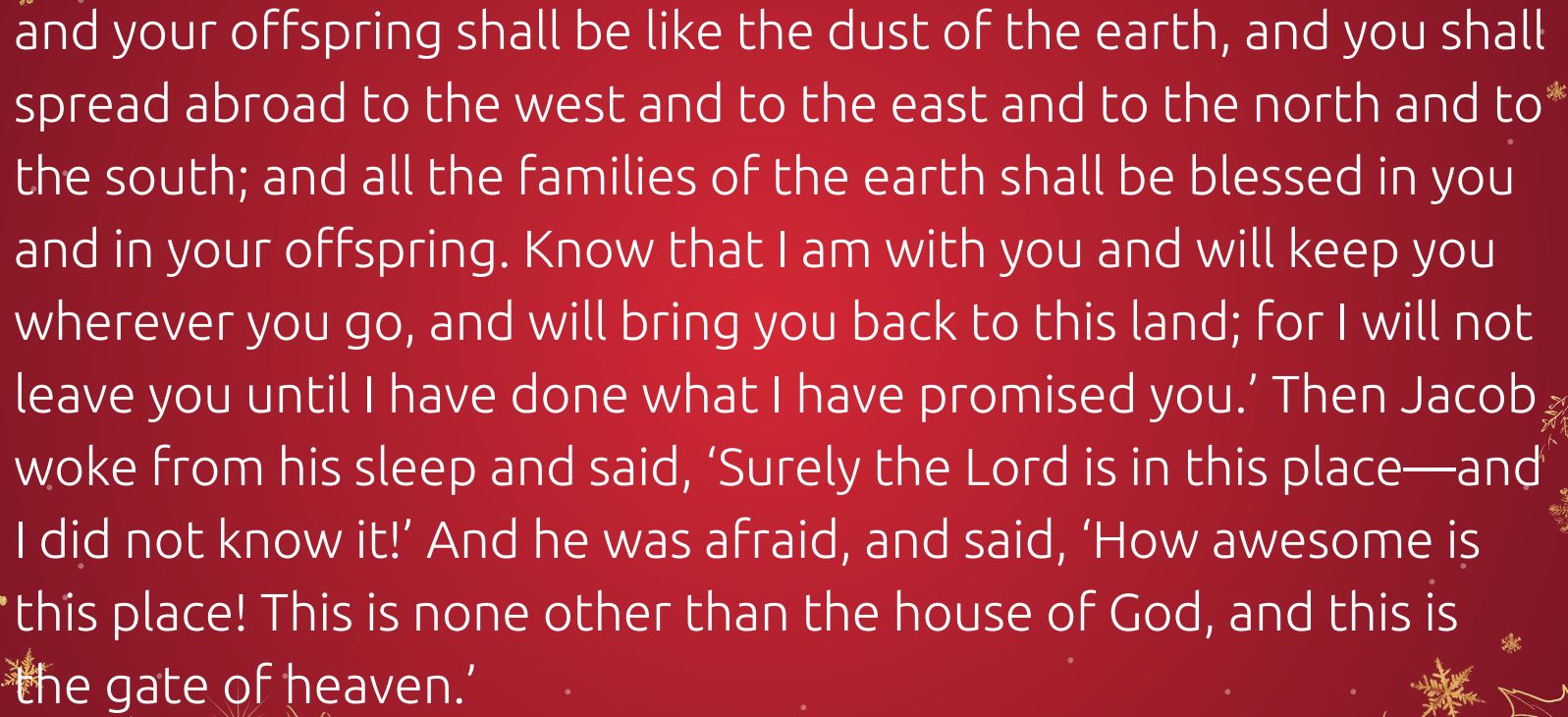


Elizabeth, Zechariah, & baby John



Read Genesis 28:10-17

Jacob left Beer-sheba and went towards Haran. He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And the Lord stood beside him and said, 'I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring;



and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.' Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, 'Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!' And he was afraid, and said, 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.'



