

“Women of the Bible: Elizabeth”

Luke 3:2-6 ¹

Elizabeth I was 25 years old when she became Queen of England in 1558. Her 45-year reign, which ended with her death in 1603, saw England’s emergence as a nation of tremendous political power and unparalleled cultural achievement. Because so much of this English renaissance is directly attributable to Elizabeth’s personal character and influence (as well as to the unprecedented length of her reign), it’s appropriate that the last half of the sixteenth century in England—which was also the age of Shakespeare—is identified as the Elizabethan Period.

Nearly four hundred years later, in 1952, Elizabeth II became Queen of England at the age of twenty-six. Now in her 65th year, Queen Elizabeth’s reign is the longest in the history of the British Crown.

The really remarkable thing about these two Queens is that they were both named for me. I am Elizabeth, wife of Zechariah, mother of John the Baptist, and the only Elizabeth in the Bible.²

You may remember that Jewish priests had to be biological descendants of Aaron, our first High Priest, who was the brother of our ancestor Moses, giver of God’s Law. My husband, Zechariah, was descended from the line of Abijah, one of the priests who returned to the Holy Land from our exile in Babylon.³ In order to keep the priesthood as pure as humanly possible, priests generally married women who were also descendants of Aaron, as I myself am.

God blessed Zechariah and me in many, many ways over the years. We were very careful to obey all of the Lord’s commandments and regulations, and we were very glad to be able to serve the Lord in the Temple. Of course I couldn’t go farther into the Temple than the Court of the Women, but I was glad to be able to support Zechariah in his ministry before the Lord. As I prepared Zechariah’s vestments and other things for his work in the Temple, I was grateful to be able to participate in the worship of our great and glorious God! It was a good life.

Our one great sadness was that we had no children. Some of you here this morning know this sadness, too—the sadness of empty arms that ache for little ones. As we gathered both years and grey hairs, Zechariah and I both eventually became far too old for bearing children. Our hearts were grateful to the Lord for His blessings, of course, but still the sadness lingered.

Because all male descendants of Aaron were automatically priests, there were quite a lot of them after more than a thousand years in the Land. There were so many, in fact, that each priest served in the Temple for only two weeks a year, and there were a thousand priests in each two-week group! This meant that a given priest might or might not ever have a chance to serve in what were thought to be the more important duties—never in his whole life!

The very highest honor in the entire service of the Temple was offering the incense after the evening sacrifice, because after this offering the priest came to the railing between the Court of the Priests and the Court of Israel and blessed the people with the ancient blessing God gave to Aaron himself. You’ve probably heard it before:

May the LORD bless you and protect you.

May the LORD smile on you and be gracious to you.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on August 21, 2016.

² “Elizabeth” or “Elisabeth” means “My God is good fortune” or “My God has sworn an oath.”

³ Nehemiah 12:4

May the LORD show you his favor and give you his peace (Numbers 6:24-26).

The Temple duties were assigned by drawing lots, and on one occasion my Zechariah was actually chosen to offer the evening incense! He was sooooo excited!

I wasn't there when what I'm about to tell you took place—no one else was in the Temple except Zechariah—but he has told me what I'm about to tell you more times than I can count! Here's what happened

Zechariah was in the sanctuary, offering the incense that symbolized the prayers of the people, when the angel Gabriel appeared, standing to the right of the incense altar. Zechariah was terrified, and I think I surely would have been, too. But Gabriel told him,

Don't be afraid, Zechariah! For God has heard your prayer, and your wife, Elizabeth, will bear you a son! And you are to name him John. You will have great joy and gladness, and many will rejoice with you at his birth, for he will be great in the eyes of the Lord. He must never touch wine or hard liquor, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even before his birth. And he will persuade many Israelites to turn to the Lord their God. He will be a man with the spirit and power of Elijah, the prophet of old. He will precede the coming of the Lord, preparing the people for his arrival (Luke 1:13-17).

Well, Zechariah found this pretty hard to believe, and because he doubted the Lord, the Lord made him unable to speak until our son was born . . . so he didn't get to bless the people after all. It wasn't too long, though, before I did in fact become pregnant. I could hardly believe it! I was sooooo happy!

There's hardly any way to describe what it's like to have life growing inside your womb. Even those of us who have experienced it can hardly describe it, though we're able to understand one another in these matters without much effort.

