

Elizabeth: Mother of John the Baptist, Friend of Mary
Luke 1:5-13, 18-25, 39-45

Our theme this year is the Women of Advent. Today we look at Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist and friend of Mary. Her husband Zechariah was a countryside priest and Elizabeth was also from the priestly lineage of Aaron, a family of deep devotion to God.

The text begins with a description of them: they were “righteous before God and, walking in all the commandments of the Lord, were blameless” (v.6). With the next sentence brings the dramatic tension: they had no children, Elizabeth was “barren” (a terrible word), and they both were “advanced in years.”

Elizabeth’s childlessness could well have been seen by others as the result of some sin. Too many people, then and now, believe if you suffer, if bad things happen, it’s because there is sin in your life. But the text makes clear the falseness of such assumption. In God’s eyes they were “righteous” and “blameless.” We should never take how other people see us as the truth, or last word about us. It is how God sees you that matters, and you are God’s beloved.

As we shall see, God’s favor would be upon her, and through her would shine upon the world.

The story opens on the day Zechariah had been looking forward to his whole life. It was his turn, his one and only turn, to enter the sanctuary of the temple in Jerusalem and offer incense on the altar on behalf of Israel's people.

You can imagine Elizabeth beaming as she helped Zechariah on with his robe. He had rehearsed this moment from the first day he was a priest. He, going into the holy sanctuary would first offer this prayer: "May the God of all mercy enter into this holy sanctuary and accept with pleasure the sacrifice of his people."

Then he would scatter the incense on the coals. When finished, he would return to the outer steps of the temple where the people were gathered and offer the priestly benediction which went all the way back to Aaron, Moses' brother.

The Lord bless you and keep you,
The Lord make his face to shine
upon you and be gracious unto you,
The Lord lift up his countenance
upon you and give you peace

We live by such words of blessing

Then he and Elizabeth would go home and celebrate. Today he had been Israel's priest! But that's not quite what happened.

II

He entered the temple and sanctuary, said the prayer and scattered the ashes on the coals. Suddenly he was startled by the appearance of a stranger near him. No one was allowed here except him. It was an angel the text says, which means a messenger of God.

Zechariah was terrified. He began to shake with a shaking he could not stop. The angel said, as angels seem *always* to be saying, “Do not be afraid. Your prayer has been heard.” Zechariah may have begun to relax. His main mission had been accomplished.

But the angel was not finished. “And your wife will bear a son, and you shall name him John”, he said. Then the angel went on in a kind of incantation:

He will bring joy and gladness to you home, and many will rejoice at his birth;

He will be great before the Lord, and he shall drink no wine or strong drink.

(The first hint he would be called the Baptist)

He will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb;

He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children’s

And he will make ready for the Lord a people prepared. (Isn't this the heart of the meaning of Advent: being made ready, a people prepared!?)

I love the phrase, "turn the hearts of the parents to their children." It sounds like Christmas, doesn't it? When we turn our hearts to our children? What if everyone in our nation turned their hearts to our children and all children and made all our decisions based on their welfare? What a better world it would be, a Kingdom of God kind of world.

Zechariah was having trouble taking all this in. "How can I know this?" How can I know it is true? In other words, I need a sign! This cannot be, he protested. How many years have we tried to have a child? We gave up a long time ago.

The angel said, "And I am Gabriel who stands in the presence of the Lord. I have been sent to bring you good news". Then he said, "Because you refused to believe my words, you will be silent and unable to speak until all these things come to pass."

Sometimes we need to be quiet long enough to be able to tell the difference between the sound of God's voice and our own.

III

Meanwhile the people gathered on the front steps of the temple were wondering what was going on. Zechariah was taking far too long. Had something terrible happened? In that day the priest going into the Holy of Holies would have a rope tied around his ankle, so if he was struck dead in the presence of the Lord, the people could haul him out without going in.

When Zechariah finally came out there was wild look in his eyes. He could not speak nor utter the priestly benediction. The text says that he “motioned” to them. Did he raise his arms and mouth the benediction? Did he become a mime, waving his arms like an angel’s wings? Did he rock an imaginary baby in his arms?

The text does not say. It only says that he returned home. How did he tell Elizabeth what had happened with no words he could speak? Did he rock an imaginary baby in his arms? Did he write it all on a tablet? Soon after, Elizabeth conceived. While Zechariah disbelieved, she believed and conceived in her body the child promised by Gabriel.

IV

The next scene with Elizabeth happened right after Gabriel had appeared to Mary, announced her own holy son and called her to bear the Christ child into the world.

Mary heard that Elizabeth, her older cousin, was pregnant now in her sixth month. She decided to go see her in the hill country nearby. When Elizabeth opened the door, Mary cried out her greeting, and at the sound of Mary's voice, Elizabeth's child leaped in her womb, "leaped for joy", Elizabeth said.

There is that magical time called "quickenning" when the mother feels her child first move in her womb for the first time. Do any of you remember that day? Do any fathers out there remember the day when you placed your hand on your wife's tummy and felt it yourself for the first time?

Advent is the time of quickening! Life is on the way. We can feel it!

Elizabeth says to Mary: "Blessed is she who believed what God has promised." And we could say the same of Elizabeth: "Blessed is she who believed what was promised!"

The text says that Mary stayed with her for three months, the first fragile trimester of her pregnancy, and the last three months of Elizabeth's. How they must have needed one another those months. Who else could have understood? Elizabeth gave shelter to Mary and to her child on its way into the world. Friendships are sheltering things.

Judith Viorst described friendships with these words: "comforting and exuberant, sacred and miraculous connections." Let us give thanks today for

every comforting and exuberant, sacred and miraculous connection. One can hope Joseph found a friend in Zechariah, Joseph needing a friend to talk with during these no doubt lonely days, and Zechariah needing a friend he could talk with, without needing to talk, God's cat having gotten his tongue.

V

There is one more scene with Elizabeth: the day John was born. All their friends and neighbors gathered around to share their joy.

Eight days later when the time of circumcision and naming arrived, they were all together again. The priest offered a blessing for the child and was about to name him, as was the custom, after his father's name: "Here is Zachariah the younger!" But Elizabeth stopped him and said, "No, his name is to be *John*."

The friends gathered around may have said, "John?! There's no one in the family line named John! This is highly irregular!" And Zachariah probably rolled his eyes as if to say: "Everything about this child has been highly irregular!"

The friends began to make signs to Zechariah to say: "What do you the father say?" They thought since he could not speak he was also deaf! Zechariah motioned for a tablet and wrote: "His name is John!"

At that moment Zechariah could speak, and what he let loose with was a song! Nine months' worth of song he had been saving up! "Blessed be the God of Israel", he sang. Then turning to his son he sang:

You will be a prophet of the most high!

For you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways:

to give knowledge of salvation to his people,

the forgiveness of sins, the tender mercies of our God,

light to our darkness and peace.

And it all began with Elizabeth believing when Zechariah could not.

Conclusion

Mary's visit with Elizabeth has been called in Christian tradition, "The Visitation." It has been captured in art over and over again, one of the most often painted scenes in the story of Jesus. Go to your computer and take a look!

Two women believing, two women bound in friendship, two women carrying in their bodies the surprising promises of God. That's how God still works. In this season of quickening God is bringing you new life. Let yourself believe it and feel it.