

The First Family of the First Christmas

Aunt Elizabeth

Pastor Jeff Wood

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Whenever there is a change of administration in this country, there is a change of residents in the White House. We call them the First Family. Two thousand years ago there was a change of administration for the world, and it is marked by BC and AD on the calendar. There was no White House then, but there was a humble abode in Palestine and there was what we're calling the First Family of Christmas.

We might forget that Jesus, the center of Christmas, as luminous and great as he was and is, had a family. But he did. He had a mom and a stepdad. He had aunts in that village over the hill. He had uncles in the town down by the Sea of Galilee. He had to learn to tie his sandals, memorize multiplication tables, and he figured out the shortcuts between villages for him and his cousins to take.

One of those cousins was John, John the Baptist, a figure known in all four of the gospels. What the Secret Service is to a President, John was to Jesus. He went ahead and prepared. There's a transition team working here in November and December for the new administration. What a transition team is to a new administration, John the Baptist was for Jesus Christ. That advance preparation included letting it be known that there were new players in the system, new policies coming into place, ... a new reality. To act like it wasn't so, to act like the

old administration was still in power ... would be to misalign with real reality and it would lead one to awkwardness, ineffectiveness, and difficulty. So get your mind and life around the new reality. John the Baptist's word for this was repent.

Today we'll look at John the Baptist's parents. We'll look mainly at Elizabeth, but we'll begin with Zechariah. We'll begin with Zechariah because, as we all know, behind every good woman there is a good man. Behind every good wife, there is a good husband. (And behind every good husband there is a surprised mother-in-law.) So let's start with Zechariah.

We'll call him Uncle Zechariah. He was a priest and we would be completely right to say he was a salt-of-the-earth kind of guy. That would mean he was plain, regular, and did his best. The way the Bible conveys this to us is to say that he was from the hill country of Judea and that he was upright.

We ourselves will refer to someone as from the heartland of America and when doing so we are not just saying they are from Kansas but that they have a solid and preserving character. Or if we said someone was uptight, we know that they are serious and obsessive. In similar fashion when Zechariah is said to be from Judea and upright, we are being told he is plain, regular, and did his best.

His plain and regular and did his best was the kind that meant he had a life that was a mix of blessing and difficulty, and prayer. If all this is you, then you would feel comfortable drinking coffee with Zechariah at the coffee shop.

Zechariah's life, however, has a very special happening in it. He is addressed by Gabriel, God's archangel.¹ We should ponder a good while how that conversation begins. Gabriel says, "Fear not, Zechariah, your prayer has been answered." Exactly what kind of prayer was Zechariah praying that an archangel would say such a thing to him, "Fear not, your prayer has been answered"? When was the last time you prayed a prayer that might need an angelic warning label on its answer? Fear not, your prayer has been answered.

Fear not can also mean that Gabriel is, as all the angels in the Bible are, not a cute cherub but an awesome, even frightening being.

Zechariah had a wife and her name was Elizabeth. She, like her husband, was of the priestly tribe of Aaron. We discover that she is a relative of Mary. The King James Version calls her a cousin but the word simply means relative. But we have called her Aunt Elizabeth. Auntie Liz. Auuunt Bet. We'll call her the great-aunt of Jesus, a great aunt on his mother's side.

Here are the other facts about her. They are limited but here they are. She is, when we meet her in the New Testament, old and barren. Not just old.

¹ The only Old Testament book with Gabriel is Daniel. It's basically at the end of the Old Testament. When we see that Zechariah and Elizabeth have on their lips the same words that Abraham and Sarah, an old and barren couple at the beginning of the Old Testament, and the same words as Elkanah and Hannah, a barren couple in the middle of the Old Testament, then we might well think of them as a Mr. and Mrs. Old Testament. After all they reflect some its beginning, middle, and end.

Not just barren. Old *and* barren. Here is a metaphor for all that is withered and running out of life.

Gabriel told her husband that she would bear a son. How fascinating that the Old Testament begins with Sarah as old and barren and that the New Testament begins with Elizabeth as old and barren. Look at all the life and story and pages that God makes to happen thereafter from these. Take heart any of you that feels old and barren.

Well, both Elizabeth and her ancestor Sarah could hardly have imagined themselves shopping at Walmart for Huggies or Pampers. Depends maybe but not Huggies or Pampers.

After discovering herself pregnant, we're told she secludes herself for five months. I don't know if that was because she was worried about miscarrying or what. I don't know if that meant she didn't go to the village well or to market or the cooking fire by the house. But somehow she was not out and about as normal.

