

Series: Joy in the Journey

Today: Elizabeth—the Mother of John the Baptist

Text: Luke 1:24-25; 39-45

A Sermon preached by the Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.

Sunday, December 13, 2009

First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA

What are you doing to get yourself ready for Christmas? We hope it is more than a cultural celebration you are observing, but as time presses in on us, there is a danger of forgetting what the season of Advent is all about.

I read the story of a woman was doing her last-minute Christmas shopping at a crowded mall. She was tired of fighting the crowds. She was tired of standing in lines. She was tired of looking for a gift that had sold out days before. Her arms were full of bulky packages when an elevator door opened. It was full. The occupants of the elevator grudgingly tightened ranks to allow a small space for her and her load.

As the doors closed, she blurted out, "Whoever is responsible for this whole Christmas thing ought to be arrested, strung up, and shot!" A few others nodded their heads or grunted in agreement. Then, from somewhere in the back of the elevator, came a single voice that said: "Don't worry. They already crucified him." [Source: *Homiletics (November/December 2006), Volume 18*]

This morning, with only twelve days left until Christmas, it is easy to forget who is responsible for this whole season, isn't it? Thank God for Elizabeth who helps us remember what the season does indeed have a reason. His name is Jesus.

Elizabeth is the wife of Zechariah who became the mother and father of John the Baptist. She is also an older cousin of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Last week we heard Zechariah's story.

Today we want to take a few moments to focus on the story of Elizabeth, and there are at least two important lessons we can learn from her role in the birth of Jesus: 1) She accepts that her life has a holy purpose; 2) She is willing to mentor the faith of someone else.

She accepts that her life has a holy purpose

Like many of the texts in our current series about the journeys of the heroes and heroines of the bible, I have never preached on these verses of Luke. In 38 years of ministry I confess to you that I had never given much thought to the role that Elizabeth played in the nativity of Jesus, so reading this text this morning was eye-opener for me.

What immediately leapt out at me was Elizabeth's response to her own pregnancy. She was an older woman, and for those of us who are older, it only takes about two days of trying to keep up with my grandchildren before we reach the conclusion that others have reached before us: God knew what God was doing when God designed childrearing for our younger years. There are not many women or men that I know that would welcome pregnancy in their later years. Yet this was not the response of Elizabeth. Look in verse 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.*

Elizabeth had not been able to have children. Because the Bible is written from the male perspective, we don't know if it was her problem, or if it was Zechariah's problem that the couple was childless. However, the role of women in the culture in which the Bible was written was to provide a son to her husband to carry on the family name. Not to do so was a source of shame for Elizabeth.

So in her later years, Elizabeth welcomes the fact that she is pregnant. More than welcoming it, she accepts that her life has a holy purpose in the conception and the birth of John.

I covet for all of us that we would accept that God has a holy purpose for each of our lives, no matter what age we find ourselves. So that we might interpret even the surprises that God brings as an opportunity to serve God's purpose.

At Rotary the other day I sat at a table with a group of people I didn't know. In the course of our conversation, the subject of retirement came up. The man sitting next to me, who appeared to be approaching retirement, was quite excited by the prospect. He related a conversation he had with his wife that morning.

"My wife asked, 'What are you going to do when you retire?'"

I told her, 'I'm going to sit on the couch and watch TV all day every day.'"

One of the retirees at our table said, "If you do that, you'll be dead in a year."

The fellow next to me was wide-eyed, and asked why.

The retiree told him, "If the lack of purpose in your life doesn't kill you first, your wife will."

All of us need to have a sense of purpose in our lives or life is simply not worth living. More than that, medical studies have shown that the health of those who lack a sense of purpose is seriously compromised.

Not long ago in our Clergy Consultation Group at the Samaritan Counseling Center we were reviewing the principles of *The Seven Habits of Highly Successful People* authored by Steven Covey. Covey encourages his readers to be proactive and to develop a personal mission statement which is only one sentence long. From it one can develop short term and long term goals which can be guides to the way you live your life on a daily basis. This is the essence of a "holy purpose." It is a personal mission statement which includes doing God's will at the center of your life. Elizabeth had hers. She believed that giving birth to John and nurturing him to

become the man that God intended him to be was her primary purpose in life. Once that was in place, God could use her in other important ways. Elizabeth had a holy purpose. Have you discovered the Holy Purpose God has for your life?

She is willing to mentor the faith of someone else

The other thing that leapt out at me in the reading of this text was the important role that Elizabeth plays in the life of Mary at a crucial point in her life. She was Mary's distant cousin, but she must have been an important person in her life or Mary would not have made the trip from Nazareth in the north to the Judean hills in the south after the Angel, Gabriel, had announced her conception of Jesus. Gabriel had visited Elizabeth as well, and she knew her younger cousin must be confused. However, scripture says that when Mary came, "*the child leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit,*" and then she says those words which are familiar to all our Roman Catholic friends, "*Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.*"

At what must have been one of the most confusing times in Mary's life, it was Elizabeth who helped Mary understand the purpose that God had for her life. She was a mentor in the faith to the mother of Jesus confirming for her that what was going on in her body was, indeed, a gift from God.

A colleague wrote a story in his newsletter about his 5-year-old niece, Olivia, and her best friend, Claire, who were participating in a nativity play at school. Claire was playing Mary, and Olivia was an angel. Before the show, a young boy was going around the dressing room repeating, "I'm a sheep, what are you?" Each child responded politely, including Olivia, who proudly declared she was an angel.

The boy then turned to Claire, still struggling into her costume with her mother's help, and repeated the question to her: "I'm a sheep, what are you?" Claire simply said, "I'm Mary."

Realizing he was face to face with a lead character, he felt he needed to justify his own role. "It's hard being a sheep, you know," he said with all the seriousness of a 5-year-old actor with a big part. Claire's equally serious response was humorously profound. "Yes," said Claire innocently, "but it's also hard being a virgin, you know." [Source: *Jeremy M. Basset, Oklahoma City*]

It was hard for Mary to be a virgin and believe that all that had happened to her was a gift from God, but Elizabeth stepped in and helped her to believe when she could not believe for herself. Thanks be to God for the Elizabeth's of this world who are willing to believe when we have difficulty believing for ourselves or in ourselves.

When I shared this text with the staff on Wednesday, it was Alisa Bair who gave some contemporary commentary. She said, "*Blessed are those who nurture the embryo of God's activity in our lives.*" Isn't that beautiful?

We can all remember the people who nurtured faith in us, can't we? Any of us who have an ounce of faith today can point to people who mentored us when we were going through a rough time in our lives. I consider myself incredibly blessed to have a long list of people who have been there for me helping me to believe when I found it difficult to believe in God or in myself. I have told you about them before: Louie Evans who introduced me to the person of Jesus Christ; Walt James my first mentor in the faith; Scott Sullender, my seminary roommate; my wife, Cherie; Ralph Osborne, spiritual advocate for our children; Ladon Sheats who helped us to see God's agenda for our world; and the list goes on and on. It includes many of you who have stood with us in the midst of personal crisis and helped us to know that we were not alone.

I want you to take a moment to think of one person who has been your mentor in the faith; who has helped you to believe when you could not believe for yourself (silence). Now quietly say a prayer of thanksgiving for their role in your life (silence). Sometime this week, whether they are living or dead, write them a note and say thank you for what they have meant to you.

Elizabeth: a woman who claimed a holy purpose in her life. Where would Mary have been without her? Thanks be to God for Elizabeth.