

Zechariah and Elizabeth

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

2nd in a four-week series

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John 1:6–9 (NRSV)

⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

Luke 1:5–25 (NRSV)

⁵In 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.

²⁴After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, ²⁵“This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.”

Zechariah and Elizabeth discover that

“everything is gonna be all right” in ways they had never imagined!

Zechariah and Elizabeth had lived a long time with the disappointment of their childlessness. They were far too old to hold any hope of a baby. Yet, you see, everything was going to be all right. This is their story.

A day like no other

The temple in Jerusalem was the workplace of the priests of Israel. The priestly system was built around animal sacrifice; in the busy festivals of the Jewish year, the Jerusalem priests had their hands full, literally, keeping up with the demands of the populace. Somewhere around 6-4 BC, one of the priests was a very old man named Zechariah who was married to an equally old woman named Elizabeth. Much to their disappointment, the old couple was childless.

One day, as Zechariah's department was fulfilling its priestly duties, the old man was chosen to enter God's sanctuary and offer up incense.¹ This was quite an honor for Zechariah and something that he may have waited for his whole life. Nonetheless, Elizabeth and her family had to wait patiently outside.

Alone inside the sanctuary and somewhere during the middle of the ritual, the divine burst in upon Zechariah and all thoughts of the sacred ceremony were set aside. Gabriel, an angel of the Lord, stood on the right side of the altar. Zechariah was terrified. As was the necessary custom among angels, Gabriel told the old man, "Don't be afraid." Elizabeth's and Zechariah's prayers were about to be answered.

Hannah's Story

More than 1000 years before Elizabeth's visit with Mary, another Jewish woman struggled with barrenness, for "the LORD had closed her womb" (1 Samuel 1:6). Hannah was the first and favorite wife of Elkanah but, like Elizabeth, she carried the shame of childlessness. In order to have heirs, Elkanah took a second wife, Peninnah, who had many children by Elkanah and made Hannah's life miserable.

After many years of this, while visiting the priests at Shiloh, Hannah prayed fervently for a child, promising God that she would dedicate the child to the Lord's service. As the NRSV puts it, "the LORD remembered her," and Hannah gave birth to a son, Samuel. While he was still young, Hannah took him to Shiloh and dedicated him to God. Samuel grew to be a judge of the Israelites and a great prophet of God. Samuel anointed both Saul, the first king of Israel, and David, the second.

When Hannah came to Shiloh with her young son, she prayed a song beginning, "My heart exults in the LORD; my strength is exalted in my God" (1 Samuel 2:1). There are numerous parallels between Mary's song, the Magnificat, and Hannah's son. Both songs focus on God's turning the world upside down – he "raises up the poor from the dust . . . he lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes" (1 Samuel 2:8).

Zechariah and Elizabeth had always strived to lead holy and righteous lives. Not only was Zechariah a temple priest, Elizabeth was a descendent of Aaron, brother of Moses and the first high priest of Israel. But still, their lives had been clouded by the sadness and even disgrace of childlessness. This would have fallen especially hard on Elizabeth, as, in their world, a woman's barrenness was seen to be a reproach from God. Now, Elizabeth was too old for there to be any possibility of a child.

But with God, the impossible becomes the possible. As the old man did his duty, an angel had appeared right in front of him, promising a child. And not just any child. Many people would rejoice at their son's birth. He would be filled with the Holy Spirit and would lead people back to the Lord. In the spirit of Elijah, their son would make the people ready for the coming Lord.

As you might imagine, Zechariah found all this a bit hard to swallow. As many of us would, he wanted some sign that Gabriel's message was truly from God. But doubt can be dangerous. Zechariah was struck mute for his lack of faith and would remain so until his son's birth. When Zechariah emerged from the temple, the crowd understood that he had experienced a vision of some sort because he could do no more than make signs. Elizabeth, of course, would conceive and give birth to a male child. He would grow up to fulfill the vocation given him by God and would be called John the Baptist.

When Elizabeth was six months pregnant, her relative, Mary, was visited by the angel Gabriel. At the time, Mary was engaged to a young man named Joseph. Mary would probably have been 14 or so at the time. Her

¹ In Exodus 30, God commands that the priests of Israel are to burn holy incense (a general term for aromatic plants) in front of the "holy of holies" in the temple. The smoke from the incense would protect the priests from the presence of God. (See also Leviticus 16)

engagement to Joseph would have been completely binding, so much so that had Joseph died before their marriage, Mary would have been considered a widow.

