

Advent 4—C

Luke 1:39-45: In those days Mary got up and hurried to the hill country, to a town of Judah. She entered the home of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. Just as Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. She called out with a loud voice and said, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! But why am I so favored that the mother of my Lord should come to me? In fact, just now, as soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy! Blessed is she who believed, because the promises spoken to her from the Lord will be fulfilled!"

God Does Amazing Things

Elizabeth was a post-menopausal woman who thought that pregnancy was now no longer biologically possible. And yet, God asked her to believe the unbelievable and to believe possible the impossible. And she did! She's one of my heroes because she's older, maybe not too far from my age; the age at which people don't have young children anymore. And you know, that's not such a bad idea. I understood and appreciated all over again why God gives young babies only to younger people. There's a reason for that, isn't there? I don't think I have the energy for it anymore. But Elizabeth somehow had to find the energy. She had a squirmy toddler and her little baby, John the Baptist, was just a squirmy little boy like every other squirmy little boy who was a pistol and full of energy and full of spunk and full of inquisitiveness and she had to ride hard on him as an older gal. That just makes me love her right out of the gate.

I also love this woman because I so resonate with the burden she had to drag around her whole life. You know, infertility is just really, really hard. It's such a painful subject; nobody even wants to talk about it. Even people for whom that is their life, it's so painful they don't bring it up to their friends. Their friends usually have the good taste not to ask. But this woman—and we know for sure because of the words we're going to hear in just a minute—this woman had to drag around this sadness in her heart her whole life and it influenced everything she did and was as an adult. Everything she did, there was always, "Yeah, but I don't have any children."

So why is that such a big deal? For one, her arms are empty. She ached to love her own flesh and blood; wanted to hold not somebody else's baby, she wanted to hold hers. And I know we still have that urge going on in our hearts, don't we? She had empty arms and God let those empty arms go on year after year, decade after decade, until menopause hit and she thought, "Now I can't. Now it's over." So that sadness was there. It made her feel like I'm maybe not fully a woman. Like, back in the day, everybody blamed the woman like, "You're sterile," or "You're infertile," or something, even though it's at least 50 percent as likely that the male equipment is where the breakdown is. The woman felt it most keenly. It hurt her sense in society of being viewed as a fully competent woman because she had no kid. It made her frustrated that she felt like a failure as a wife because she couldn't give a baby, an heir, a son to her husband, Zechariah. And that dear man, of course, had his own sorrow, but I think it hit her worse and that makes me love her and appreciate her all the more. And it makes me understand all the more that God sometimes waits and waits and waits and waits and waits and he allows us to struggle and the pain and the struggle from God's viewpoint are not necessarily disasters or bad. Same as in your life—he has not fixed every owie that you have, has he? No, he hasn't. You are dragging around your own bag of rocks, are you not? And you've prayed about it. How many prayers do you think Elizabeth sent up to God for a child? A hundred, do you think? Nah,

more than that. A thousand? At least. And it seemed to her, maybe, that her God that she was praying to was deaf. Same as you have feared: “Why isn’t anything happening in my life? I prayed and prayed and I still got my shadows on my soul. I’ve still got my bag of rocks.”

And God had in mind to utilize her platform of struggle and pain to do something later in life. I also—speaking of later in life—that’s another reason why this woman’s my hero is God had great stuff for her but in the last third of her life, not in the first two-thirds. He didn’t use her in her prime when she was at her physical peak; charming and beautiful and 21 and had the world at her fingertips. No, he waited until she feared: “I’m growing old and my husband and I will have no one to take care of us in our old age.” That’s another component of this disappointment and shadow, isn’t it? There was no social security back then; there were no nursing homes. There was no assisted living facility in 4 B.C. You counted on your kids to take care of you when you became frail. Where is that? With no child, that wasn’t going to happen so the woman just had a lot of sadness in her heart.

