

## **Elizabeth and Zechariah**

### **Luke 1:5-25 by Patty Friesen (First Advent, Nov. 29/15)**

This first Sunday of Advent we are in Luke's Gospel this lectionary year. Mark's Gospel of Jesus challenges us to discipleship, to follow in the path of Jesus and imitate him. Matthew's Gospel of Jesus challenges us to preach the good news and make disciples. In John's Gospel, Jesus reveals who God is – the all-important sides to the wonderful complexity of Christ. But Luke's Jesus is the compassionate friend of outcasts. Luke is a skilled writer, adept at Greek and knowledgeable of the Old Testament. Luke seems to have full record of Jesus' ministry and early development as a child. Luke is not a direct disciple, not one of the 12 like Matthew, Mark and John. He is probably a Gentile from Ephesus since he seems to know a lot about that city when he writes Acts. Luke knows how to create strong biblical characters, painting vivid scenes with his words, giving structure to the entirety of his work. For example, Luke enjoys pairing women and men, Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary and Joseph, Anna and Simeon, and other pairings like Mary and Elizabeth, and John the Baptist and Jesus and Mary and Zechariah in their Magnificats. Like good wine and good food pairings, I will follow Luke's pairings in my Advent sermons.

Luke begins today's scripture in the traditional storytelling method, In the days of King Herod. It is like Once upon a time but this time is specific and the characters are specific. Zechariah means God remembered and he is a specific man, a priest of the order of Abijah whose wife Elizabeth meaning, God's oath is also from a priestly family. They are righteous and blameless, full obedient to God and yet not blessed with a child. The condition of childlessness and the context of the temple, immediately remind us of

Hannah praying for a child in the temple in 1 Samuel. It gives us hope, as God worked for Hannah, God may work for Elizabeth.

Now Zechariah was serving in the temple. There were 24 groups of Jewish priests serving for a week in the Temple twice a year. They drew lots to serve the inner sanctuary so one might be chosen to serve once in a lifetime. In the middle of his work of burning incense, an angel appears to Zechariah with the first recorded words in the gospel, “Do not be afraid.” Do not be afraid will become the theme of the entire gospel as God continually bursts into people’s lives. Then Gabriel gives a two-part announcement – firstly, Zechariah and Elizabeth will have a son whose name is to be John meaning God is gracious. And secondly, there will be another birth of the Messiah and joy and gladness will accompany both births.

Zechariah replies emphatically, “How can this be? I am old and my wife is old!” Gabriel replies equally emphatically, “This can be because I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God and have been sent to speak to you and bring you this good news. But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time anyhow, 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 emerged, he was supposed to pronounce a blessing over the people, the highpoint of his career and he cannot speak. While the crowd can’t read lips, they know he has seen a vision and has been rendered speechless, like the prophet Daniel when he saw an angel. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. When his time of service in the temple was ended, he went home and we all wait with bated breath as to what is going to happen next.

This is a drama that affects everyone. Israel's waiting for God's blessing outside the temple, parallels this ancient couple's waiting for a child and this is all a call for the despairing to believe that it is never too late for those who wait upon the Lord. These wonderful Advent stories are the windows to this season that help us see into the mystery of incarnation, God with us. These stories are not so much biographical information on the origin and birth of Jesus as rich perspectives on the mystery of God and human life. They are narrative accounts compiled by the early Christian community, which speak to the *meaning* of the Christ event. They paint word pictures and preserve for us their own windows upon these truths. And they didn't end there. Each generation has taken these windows and have painted, sculpted, sung and written about them to gain more appreciation and understanding of them as the centuries go by. This season is rich with art on Christmas cards and in churches and in choral renditions of the story.

We are so blessed to have artists in our community who are willing to share their expressions with us and preaching with me this morning is Robin Neudorf's Elizabeth, or female elder, or crone, a wise woman. She stands in Robin's garden, which is an amazing living work of art in itself and a powerful place for contemplation and prayer if anybody ever wants to use it. Elizabeth stands in the garden overlooking the herbs and she has two other female companions, a young woman and a pregnant woman who will be Mary for us this season as we meditate on these biblical women who bore John the Baptist and Jesus in miraculous ways. They have come out of the cold garden shed and have been riding around Saskatoon in the back of my Subaru this week, which hasn't made them too happy bouncing over the potholes but now they are safely in our warm church to bear visual witness to the biblical truths of Advent.

They were shaped with wire and layered and lacquered with cool stuff and their hair is made from mops. They are durable so please come up and have a look at them and touch them after service. They are the embodiment of the message. It is especially fitting that they live in a garden, for the prophet Isaiah uses vegetative language to describe what God is doing for Mary and Elizabeth.

The desert shall blossom, the wilderness will become a place of spring and in Luke, the barrenness is found in the body of a woman, the elderly Elizabeth. It recalls Hannah, but also Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel and other barren biblical women. We often think of Mary during this season, the fresh bud ripening with her pregnancy of Christ but her fruitfulness was in season. She was a symbol of fertility of creation itself, ready to receive God. But it is Elizabeth, old Elizabeth's conceiving is even more remarkable. She was parched creation, dry, gray desert sand unable to even support new life even if she could conceive it. In her historical moment, barrenness defined her social identity as hopeless. She more than any other of these Advent characters is a true symbol of waiting and desert deep roots of faith for spring rain to make her cactus bloom.

We begin Advent today with the aged Elizabeth and Zechariah in the temple with Gabriel and we will end it on December 27 with the aged Anna and Simeon in the temple at Jesus' child dedication. Elderly women and men are the bookends to the Jesus story in Luke. Who are the Elizabeths and Zechariahs among us that show us the way to Jesus today? I have to think of Neta and Art Shantz from Bluesky Mennonite Church in northern Alberta where I grew up. Art and Neta were old for all the years I knew them at church. Their children and grandchildren lived in the south as did our grandparents so they became grandparents for us in the north. They always hosted the church's New

Year's Eve party that was terrific fun because we kids ran around in the basement while the adults played Crokinole upstairs. At midnight Neta came with creaking knees down the stairs to give us kids pots and pans to bang as we came upstairs to ring in the New Year. There are unforgettable memories of Neta and Art Shantz. Neta also was the first woman to wash my feet at my first communion as a baptized member of the church, her knees creaking again as she knelt by the basin. We need the Netas and Elizabeths of the faith, elderly women who model faithfulness and steadfastness and we are so fortunate to have a number of them in our congregation – a treasure chest full that we need to hear from more often.

In the days of King Herod – it is the elders, the poor, and the barren who are God's chosen people. For those of us who grow weary and cynical, Gabriel's message breaks through and we proclaim with Elizabeth, "This is what the Lord has done for me."