Early in her pregnancy, Mary came to visit Elizabeth, traveling from Nazareth in the north to the Judean hill country west of Jerusalem. Perhaps, Mary undertook the visit to escape the inevitable shame and derision that would fall on an unmarried, yet pregnant, village girl.

But what joy we see in the first meeting of these two pregnant women, one old, the other young (Luke 1:39-45). Far from a dry recounting, Luke gives us a poignant and emotional portrait of the moments when the formidable mothers of John and Jesus meet. Darrell Bock help us see more of Elizabeth in this passage:

Elizabeth is exemplary in her response. She is the “amazed saint.” Her attitude is summarized in the question “*Why am I so favored?*” Here is humble amazement at being able to participate directly in God’s plan and see him at work (2 Sam 6:9; 24:21). All who have a role in God’s plan should share this wonder.

Elizabeth recognizes the unique blessedness of Mary (*blessed are you among women*) because of the child she bears (*blessed is the child you will bear*). The remark is rhetorical and should not be read as if Mary is the most blessed of all women. It means she is “very pleased” (compare Judges 5:24; Song 1:8). The attitude of Elizabeth is representative of what Luke desires in any believer. What a joy to share in the events associated with Jesus. What a joy to share life with him.

Elizabeth also reveals a second exemplary attribute, one that also is found in Mary. While reporting the leaping of John in her womb, she expresses a beatitude for Mary’s faith: “*Blessed is she who has believed.*” Here is the essence of response to God, to trust his word to be true and live in light of that belief. To be blessed is to be happy because God has touched one’s life. Such divine benefit rains down on those who trust him and his promises. Blessing emerges from God’s ability to bring his promises to completion, but to share the benefits, we must be confident that God does what he says. The first sign of such faith in Mary was her willingness to let God use her (v. 38). The second was her immediate (*hurried*) visit to Elizabeth, who herself served as a sign that God keeps his word and can give life (vv. 36, 39).

Theophilus and readers like him should not doubt, but rejoice and be assured that God keeps his promises. Trust and joy are two vital aspects of a successful walk with God. Elizabeth’s joy is shared by Mary, who will utter a hymn of praise to God for his gracious work on her behalf. Mary’s psalm also comes from the heart of a grateful believer.²

The Birth of John the Baptizer

By the time that Gabriel interrupts Zechariah’s incense offering, the Jews had waited hundreds of years for the arrival of their deliverer, their Messiah. Surely, many Jews had given up hope that they would ever see the decisive acts of God. Similarly, Zechariah and Elizabeth had given up hope of ever having children. But just as God burst in upon their lives, giving them a son, God would soon end the Jews’ wait and burst in upon human history, bringing it to a climax in Jesus Christ.

Just as the announcement of John’s birth precedes the announcement of his cousin’s birth, so Luke tells of us John’s birth before he tells us the story of Jesus’ birth (see Luke 1:57-80).

When Elizabeth’s baby is born, the neighbors are overjoyed. At the infant’s circumcision ceremony, he is about to be named Zechariah, after his father, when Elizabeth announces that he is to be named John. Zechariah agrees to the naming and, at that moment, his speech is restored! The story is told throughout the area causing people to wonder, “What then is this child going to be?” They know, as Luke writes,

² Bock, D. L. (1994). [Luke](#) (Lk 1:29). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

that “indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.” Having recovered his speech, Zechariah pronounces a lengthy blessing upon his son, John. John “will be called the prophet of the Most High” and “will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins.”

So there you have it . . . maybe sooner, maybe later, even much later, everything is gonna be all right. It is not trite or a cliché; it is the promise of God that “all things work for good for those who love the Lord” (Romans 8:28).

Scott Engle’s Bible Classes

Monday Afternoon Class

A study of the book of Exodus

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott’s Facebook page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC.”

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

A study of Ephesians

Meeting on-line at 12:00 noon Tuesday on Scott’s Facebook page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC”.

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week’s lesson stands on its own. This is very “drop-in.” Bring something to eat if you like, wear your pj’s.-- we’re on-line now so who’d even know. Have a Bible handy.

Both classes are now recorded and are available each week in my new podcast at scottengle.podbean.com. They are also available on Apple podcasts. Search by my name, “Scott Engle”.

Scott’s Sunday Class

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 on Scott’s Facebook page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC.”

Our Advent series: *A Christmas Smorgasbord*

Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott’s YouTube channel. Search for “Scott Engle.” These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.