

When Elizabeth Heard Mary's Greeting

Hespeler, 19 December 2021 © Scott McAndless

Micah 5:2-5, Psalm 80:1-7, Hebrews 10:5-10, Luke 1:39-55

Zechariah had always been a good husband. He had been devoted and loving. And he had stuck by her in the good times and in the bad. Even when she endured the disgrace... (And, yes, that is how she thought of it, disgrace. That is what some of the other women said of her as well.) – she had endured the disgrace of being childless, he and he alone did not blame her or treat her as any less than a valued wife.

An Uncommunicative Husband

But Zechariah had one flaw. He had never been one for talking, and certainly not for sharing his feelings. Nor had he been the kind of person that she could share her feelings with. You know, men. They just don't know how to communicate. They can often be quite useless in that way.

And that had been *before* the incident in the temple, the incident that still had not yet been adequately explained to Elizabeth. All she knew was that, after he had completed his temple service, he came home and she greeted him with all her usual affection, but he didn't say a single word. Nothing! She hadn't a clue what was going on. She had thought that he was uncommunicative before, but this was kind of crazy.

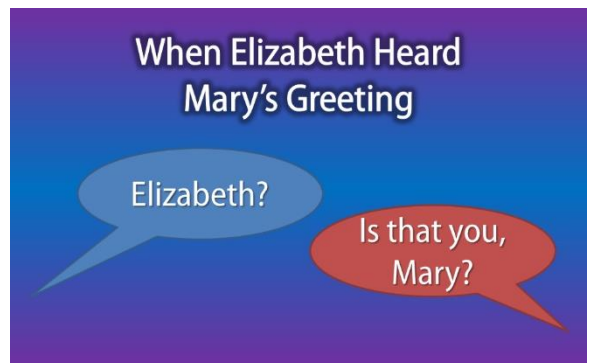
The Only Explanation

It was only after several days that he seemed to have had an idea. He found a wax tablet and a sharp stylus, scribbled a few lines and gave it to her. Even with the written word, Zechariah was still very taciturn. Elizabeth couldn't read it, of course. Few women could read. So, she took it to one of his brother priests and he read it for her. It said, "You shall have a son. We will name him John. Drink no wine or strong drink." That was it.

It wasn't much in the way of explanation. But it seemed as if that was all that Elizabeth was going to get. She accepted that it was true, as unbelievable as it was, because she knew that her husband would not joke about a matter like that. But it still didn't seem real. She might believe it with her head, but how could she believe it in her heart? She said it aloud, trying to convince herself as much as anyone else **"This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favourably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people."** But she was still not sure she believed it.

Elizabeth's Doubt

When her body began to change, she recognized that something was going on, but how could she truly believe that she was expecting after having been disappointed so many times before? That is the real problem that people have when they struggle with infertility.



They've gone through that monthly cycle of hoping against hope only to have that hope crushed so many times that it becomes so much easier just not to hope anymore. And maybe these changes in her body were actually a bad sign. She was getting very old after all. Could these not just be the signs she was finally getting too old for it even to be a possibility?

Hoping for the Quickening

There was one thing that she had always heard from other mothers, though. They had always told her that there had been one thing that had made it all real for them. It was something called the quickening. They had promised her that when she finally felt her child moving within her, it would be a wondrous event and she would finally know for sure that a baby lived within her. So, with great trepidation and fear, Elizabeth waited to feel something. Every day she didn't feel it was a day of agony. And then, when she actually did begin to feel something, something like little flutters or bubbles, they were so small and fleeting that they just weren't enough to convince her that anything was real.

And so, even if she was well into her fifth month on the day when her cousin Mary from Nazareth in Galilee came by to visit, Elizabeth was not really in a very good place. She was getting no support from her husband. I mean, I know it wasn't his fault that he wasn't communicative this time. But still, she couldn't help but feel abandoned. And she was filled with doubt and fears. She was having a hard time hoping.

An Unannounced Visit

And here's the other thing you need to understand about her visit from Mary: this was not an age of lightning communication. Mary had not been able to call or text to say that she was coming. The Roman Empire did not have a civilian postal service. The only way for someone like Mary to visit a relative who lived in another town was to drop in unannounced.

So, Elizabeth had absolutely no idea who was about to walk through her door. Nor is there any indication that she had been given any information about what had been going on with Mary who had just received her own message from an angel that she was going to have her own very remarkable child. Apparently, Mary just set out to see her cousin right away when she heard, from the angel (and, no, it had not been posted on Facebook) that Elizabeth was also expecting.