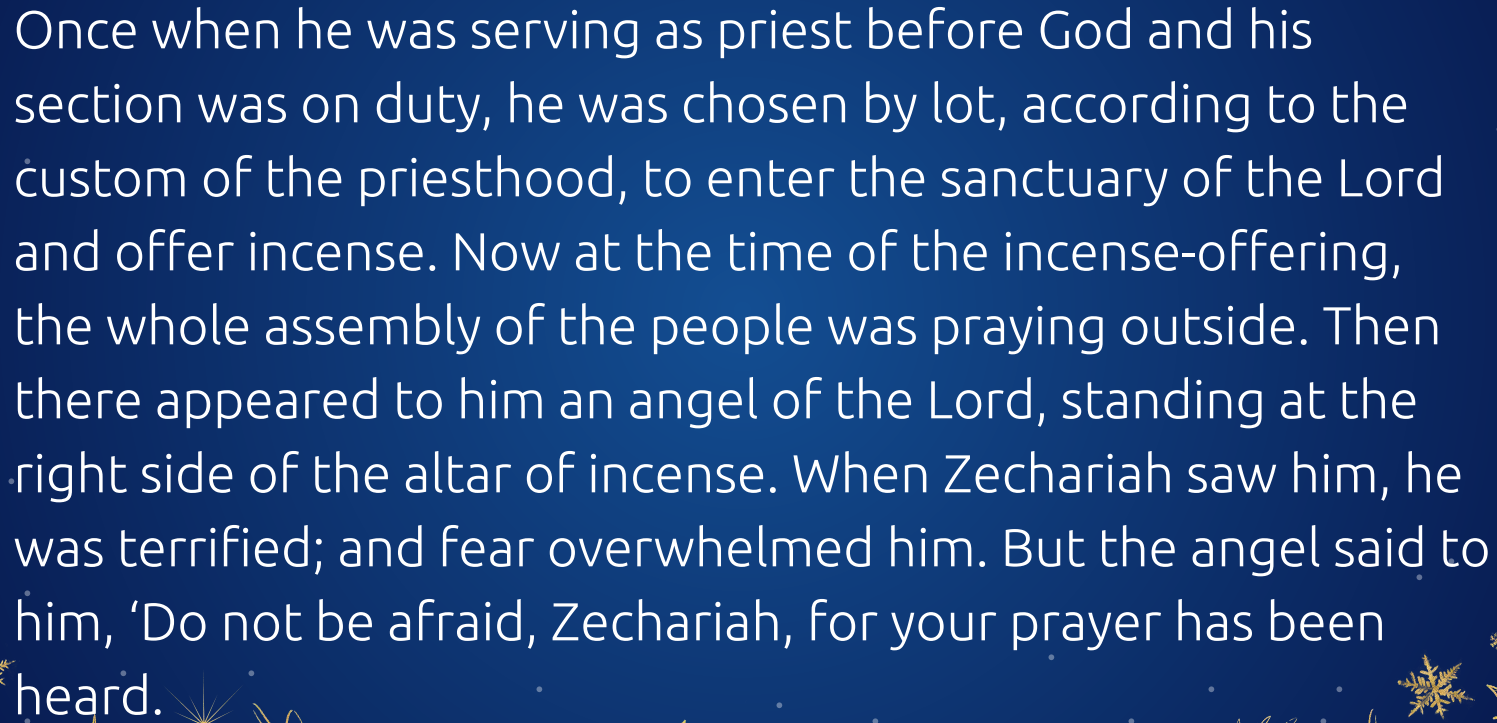
Holy Spaces & God's Presence

- ★ Why do you believe there are certain times and places where people say they palpably feel God's presence?
- ★ Where have you felt God's presence strongly? What senses or emotions did you feel?
- ★ What do you think creates opportunities for feeling God's presence? Does it have more to do with the place and time, or with you?