And then one day, her husband—who’s a priest—comes back from one of his shifts at the temple where he was a prayer and sacrifice leader, and her husband comes back mute and deaf. And somehow, through sign language or writing down a story, an amazing story for her, found something to write on and told her that you are going to have a baby after all. And God waited until it was a physical impossibility for either of them to think it’s a coincidence or we did this. He waited just as he waited with Abraham and Sarah; so long that they had to say it is all God’s doing. He was using them and built off of the platform of their hurt to do a demonstration of pure grace; where God is working a miracle to do something of incredible impact.

And another little piece of her sadness is that when you have a kid when you’re in your late 50s or older—who knows how old; maybe she’s like in her 60s for crying out loud—you’re not, she would not have been alive to see her baby, John the Baptist, do his ministry. How old was John, John the Baptist, when he did his extraordinarily important work of heralding the coming of the Son of God in human flesh? How old would he have been? Thirty! His relative, Jesus, was 30 when he began his ministry, when his tempting in the wilderness experience launched his ministry when his anointing in the Jordan River—he was age thirty. And if John the Baptist started just before Jesus, that would have meant he was 30, too; 30 also. So Elizabeth was probably dead and never got to see her boy do his thing. She died in hope; not really seeing what God was up to. That’s another reason she’s my hero because so much of our lives involves believing in things we cannot see, trusting that God has a plan, though we cannot detect it; trusting that it’s going to have a good outcome, even when all I’m seeing around me is some bad outcomes. And trusting that he’s really in charge and has a plan overall and in the end, everything’s going to work out because all I can see is short-term; I can’t see the long-term. All I can see is the physical universe; I cannot perceive the spiritual universe. All I see are fragments and glimmers when I so really want to see the fullness. But I have to wait. Waiting is hard. That’s what Advent is, isn’t it? It’s the waiting time. So I appreciate and love this woman for her attitude in Advent; her Advent attitude.

I’d like to have you hear a few of her words in this Advent time. We will listen to Luke 1 and we’re going to hear a few things that Elizabeth had to say.

When Zechariah, her now deaf and mute husband, came home, silent from his timeout, his nine month timeout. And give me just a quick comment on that—that sounds really punitive, doesn’t it? Like, wouldn’t a one-day time out have done it? Wouldn’t you have learned your lesson if you had only had to be deaf and mute for one day? Why nine whole months? I’ll tell you what—even though Zechariah and Elizabeth may never have lived to see John the

Baptist's actual ministry, his spiritual formation was extremely important. They had to prepare him for years and years and years for the spiritual ministry he was going to have. So it was critically important that they have their heads screwed on straight and God thought a nine month timeout where this man will be in the quiet and in the dark is just about right.

Elizabeth caught on quicker. She did not have Zechariah's doubts. Even though this promise was crazy, she believed it. And she went into her own seclusion; maybe because she knew Zechariah would need a lot of help. Verse 25 shows that she realized that this pregnancy did not result from Zechariah and her. "*The Lord has done this for me,*" she said. She could connect the dots of cause and effect. "*In these days he's shown his favor and taken away my,*" what? "*Taken away my disgrace.*" And you want to say: "Liz! Woman, dear woman, it's not a shame to be infertile. Ten percent of couples are infertile; it's everywhere. It's not a disgrace; don't say that." You know, you could come up with all the logic you want, all the carefully laid out rationale you want, and that's still how she's going to feel, isn't it? Cause this is not a rationale conclusion; this is an emotional feeling that lay on her heart like a soggy, gray, wet blanket all the time. She felt embarrassed. It's a disgrace. "Worse, maybe I'm getting punished!" No, Liz, you are not getting punished! You are a believer. All of your sins have been forgiven through the shedding of the blood of the sacrifices that connect you with your coming Savior; the great Lamb of God, Jesus. You are washed and cleansed. What's happening to you is not a punishment. Don't call it a disgrace. Well, that's what you would have said. I'm just telling you—how can you not love this woman for keeping her spirits up when that's how she felt? I'm a disgraced woman. I'm a loser. I'm being judged. I'm being punished. I'm ashamed. Not anymore though, she said. I can hold my head up now. Finally, I have what my heart has been desiring.

