

## **“A Journey Toward Peace: Elizabeth Speaks”**

Sermon by Emily Rose Proctor

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Advent – Dec. 6, 2015

First Presbyterian Church in Marianna, FL

### **Optional: Old Testament Reading: Malachi 3:1-4**

#### **Luke 1:5-25**

<sup>5</sup>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.

<sup>6</sup>Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord.

<sup>7</sup>But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

<sup>8</sup>Once when [Zechariah] was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, <sup>9</sup>he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense.

<sup>10</sup>Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside.

<sup>11</sup>Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense.

<sup>12</sup>When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him.

<sup>13</sup>But 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.

<sup>14</sup>You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth,  
<sup>15</sup>for 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.

<sup>16</sup>He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God.

<sup>17</sup>With 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.”

<sup>18</sup>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.”

<sup>19</sup>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.

<sup>20</sup>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.”

<sup>21</sup>Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah,  
and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary.

<sup>22</sup>When 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.

<sup>23</sup>When his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

<sup>24</sup>After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived,  
and for five months she remained in seclusion.  
She said, <sup>25</sup>“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.”

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

My name is Elizabeth of Ein Karem—I'm the only one in my family who can speak at present, so that's who you are going to hear from today. And I have some big news that I am finally ready to share.

I am expecting! Me!

After years of hoping and praying, years of self-doubt and disappointment, years of watching all my friends one-by-one start families—and now some of them are even grandmothers—after all this, I, too, am with child!

But another strange thing happened first. My husband, Zechariah, returned from Jerusalem a few months ago unable to speak a word. At first, I just thought he was ill, but it obvious there was some sort of story behind it. He spent his first few days back grunting and gesturing frantically, pointing to my stomach, and drawing pictures of some sort of strange being in the Temple. I didn't know what to make of it! I don't know who was more frustrated, me or Zechariah.

And then, a few months later, I started feeling sick to my stomach and tired all the time. At first I thought it was just the flu or something like that, but it lasted for weeks and weeks, and there were other signs too. Nothing really that noticeable from the outside, but I knew something was going on, and I—well, I could hardly even think it. Could it be? Dare I get my hopes up?

I'll admit, part of me was relieved at first that I didn't have to talk to Zechariah about it. It meant I could pretend a little longer that everything was as usual. It bought me some time to think, and to wait and see how things progressed.

Honestly, I was afraid to say about what was happening—to anyone, myself included. What if what I suspected was just my imagination—a hallucination born of decades of longing?

How humiliating! Or what if it was true, but something happened, and we lost the baby? It was too awful to think about.

And if something did go wrong, I didn't think I could handle having such heartbreak be public knowledge. It was bad enough dealing with people's questions, advice, and platitudes about God's perfect timing for the first ten years—even from the most well-meaning of souls.

Eventually they tapered off, and it's been a while since anyone has mentioned anything about children to us. I didn't think I could handle another round of it though, especially after a loss.

So for a while now, I have been keeping close to home. With my mute husband for a companion. A silent retreat of sorts, for us both.

Having so much time with my own thoughts, it has not escaped me that this is not the only time in our marriage that we have been at a loss for words. I should probably mention that Zechariah is a priest, whose section serves periodically in the Temple at Jerusalem.

As long as we have been married, we have taken pride in his service, doing our best to keep the commandments and live according to the Torah. We try to set an example for others in the community.

Maybe that sounds dull to you, but I come from a long line of priests, going back to Moses' brother Aaron, so this kind of life is second nature to me. Plus, I've always been a "good girl"—as far back as I can remember, I helped my mom around the house, preparing the food, cleaning up. I couldn't stand dirt or clutter, even as a little girl.

"Too bad you weren't a boy," my dad used to say. "You'd make a great priest." He even taught me the Hebrew alphabet and many of the

prayers that they say in the Temple. So it wasn't a huge surprise that when I came of age, I was promised to a priest.

So, yes, God and the Temple have always been a big part of my life, and that didn't change with marriage. And, yet, we could not conceive. It didn't make any sense; we were so faithful. A lot more faithful, we thought, than some other couples we knew who seemed to always be pregnant.

Or people who seemed to see their children more as nuisances than blessings. There were times when I thought that if I heard one more mother scream at her kids for just being kids, I would explode right there in the marketplace.

Zechariah got really depressed about the whole thing; he was a priest, after all. A servant of the Lord—didn't that count for something?

Not having children reflected poorly on him; people whisper, you know, even about priests. Few will say it to your face, but many assume that it's somehow your fault. That you must have done something to deserve this withholding of God's blessing.