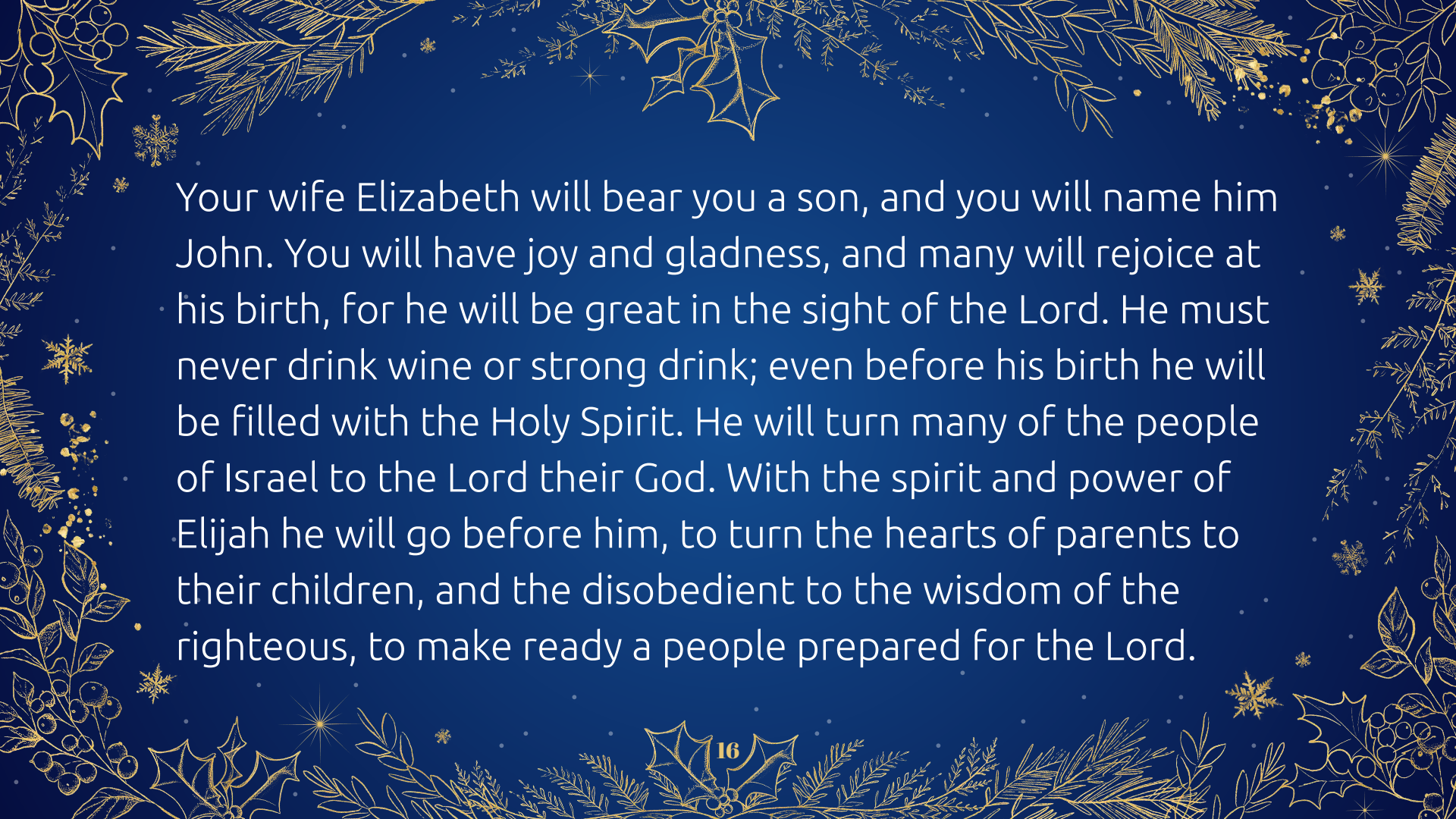


Read Luke 1:5-25

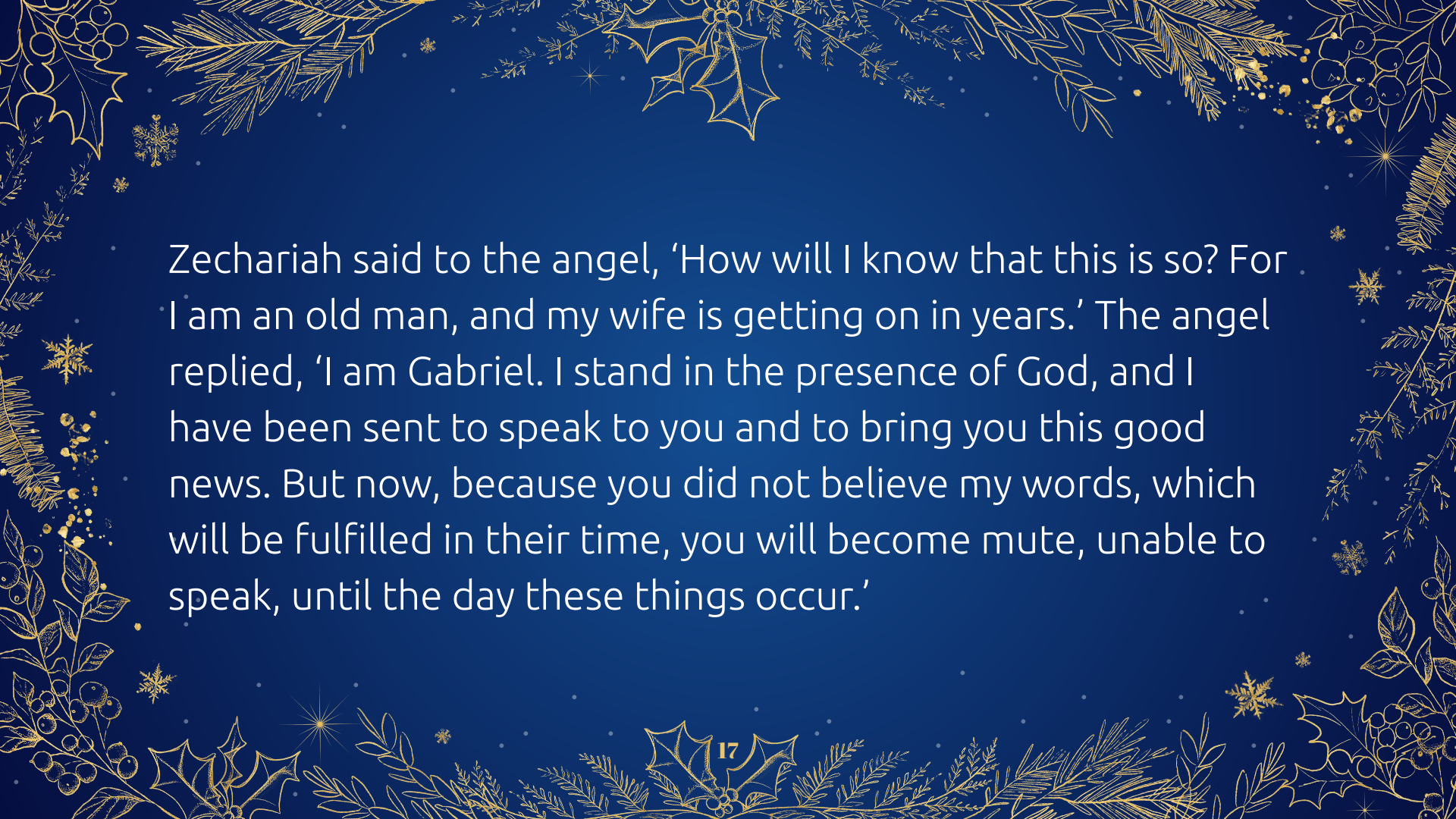
In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.