Her seclusion had some deeper tones too It had to have been a strange time for her, having this advanced age pregnancy while having a husband who, on account of his disbelief of Gabriel, was now indefinitely deaf and dumb (the onlookers at the baby's baptism had to make signs to him to ask what the son's name should be and he had to write out the answer). How long would his condition continue? It would have been helpful, I'm sure, for her to have had him to communicate with. It was a seclusion in many ways then.

Elizabeth's seclusion is released for a visit with her niece, Mary. Mary was also pregnant. Hmm, one

maybe too late to be pregnant meets one maybe too early to be. One gets filled with the Holy Spirit and greets one who had been overshadowed by the Holy Spirit. The baby in Elizabeth's womb, we are told, leaps, leaps for joy. (Make no mistake, Jesus is a source of joy.)

Luke, the gospel writer we are reading today, records Mary singing a song just after this greeting with Elizabeth. A few verses later Zechariah will sing a song too. In between the two songs, John the Baptist is born. That's kind of nice --- to be born between two songs. He is named by Elizabeth and everyone is surprised at the name choice. But they make those signs to him and the name is confirmed by Zechariah. With that Zechariah speaks again, everyone wonders, given these strange happenings, who this child will be. Then Elizabeth simply disappears from our view.

If I were to give this sermon another title, I would name it, "The Second Greatest Story Ever Told," for the lesson of Elizabeth is the lesson of being second. Her pregnancy comes late while Mary's comes early. Her pregnancy is human, while Mary's is divine. Her pregnancy is one carrying a servant, while Mary's is one carrying the Messiah. She might have wanted her pregnancy to have a moment in the sun before being eclipsed by the superior one.

It might have been easy for Elizabeth, blessed as she was, to still feel jealous. That happens to us, doesn't it – to feel blessed but lose the feeling to nips of jealousy or disappointment? The new Toyota Corolla is a blessing, but you feel something when the neighbor drives up in his new Cadillac Escalade. Blessed and envious at the same moment.

It would have been natural for Elizabeth to feel secondary because, well, she was. Do you remember the story of Mozart? In the movie about him, there is Salvatore? And, while a gifted musician, he is not a genius like Mozart. It drives him crazy. But none of that seems to show up with Elizabeth.

Elizabeth is content with her role as best supporting actress. She is content to lead from the second chair.² Lead ... not sit in the second chair, but lead from the second chair.

See her when Mary comes? She welcomes and blesses and affirms Mary. Loudly (boldly? gladly?) she says, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!” Then she humbly both bows to Jesus, and at the same time, lifts young Mary with, “Why am I so favored that the mother of *my Lord* should come to me?” She lets Mary know that this is a meeting joyous – “Your greeting made my baby jump for joy.” If that isn’t enough, Elizabeth reaches in with a spiritual affirmation of Mary saying something so key for basic faithfulness – “You are to be commended for believing that what the Lord says will be accomplished.” (If Zechariah, who had not done so well at this, had been close by for this word, would have nodded his head too, I imagine.)³

² In an orchestra there is, for example, in the violin section, a lead violinist. That’s the first chair. There is also a second chair.

³ Isn’t it the way it is? Zechariah is to be wise by his advanced years and wise by his professional status as a priest. If anyone should get this right, it should be him. Correct? And if anyone should get this wrong, it’s a girl (not a man), a youngster (not an

All this had to feel so strengthening for this young Mary, caught up in this wondrous but bewildering drama of God. In fact, right after this she praises God with a song. Maybe it was, just a little bit, Elizabeth's way with her that brought on the song. It would be nice, wouldn't it, to have people bless God maybe just a little bit because of us?

No, Elizabeth, great aunt Elizabeth is one who put others first. You know her son one day would say, speaking of Jesus, "He must become greater; I must become less." (John 3:30) He got that attitude from someplace. It was in his DNA. He learned it, I think, not just at his mother's knee but even from his mother's womb. When you think about it, this exactly what priests do. This is a priestly family. They lift up God and support people in their following of him.

This whole pregnancy ... Elizabeth could have said, "I don't think so" or "I'm too old for that." Have you ever said such a thing ... to God? But Elizabeth knew it wasn't about her. It was about Him. Christmas began in a family where someone was saying, "It's not about me getting what I want but Him getting what he wants." After all his is The Greatest Story Ever Told.

If you would like to talk with someone about this message or your spiritual life, or to have someone pray with you, the pastors and elders of the church would welcome your call. revjeffwood@gmail.com

oldster), an amateur (not a pro). But she does. Let us take warning, then, and let us take hope, as well.