Her younger relative, Mary, living up north in Nazareth in Galilee also found out she was going to have a miracle baby; even more miraculous for it will be a virgin birth. There will be no human father connected with Mary's baby and Mary, being a little younger and more mobile, also not as far along in the pregnancy, she got herself together with this amazing news and she traveled south to the hill country of Judah; kind of a dry run for the pregnancy run she's going to make nine months later.

"She entered the home of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. Just as Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. She called out with a loud voice and said, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed in the fruit of your womb! But why am I so favored that the mother of my Lord should come to me? In fact, just now, as soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy!'" (40-44) Isn't that kind of a cool thing? I've known a fair number of women now and talked to them in the last trimester when the babies within their wombs are really starting to move around and isn't it kind of fun when you're with a very largely pregnant woman and she goes, "Ooh!" And you know, it hurts and it's really uncomfortable, but I think they kind of like it and we do, too, because it shows that kid's an active one and still kicking. So it's just—and by the way, that's just among the first of many hurts. You'll be kicked many, many times and many, many ways, moms. And here, John the Baptist did a little dance right in his womb because somehow, he was aware that the Savior of the world was in the same room as he was.

"Blessed is she who believed, because the promises spoken to her from the Lord will be fulfilled!" (45) And that's the main reason why Elizabeth is my hero; because she believed the unbelievable. She believed the invisible, the invisible promises of God. All she could see was a low income Jewish woman, unfortunately not even married yet. To all the world, she looked like

yet another unwed mother going to have a baby without a marriage. So Mary was going to have to carry that embarrassment around. All you could see was this young woman with a smile but Elizabeth believed everything: That your baby is God in flesh. “*The mother of my Lord*”—think—put those words in your mouth: “*The mother of my Lord.*” God has a mother? What? Seriously? God is becoming incarnate in human flesh? Mary said: “Yes, he is. *My soul rejoices in God my Savior*” because he saw how lowly we were and he came down, all the way down here, to lift us up.

Here’s why I so love and admire Elizabeth. She saw through the outward disguises and the outward props and through God’s promises, she tied into the reality, which is that God has become incarnate to save me. That, my friends—here’s the grand finale; here’s the so what—if you have that in your Advent, then no matter what happens, you are going to have an awesome Christmas; regardless of the amount of financial transactions moving back and forth between the present-givers and the present-getters. You will have a very merry Christmas regardless of how many people are guests in your home or how many different gatherings you are invited to. It doesn’t matter whether we’ve got splendid Christmas weather or whether it’s dreary and horrible, you will have a great Christmas. If you have got that, you have got everything.

On the other hand, if you don’t have that, if your Christmas is not organized around the central, astounding miracle of the universe that God took on human flesh to save you and me, if you have not got that, I don’t care how fancy the presents are that you get, I don’t care how many parties you go to or how much—how many lights you string outside your house—none of it’s going to matter a hill of beans and there will be no lasting joy to make this Christmas truly merry. Just as Elizabeth dragged around unnecessarily a feeling of being a disgrace, without Christ as the center and his carnation, you don’t have Christmas; you just have winter parties.

So here is the absolute summation of why this woman is so dear to my heart and I want to be just like her: I want to believe that God can still do amazing things through older people. It’s not just the young ones in the prime of life; the mighty strong warriors and the beautiful princesses that God touches and says: “I’ve got a job for you.” Sometimes it’s the older ones. You and I have no idea whom we’re touching in our lives; who’s listening to us and who’s watching. And you and I can have powerful impacts no matter what age we may be. I want to encourage you not to think that you’re washed up or nearing the end. You have no idea. You have no idea how useful God finds you or what it is that God needs for you to do. Just keep your eyes open, keep your ears tuned to the word. And even if you have a husband who comes home from work suddenly and he is deaf and mute and he says: “We’re going to have a baby who’s going to become the advance man for the Savior of the world,” be ready to say, “Awesome! Isn’t God amazing,” and praise God for your life. For who you are, for your platform, for being so valuable to your God that your God in person was willing to squish himself so tiny to get into the womb of a poor Jewish woman, just to come to this world to be able to take you to his world. Isn’t that cool? Amen.