Everything Changes in a Moment

Elizabeth had no clue what was going on when, in the middle of the day, she heard the door to the house open followed by the voice of her well-loved cousin Mary calling out to her. And in that moment, as she heard that familiar voice, many things happened. First, and most important of all, the child moved within her. And this was no flutter. This was no indistinct movement that her doubting mind could just dismiss. No, her son *leapt* within her and immediately banished from her mind all doubt, all fear and all anxiety about whether she was really expecting. The flood of joy and relief was overwhelming.

At the same moment, she was also filled with an assurance that there was something about Mary. It wasn't just that her beloved cousin was there, it was that something was happening in her.

She had only heard one word of greeting. But in that word, Elizabeth had recognized the same joy that she was feeling about the life that was growing within her.

How she knew that her son within her was telling her that there would be something truly extraordinary about Mary's child, is a little bit harder to explain. But, given all of the knowledge, relief and joy that were flooding through her in that moment of time, maybe it's not all that surprising that she was also completely certain that her child had made a revelation to her. And that was when she cried out, **"And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?"**

What Christmas is for

And, for me, that is what Christmas is all about. It is not about shopping or gifts. It is not about eating huge amounts of food. It is about what happens to Elizabeth there. It is about people finding a reason to hope. It is about people being surprised by relief and by joy, especially when those things meet them in the very thing that they are struggling with.

But here is the thing that particularly strikes me about this story of Mary and Elizabeth this year. I suppose you might say that it is God who gifts Elizabeth with all of these wonderful things, but it is surely no coincidence that this happens at the very moment when she is visited by her relative who has come from a distance to visit her.

That seems important, maybe especially this year as many people look forward to gathering over the holidays with their extended families – gathering with people who they may not have seen for a very long time, not even last Christmas, because of this blasted pandemic. Wouldn't you love to see all of our family gatherings filled with such feelings of hope, joy and comfort? I certainly would.

Families are Complicated

And yet I am also keenly aware that it might not be quite so simple as that. I know that there are many for whom family gatherings are anything but edifying. They dread going back to those people because they know all of the old arguments will be dredged up. They know that Mom or Aunt Sally or Uncle Fred just has this way of getting under their skin and making them feel bad about the life choices that they have made, the ones that they're actually normally pretty good with. They know that Cousin George is going to say something racist or that is some wild political conspiracy theory that is going to make everybody cringe, but that nobody's going to call him on it.

I mean, I know that every family is different, and these are just examples of the kinds of things that go on, but I would wager that there are a lot of families out there that have these dynamics that do make people feel more dread than joy at the prospect of family gatherings.

And that's just in an ordinary year. I am afraid, with all of the stress that we've been going through, that the potential for that kind of stuff is really going to be ramped up this year. There are some people who might be on a hair trigger when it comes to interactions with families. A lot of people might feel as if they are walking on eggshells. And that's even before you get into those very fraught discussions about inviting or disinviting people who are unvaccinated or who you cannot

rely on to wear masks. Yes, as I look forward to family gatherings this season, there could just be an emotional minefield out there. And we're all heading towards it.

An Advent Challenge

But here is a challenge for you this Advent. I know that you do not have any control over the stress of this season or the stress that you might be carrying because of all that's been going on. You certainly don't have any control over the stress that other people are feeling. You also have no control over what other people do as a result of the burdens they carry. But I'll tell you what you do have control over. You have control over what you do and how you respond. And you can commit yourself right now to going into any encounters with those important people in your life, your family, during this holiday season with a spirit of grace and kindness.

I'm not accusing anyone of anything but, is it possible that sometimes, when your family gathers, you are the one who reminds people of old arguments and disagreements? Can you sometimes be the person who just has to put down somebody else's accomplishments in order to feel good about your own? Or maybe you're just that person who has a way of getting under somebody else's skin, of being judgmental or even mean. Do you sometimes share opinions that you know no one else wants to hear?

None of us are perfect and I would suggest that each one of us, maybe even in just a small way, contributes to the dysfunction that sometimes happens when families gather. Well, first of all, you could just decide not to do that this year – not to be part of the dysfunction.

Be Like Mary

But even more than that, what if you went into all of those encounters this year with a determination to be what Mary was to Elizabeth, the bearer of a blessing. You could do your best to respond to someone who seems determined to take you down a peg by honouring them and lifting them up because, guess what, they've had a pretty lousy year too. What if you were to respond to what feels like judgment with a little bit of unconditional love?

The more I look at this story of Mary and Elizabeth, what I see is Mary, her heart full of joy and love and promise, walking in on her cousin and being completely unaware of all of the agony and doubt and questions that Elizabeth has been struggling with. And with a word, she transforms the entire situation into an encounter with pure joy. I honestly believe that that can be you this Christmas, if, with God's power and the help of the Holy Spirit, you take on the challenge that Mary offers to us.