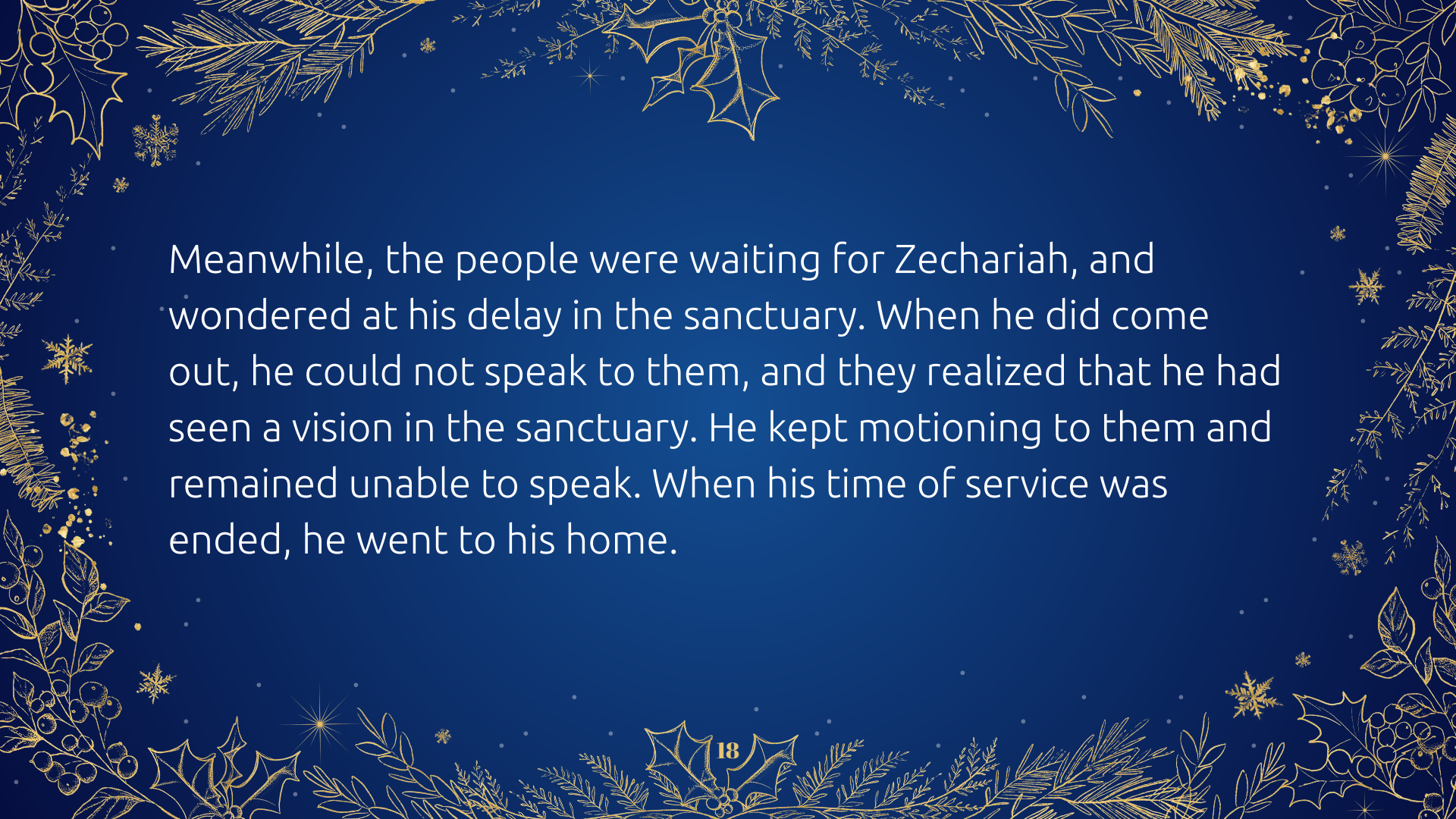
Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. Now at the time of the incense-offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard.



