

“Supporting Cast of Advent: Zechariah and Elizabeth

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Luke 1:5-23, 67-80

Let me introduce to you Zechariah and Elizabeth, two somewhat obscure but very important members of the supporting cast of Advent. Zechariah and Elizabeth were the parents of John the Baptist. But that’s the end of their story, the beginning goes like this....

Read Luke 1:5-23

“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. ⁶Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. ⁷But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years. ⁸Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, ⁹he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. ¹⁰Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. ¹¹Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹²When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. ¹³But 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. ¹⁴You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵for 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. ¹⁶He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷With 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.” ¹⁸Zechariah 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.” ¹⁹The 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. ²⁰But 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.” ²¹Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. ²²When 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. ²³When his time of service was ended, he went to his home.”

*From this introduction what do we learn about Zechariah and Elizabeth? Obviously they are faithful in their religious practice. **“Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord.”** That’s a pretty good description of a sincere disciple of God. They took their faith seriously. Zechariah was a priest and Elizabeth, came from an impressive religious lineage that went all the way back to Aaron, the brother of Moses.*

However, every day they lived with sadness. They were quite elderly and had never been able to have children. For years, in their faithful way, they had prayed that God would give them a child but it seemed that God’s ears were closed toward their sincere pleas. I’ve heard infertility called an “*Endless Advent*” and Zechariah and Elizabeth were living in an endless advent....endlessly waiting for God to act. The experience of endless waiting is not limited to infertility. We have waited for the results of tests....we have waited on others to make decisions.....some have waited for a loved one to give up self destructive behavior.....we have waited for the phone to ring to hear the news about _____...we have all waited for good news that never seemed to come.....endlessly waiting for God to act. *For what are you waiting? For what are you praying?* Waiting is hard work!

That was Elizabeth and Zachariah.....endlessly waiting and praying for a child. Faith is not easy but Zachariah and Elizabeth hung in there with steadfast faith even in the face of their endless advent! They remained faithful and their faith continues to encourage us to this day! Many of you have and are facing what seems to be an *endless advent* and I pray that worship, scripture, prayer and fellowship will encourage you to keep the faith. But I also pray that you have inspiring people of faith who spark your faith during periods of waiting. *Who helps you keep the faith?* While we worship, I hope you will offer a prayer of thanks and blessing for them!

As the story goes, Zachariah was in Jerusalem taking his annual two-week tour as priest in the Temple. It was every priest’s dream to be chosen to enter the Most Holy Place to offer the prayers of the people. On this tour of service Zachariah finally heard his name called! Filled with awe Zechariah entered the inner court to burn incense which represents the prayers and longings of God’s people ascending to heaven! Zechariah was in for the surprise of his life!

Never in his wildest dreams would he have conjured up what was about to happen. *“Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹²When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. ¹³But 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.” Zechariah, this man of faith serving in the holiest part of the Temple, was so scared that he couldn’t wrap his mind around Gabriel’s message. *“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.””**

Don’t miss the significance of Zechariah’s response to Gabriel. Here was a man who would win the annual *“outstanding person of faith”* award. As a priest he faithfully prayed for God’s blessing for himself, his wife and his people and he regularly prayed that God would answer their prayer for a child. BUT when the good news came to him he couldn’t believe it. He did what most of us would have done.....he protested and made his case of why this won’t work.....Elizabeth and I are too old.....we’re past childbearing years!

The older we become the easier it is for us to think it’s too late for us. *“I’m too old,”* we say to ourselves. The older we get the fewer possibilities seem open to us. We say to ourselves, *“If I haven’t accomplished or experienced it by now it’s not going to happen.”* That was Zechariah’s mindset even though he had faithfully prayed for a child. When it came to the moment of good news Zechariah’s faith choked.....we’re too old to have a child he told Gabriel. But God wasn’t finished with Elizabeth and Zechariah yet! And God is not finished with you or me or Fairmont Presbyterian Church yet!

As Christians we need to remember that everything up to this very moment in time is prelude. Judy plays a prelude for us to help us *prepare* for worship. Everything we have experienced to this point in life is prelude to prepare us for what God has planned for us next. No matter how old we are or how our church might be aging, God is not finished with us yet! God can and will surprise us yet!

There's a story told of an elderly gentleman who had serious hearing problems for many years. The man finally went to the doctor and received a set of hearing aids that allowed him to hear perfectly. When the elderly fellow went back to the doctor for a check up the doctor was thrilled that his hearing was still perfect. The doctor said to the man, "*Your family must be quite pleased that you can hear again.*" The man replied, "*Oh, I haven't told my family yet. I just sit around and listen to their conversations. I've changed my will three times!*"

Zechariah and Elizabeth knew the clock was ticking and they had lost the chance of having a child. But God wasn't finished with them yet and God had a wonderful surprise. Christmas is a time of surprises but sometimes we become so entrenched or comfortable in our religious traditions and beliefs there is no room for surprise in our faith. Zechariah was faithful in his prayers, service and worship and he went through all the right motions. But when the good news of God's *Great Surprise*...a surprise he had regularly prayed for...came to him he couldn't receive it.

It is possible for us to become so settled into a religious routine or a comfortable belief system that even God has a tough time getting our attention. God loves to surprise us but our minds need to be friendly toward surprises. God has given us freedom to receive or refuse God's surprises. *In what way do you hope God will surprise you? In what way do you hope God will surprise our church? Have you asked God to surprise you? Make your life a matter of prayer and don't be surprised when God blesses in a far different way than you ever expected or prayed. After all God is a God of surprises!*

Zechariah needed time to ponder Gabriel's frightful interruption and the incredible message Gabriel brought. So we read "***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."***¹⁹ ***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."***²⁰ ***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."*** Some might think Gabriel was punishing Zechariah when he made him mute but I prefer to look at as a gift of silence so that Zechariah might ponder the surprise visit and grow into it.

For nine months Zechariah reflected on Gabriel's message and the gift of Elizabeth's pregnancy. When John was born, friends and relatives assumed Zechariah would name his son, Junior. But Zechariah called for a tablet and wrote, "***His name is John.***" As John was being formed in Elizabeth's womb, a new heart was being formed in Zechariah...a new heart that went beyond religious practice to a *heart to Heart* and *spirit to Spirit* relationship with the God of surprises. For nine months Zechariah pondered Gabriel's message and grew into the realization no matter how old and no matter how stuck we might feel...God is never finished with us!

When Zechariah made it clear that the baby would be named John we read, "***Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God.***" This is what he said....

⁶⁸***“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. ⁶⁹He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David, ⁷⁰as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, ⁷¹that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. ⁷²Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, ⁷³the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us ⁷⁴that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, ⁷⁵in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. ⁷⁶And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, ⁷⁷to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. ⁷⁸By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, ⁷⁹to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”*** (Luke 1:68-79)

Yes, it's true....God is not finished with us yet for God is full of surprising blessings. Just take a look at Zechariah and Elizabeth and if they were here they would encourage us to believe....really believe that God is a God of surprises. So keep your eyes open. You never know what you might see even this very day!

Amen