After a while, you can't help but wonder too, even if you know that the Lord is "slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." Even if you know the stories of Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel and Hannah. Until your lot changes too, it's hard not to question the One whose first command was to "be fruitful and multiply."

As the years passed, Zechariah offered sacrifice after sacrifice in hopes of a child. I went to every healer and midwife we could afford. I tried all kinds of strange herbs and diets; I knew what phase the moon was in better than I knew what season it was.

And prayer, don't get me started on prayer.

I prayed temple prayers, good girl "thy will be done" prayers, tearful pleading prayers, let's-make-a-deal prayers, angry I-hate-you prayers, I-give-up prayers. Maybe I wore God out with all my prayers. He was as bad as Zechariah. Silent. Always silent. But I didn't let that stop me.

Eventually, as we ran out of experts to consult, and as promotion after promotion passed Zechariah by, he insisted that we accept it as God's will for our lives. But we could not understand it.

We stopped talking about it, but still it hung around like a stray dog, following us from room to room, pitiful and rank. Maybe every family has one of those—the thing that nobody talks about but that affects everything. I don't know. After a while you get sort of used to it. Your nose adjusts.

I will say that as time passed, I began to fill my prayers with other matters, with the hopes and fears and pain of our neighbors, of our people—struggling for daily bread, suffocating under Roman rule.

I learned to be grateful for the small daily blessings. A meal shared, a visit from a friend, a moment alone under the star-filled sky. And the bigger ones too, for instance a husband who has remained faithful all these years, in spite of things.

It's weird. In the silence, a new intimacy began to grow between my Zechariah and me. Maybe because we couldn't speak, but we started paying more attention to each other. The eyes, the body language. We began to anticipate each other's needs.

Also there is more touch now—a hand on the shoulder, or a brushing of the elbows as we pass. After a while, I began to suspect that he knew. It

was almost like he was watching for it. Then I remembered his initial gestures involving my stomach.

A few days ago, I couldn't stand it any more. I knew I was beginning to show, and there were times when I thought I even felt something move inside, especially when I lay down at night. Like a fish flopping around. The first time it happened—and I could be sure it wasn't just gas—it was all I could do not to burst out laughing.

So finally I went to Zechariah and put his hands on my belly. “Do you think it's possible,” I said, “that, after all these years, I could be pregnant? Is this what you were trying to communicate when you came back from the City? Did that man, or whatever it was that you saw in the Temple, did he tell you this was going to happen?”

He nodded vigorously, a smile suddenly breaking out all across his face. Then he hugged me hard—I think we were both relieved to finally have it out in the open. I even cried a little.

And now...now I stand before you, an honest-to-God miracle, a mother-to-be. Bitterness and doubts I didn't even know were still swirling around inside me have melted away, and I feel bathed in... in wonder.

One thing is for sure. I will never again underestimate the power of God. I will never again presume to know God's will, for myself or anyone else, without a clear sign from on high. And I bet Zechariah won't either. He still can't speak, although apparently he can write.

After we had our little moment of truth, he ran to the other room to get a tablet and wrote down a name in Hebrew, that I'm assuming he meant to be the baby's name. I'm not going to say it here because we're keeping that a secret between the two of us for now. It's a pretty gender-specific name, so we'll see...

It's not a family name, I'll tell you that much, and that's bound to raise some eyebrows.

But at this point, I'm not sure I really care that much about what other people think. I like it; it feels right. And I get the sense that Zechariah didn't just come up with it on his own, that it's connected somehow to the man who spoke to him in the Temple.

I have so many questions to ask him, when...if he ever gets his voice back. Although, in it's own way, the silence between us has been an unexpected gift. I used to think that silence was a bad thing, a refusal to speak, punishment even. But now I can see that it's more complicated than that.

Once you get used to it, silence kind of opens things up. You can hear things you couldn't hear before. Smaller sounds—the breeze through the trees, the crackle of a fire, the sound of your husband approaching barefoot from the other room.

But not just sounds. Things inside of you, too. Things inside of others. There is a kind of silence that's connected to wonder and gratitude. There is a kind of silence that is just being with someone you love, without trying to change them or get them to do something. There is a way in which silence can be more intimate than talking. I don't think I understood that before.

It's started to change the way that I pray. I do more listening now. It's more about being aware of God than trying to get my way. It's the same silence, really, but it doesn't feel cold anymore. I feel held by it. It gives me peace. And these days, that's no small thing.