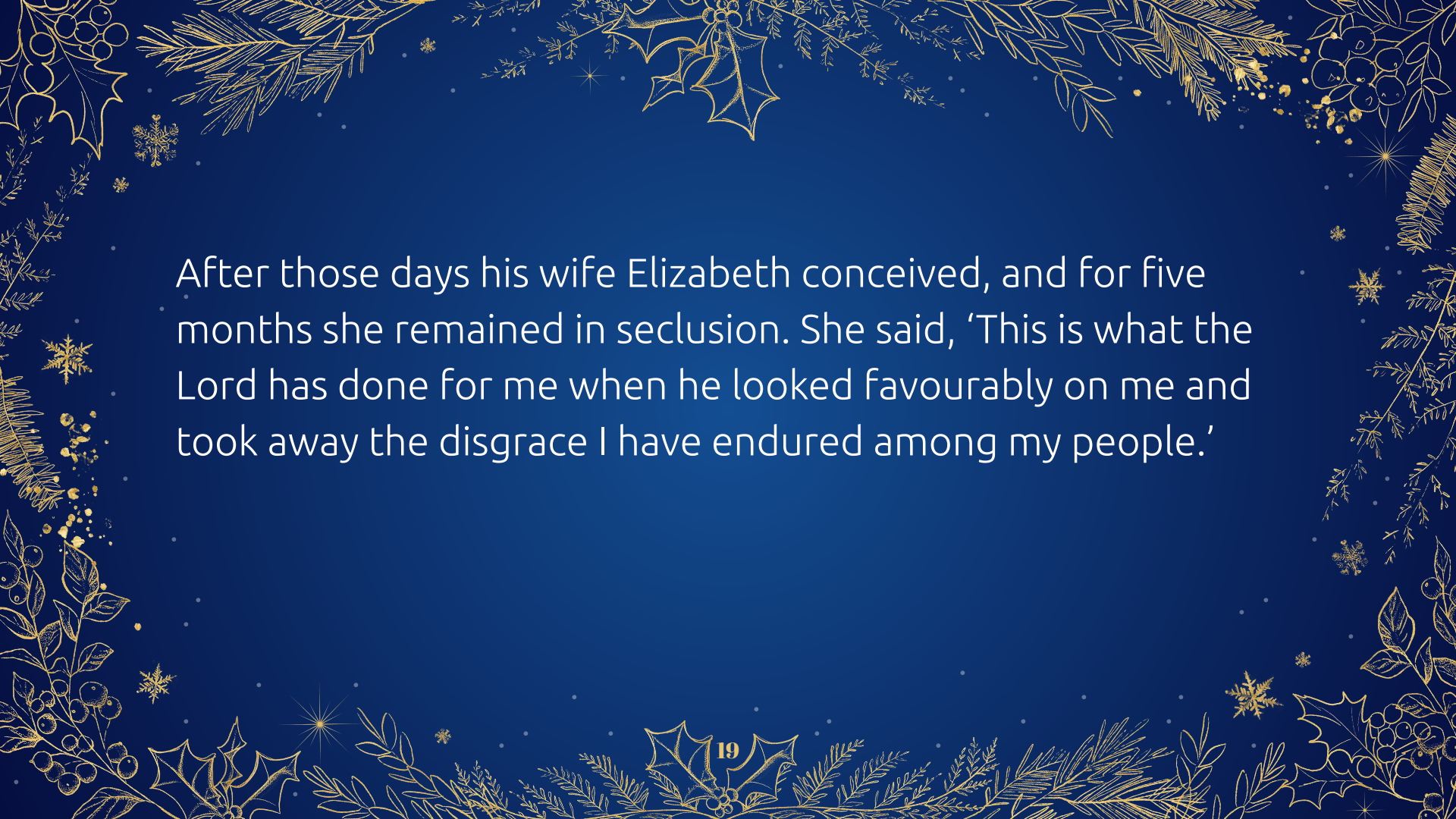
Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.



Zechariah said to the angel, 'How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.' The angel replied, 'I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.'



Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. When his time of service was ended, he went to his home.



After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, 'This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favourably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.'



Elizabeth & Zechariah

Zechariah: priest from the order of Abijah, son of Aaron

Elizabeth: descendent of Aaron (Moses' brother)

Impeccable credentials!

Old barren couple - DING DING DING - invariably, the son is given for extraordinary purpose.

Live in hill country, but his special turn to come to Temple.



Elizabeth & Zechariah

Person on whom the lot fell would have been seen as God's choice - God wanted him in the Temple.

Goes to altar in the holy place to make his offering on behalf of worshippers.

Your prayer has been heard: not just for them but for the crowd praying outside.



Encountering an Angel

- ★ How do you think you would have responded in Zechariah's place, to the arrival of an angel who told you were going to play a part in God's salvation plan?
- ★ Why do you think the angel needed to reassure Zechariah - a priest - that he shouldn't be afraid?



Encountering an Angel

Zechariah seems to ignore the good news of the past and cling to doubts: “Does God really still care about what’s happening in my life and in the lives of those around me? Does God really still answer prayer in such magnificent ways? How could God make something that seems so impossible happen? I need more proof!”



Encountering Not Just Any Angel

Daniel 8:16 - God sent Gabriel to Daniel to help interpret dreams

The sign = being struck mute for nine months

Daniel 10:15 - Daniel was speechless for a time after Gabriel helped

Struck mute out of...doubt, fear, worry, disbelief?



Put on Mute

A punishment? A gift? (A gift for Elizabeth?)

Time to listen to God; time to ponder God's miraculous bringing of life and light to his family and his people

Maybe being speechless is a gift for Advent - to listen to what God may be saying to us?

Like Abraham - he is blessed to be a blessing to others, prayers answered.

