

Surprise! The Christmas Story Begins

December: Week 1

Opening: Christmas is about surprises. Like those presents under the tree in strange shapes and funny sizes that rattle and clink-clank when we shake them. We try to guess, but we have no idea what they are! Sometimes we are surprised when Mom and Dad plan fun activities for us, like making cookies, watching a Christmas movie with hot chocolate, or driving around in our pajamas looking at Christmas lights. We get surprises in the mail – special cards from friends, or boxes from Grandma that we didn't expect. You might even have a surprise visitor show up to celebrate with your family on Christmas Day – who knows!

The very first Christmas was about surprises, too. We are going to read about these surprises tonight. But first, let's think about what it feels like to be surprised.

Family Questions:

1. What is a recent surprise that you have experienced?

OR –

2. Tell a story about one of the biggest surprises of your life.

(See below for a list of the Howell family's surprises)

Reading Together:

1. Intro: *The story of Jesus' birth has a LOT of surprises, and tonight we're going to begin the story. It starts with a man named Zechariah. We are going to read the story in our Bibles. Sometimes we will stop and talk about things. At the very end, there will be some quiz questions, and they will be a little bit hard, so if you want to get them right you need to listen veeeeery closely!*
2. Read: Luke 1:5-23
 - a. Stop after verse 11: *How would you feel if you were just eating your lunch or brushing your teeth and suddenly you looked beside you, and – WHAT?!?! - an angel was there!!!*
 - b. Stop after verse 18: *Should Zechariah have believed what the angel said? Would you have believed the angel, if you were him? Why/why not?*

- c. At the end: *Why does the story of Jesus' birth begin here, with someone else? Who was this baby, and what was he supposed to do?*
3. Quiz: It's time to see how closely you were paying attention!
- a. Who was the king of Judea at the time this happened?
 - i. Herod
 - b. Who was Elizabeth's great-great-great-many-greats-grandfather?
 - i. Aaron, Moses' brother
 - c. What was Zechariah doing in the temple when the angel came?
 - i. Burning incense
 - d. What was the name of the angel?
 - i. Gabriel
 - e. Whenever an angel appears to humans in the Bible, the first words they say are always exactly the same. What is the first thing Gabriel said?
 - i. Do not be afraid
 - f. Extra Credit: Why do you think they always have to say, "Do not be afraid?"

Apply: *God sent Gabriel to tell Zechariah that he was about to have a son, and that his son would be someone very import. His son would become John the Baptist, who prepared the people for the coming of Jesus.*

1. Are we prepared for the coming of Jesus?
 - a. Would His coming be a surprise to us today? Why/why not?
2. What things can we do to make sure our hearts are prepared for Him every day?
3. In what ways could we bring good surprises to other families this Christmas?
4. Pray Together as a family. Thank Jesus for the way He is with us, through good surprises and bad.

More Options:

1. Activity: *Kids, spend the next 10-20 minutes pretending you are "unable to speak." It might help to put some tape over your mouth, to remind you. You are suddenly like Zechariah! How does this feel? What things are frustrating? What would it be like to go for 9 months without speaking?*
2. Further Study for Moms and Dads/Families with older kids:

- a. Zechariah did not believe Gabriel's words.
 1. Do we blame him?
 2. When was the last time we doubted God? What caused us to doubt?
 3. Does God promise to give us the things we want? If not, how do we balance believing that He CAN, with knowing that He MIGHT NOT?
- b. Zechariah and Elizabeth both lived lives of obedience to God, and yet they might have felt forgotten by Him because they did not have any children.
 1. When have we been obedient to God and still felt forgotten?
 2. What can this story teach us about how God remembers people?
 3. In what ways do I need God to remember me/my family today?

Howell Family Responses (as promised above):

Our family chose the first opening question. Right away Caleb's hand shot up and he said, "Ooooh! Oh! I know! I was surprised TODAY, when we got home from school and you told us to get back in the car cuz we were gonna go pick out a Christmas tree!"

Toby wanted to be next, but he didn't have an answer yet. So I decided to take a turn: "Mommy's been surprised this month by how many beautiful colors are here in Northern California in the fall – gorgeous reds and yellows and oranges on so many trees. I didn't expect that! I'm also surprised by how COLD it gets here. When we moved here in June and it was 105 degrees, did any of you think it would be this cold by Christmas?"

"No way!" Caleb said, "I thought I'd be able to swim in our pool every day of the year."

"It's cold like Washington, Mommy. But when is the rain coming?" Toby asks.

"Good question," Greg laughs, "and maybe that will be another surprise. But Daddy was surprised today, when I went into the garage to find the Christmas lights, and I realized how many boxes are still in there."

We laugh. "Yeah like a hundred million boxes," Toby guesses. "But you know what I'm surprised about?" We wait to see if he has an answer this time. "I'm just surprised at how good I did ice-skating today on my field trip."

Everyone congratulates Toby – "Awesome! Good job!"

Brooke and Wyatt try to answer the question, but it doesn't make sense – Brooke says she is surprised by her strawberry dolly, and Wyatt says, "Olives."

"Boooo!" I shout, and the twins jump. "There," I laugh, "now you're surprised!"