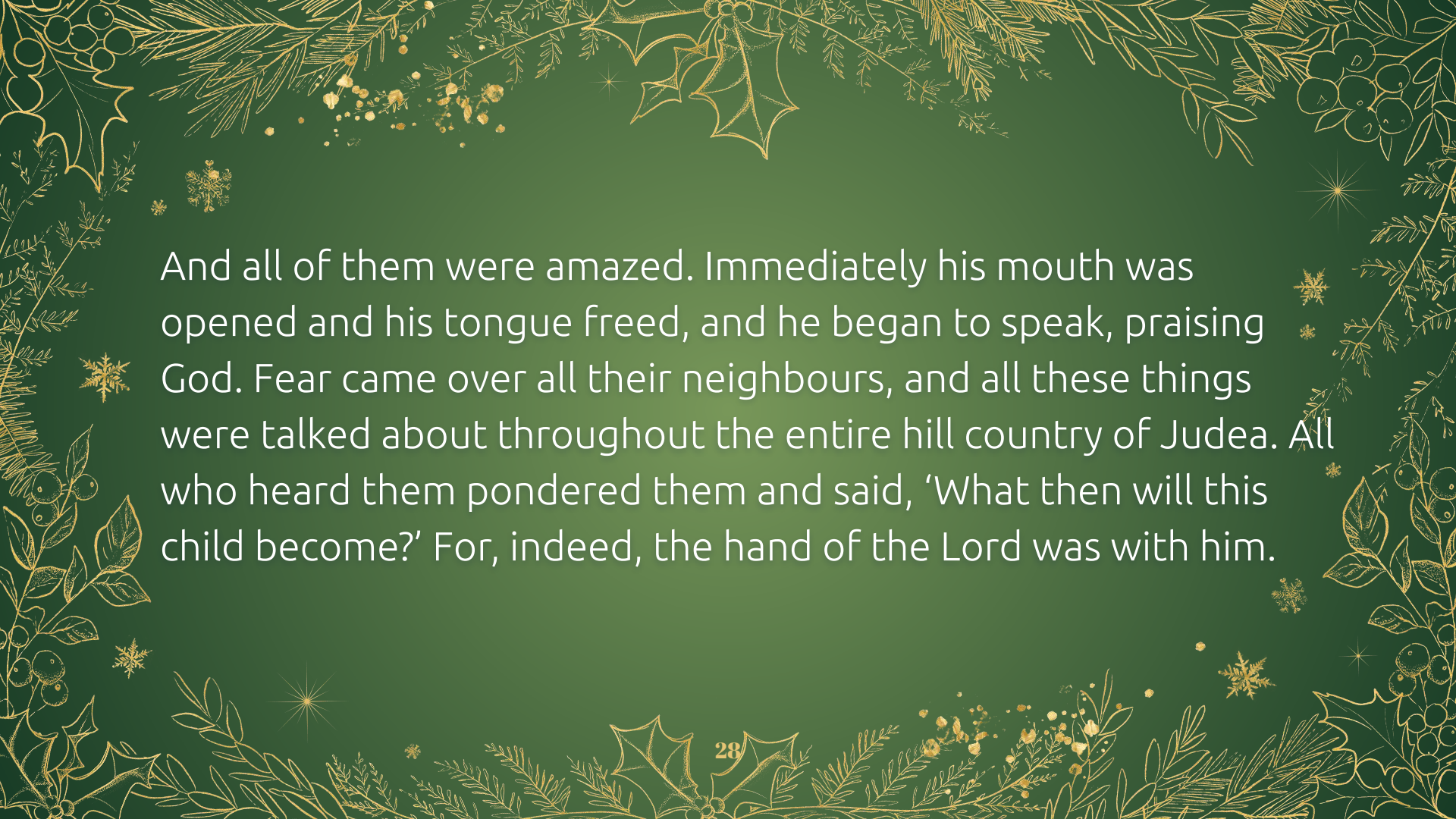
In the Presence of God

But the angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard.'

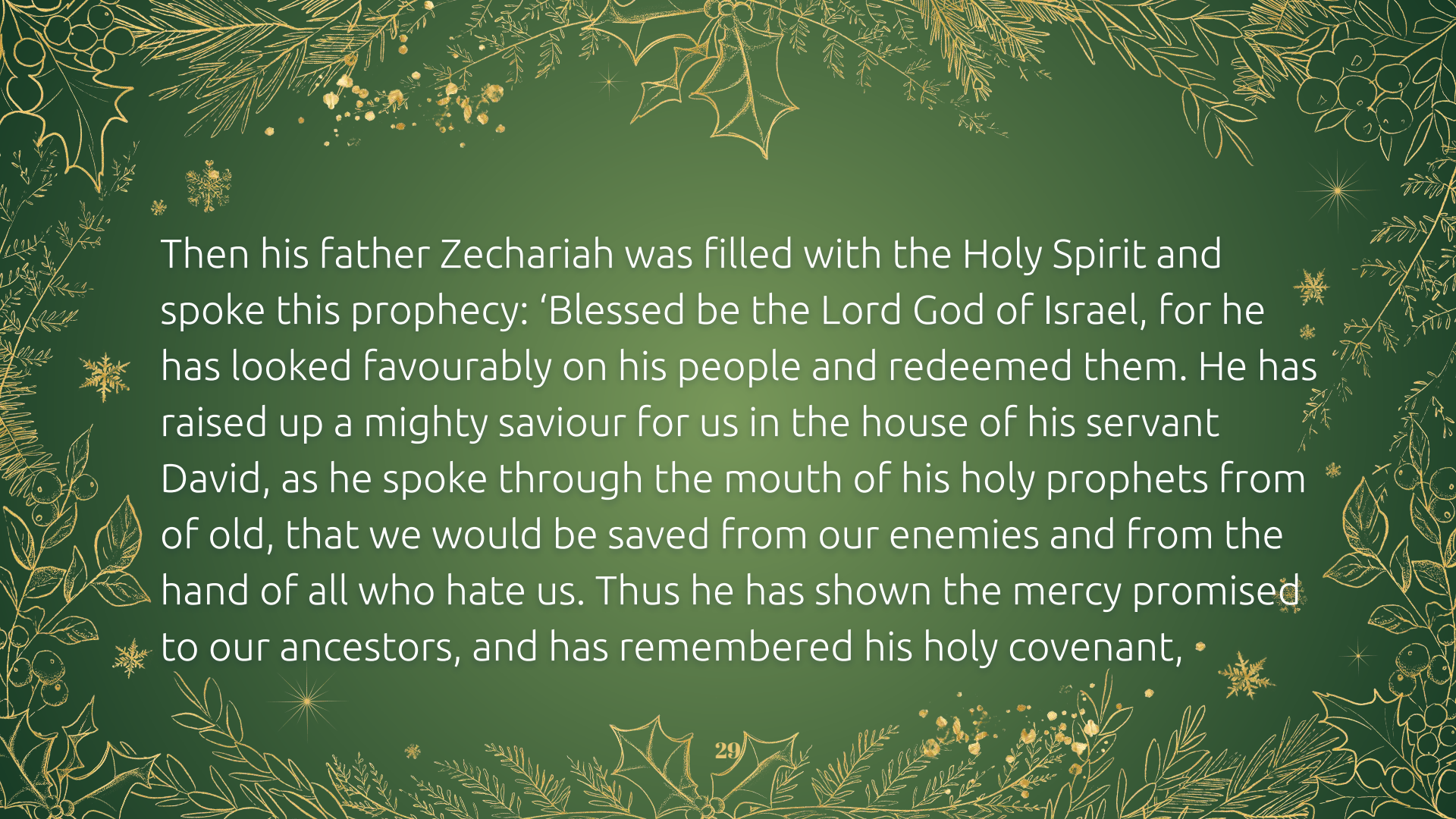
- ★ Why do you think Luke includes the detail of the “whole assembly of the people” praying outside the Temple?
- ★ How was God answer the prayers of the people with the birth of John the Baptist?
- ★ Where do you see occasions when people across a society are praying for something together?
- ★ When have you seen “prayers of the people” answered?
- ★ If the prayers have not been answered, how does that affect your attitude toward common prayer?

Luke 1:57-80

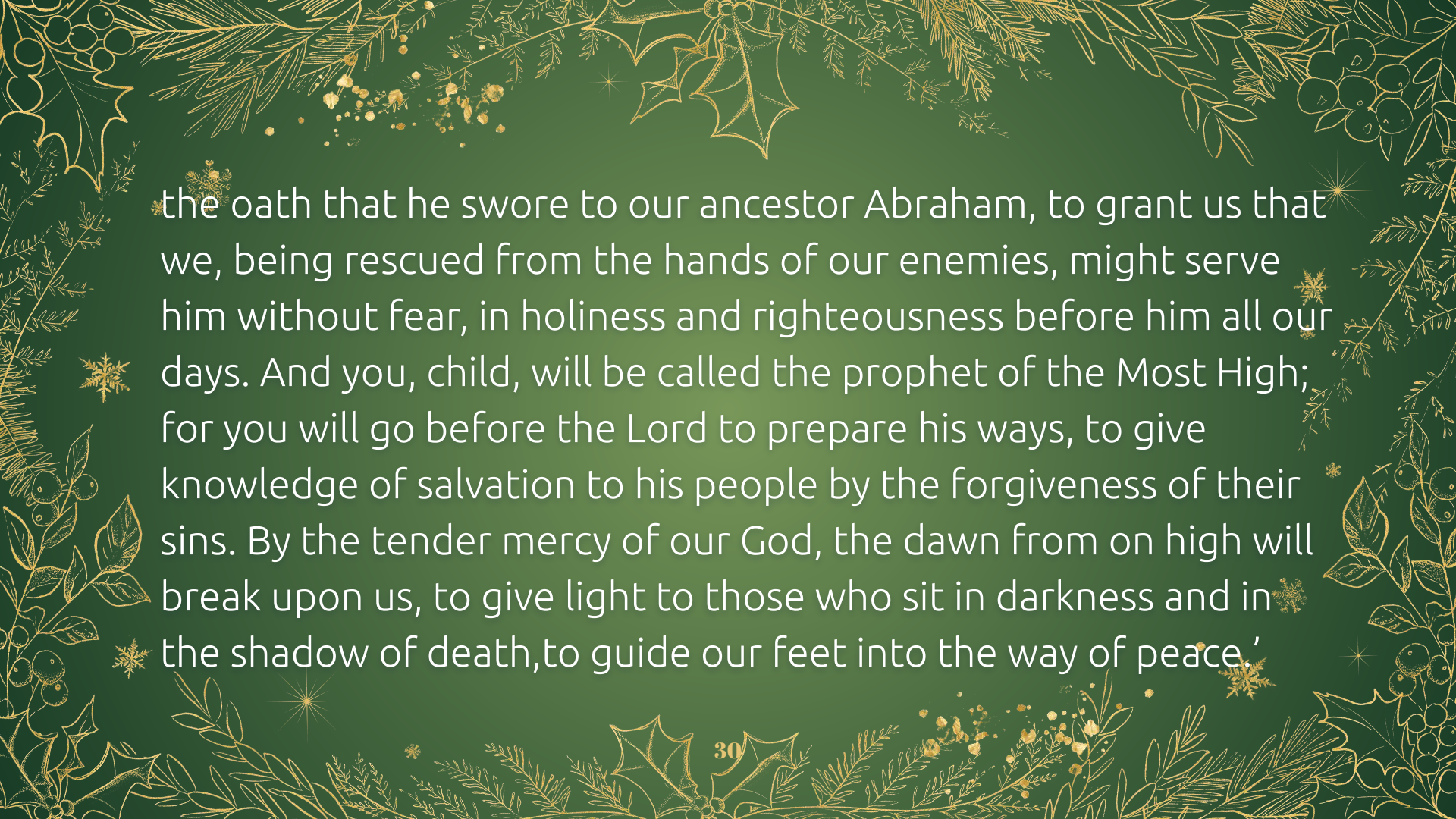
Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. But his mother said, 'No; he is to be called John.' They said to her, 'None of your relatives has this name.' Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. He asked for a writing-tablet and wrote, 'His name is John.'



And all of them were amazed. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. Fear came over all their neighbours, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. All who heard them pondered them and said, 'What then will this child become?' For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.



Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy: 'Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a mighty saviour for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant,



the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.'



The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.

In the Presence of God

- ★ Everyone expected his name to be “Junior” or the “Third;” but Elizabeth names him as instructed.
- ★ Then Z gets his voice back, and is now the *angelos*, the messenger of God.
- ★ His song - Benedictus - echoes Hannah’s and Mary’s songs.
- ★ Light has broken into their darkness, and for those living in oppression and poverty.
- ★ What will we do when faced with the sharing of Good News?
- ★ What will we do when we are rendered mute with fear and doubt?



In the Presence of God

- ★ What will we do when faced with the sharing of Good News?
- ★ What will we do when we are rendered mute with fear and doubt?
- ★ In the middle of our darkness, God is preparing for a light that leads us. God is preparing us to be a light that leads others.
- ★ “Blessed be the God of Israel, who is at work, in ways we cannot see, in ways we can scarcely imagine, to bring light into the darkest times and places.”



Closing Questions

- ★ In the coming week, how will you prepare yourself to receive the Christ Child?
- ★ In the past week, where have you made a possible “angel sighting”?



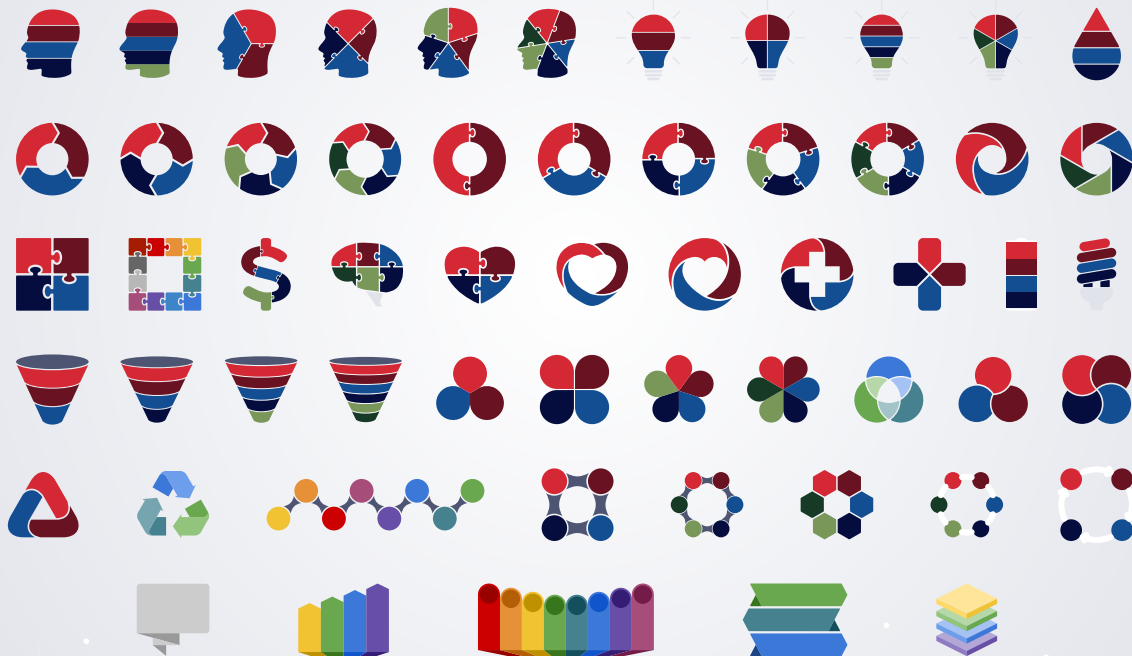
Closing Prayer

Lord, this season reminds us that you came to dwell with us, not just as a visitor but to experience life as one of us and to live in our hearts forever. Help us to be welcoming hosts for you by seeing you in everyone we meet and treating each person as we would treat you. And help us not only to hear the message of the angels but to spread to others the message that they are important and they are loved. Amen.



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01

Ho ho ho

Let's start with the first set of slides