How much more wonderful to be nurturing new life in a womb long barren . . . and for this to be a child announced by an angel as one to prepare the way for God's Messiah! I nearly swooned every time I thought of it—which was nearly all the time. I'm sure poor Zechariah thought I had taken leave of my senses!

But I still haven't told you *the most amazing things*. I was in my sixth month, and growing very large, when Gabriel appeared again. In all of recorded history, Gabriel has appeared only three times: to the great prophet Daniel in Babylon, to my Zechariah, and the third time was to my kinswoman, Mary, who lived in Nazareth of Galilee.

Like Zechariah, Mary was making her way through a fairly ordinary day when Gabriel showed up. I know this because Mary told me herself. Gabriel told Mary she was going to have a baby, too, and that her baby was going to BE the long-awaited Messiah!!

Young Mary was at the other end of life from Zechariah and me. We were old, and Mary was what you would call a teenager today. She wasn't even married, and had never been with a man, though she was engaged to be married to Joseph the Carpenter.

With me, God opened a womb that had been sealed for decades; with Mary, God blessed a womb that had never known a man. And, whereas Zechariah and I were both from the line of Aaron the Priest, and whereas the priests prepared the way for people to worship the Lord,

Joseph and Mary were both descendants of David the King, whose line God had promised would go on forever, and from whom Messiah would come.⁴

It took a lot more courage for Mary to agree to Gabriel's instruction than it did for Zechariah and me. Who was going to believe her story about how she got pregnant? I can tell you the answer to that—nobody! Well, Joseph did, but only because an angel appeared to him, too.

Because of the uproar and the scandal, Mary left Nazareth soon after the angel's news and came to stay with us for several months. We lived in the hill country near Jerusalem, about fifty miles from Nazareth—quite a walk for a young lady newly pregnant!

And when Mary came into our house and called my name, my child leaped in my womb and I was filled with God's Holy Spirit. I cried out to Mary, *"You are blessed by God above all other women, and your child is blessed. What an honor this is, that the mother of my Lord should visit me! When you came in and greeted me, my baby jumped for joy the instant I heard your voice! You are blessed, because you believed that the Lord would do what he said."*⁵

How those words came out of my mouth, I can't tell you, because I didn't know Mary was coming, I didn't know she was expecting, and I had heard nothing so far of Gabriel's visit to her. It was, as you say today, "A God Thing"!

Mary stayed with us for three months—until it was time for our baby to be born. We encouraged each other in the challenges of being pregnant, both of us experiencing this for the first time, and both by God's miracle! When our son was eight days old, all our relatives and friends gathered for his circumcision ceremony as decreed in the Law. It was at that ceremony that a boy was numbered among the people of Israel, and at that ceremony that he was given his name.

Everyone wanted to name him Zechariah, after his father, but I said emphatically, *"No! His name is John!"* *"What?"* they exclaimed. *"There is no one in your family by that name."* So they asked the baby's father, communicating to him by making gestures. He motioned for a writing tablet, and to everyone's surprise he wrote, *"His name is John!"* Instantly Zechariah could speak again, and he began praising God.

*Wonder fell upon the whole neighborhood, and the news of what had happened spread throughout the Judean hills. Everyone who heard about it reflected on these events and asked, "I wonder what this child will turn out to be? For the hand of the Lord is surely upon him in a special way."*⁶

Our John was special, all right. I think he must have set the pattern for what you call a "strong-willed child"! He was moody, and he kept to himself a lot. But he loved synagogue school, and studied the Scriptures eagerly—especially the prophets. In his late teens, John went into the desert to live with the Essenes, who were more strict in their Law-keeping than even the Pharisees, if you can imagine!

We didn't hear from John for a long time after that. Then we began to hear news that he was creating quite a stir preaching down by the River Jordan. By this time, Zechariah and I were far too old to travel to the river, but we heard that huge crowds were coming to hear him preach.

⁴ 2 Samuel 7:16

⁵ Luke 1:42-45

⁶ Luke 1:60-66

People said that John sounded like the great and fiery prophet Elijah. Here's part of one of his sermons:

“You brood of snakes! Who warned you to flee God’s coming judgment? Prove by the way you live that you have really turned from your sins and turned to God. Don’t just say, ‘We’re safe—we’re the descendants of Abraham.’ That proves nothing. God can change these stones here into children of Abraham. Even now the ax of God’s judgment is poised, ready to sever your roots. Yes, every tree that does not produce good fruit will be chopped down and thrown into the fire.”⁷

Pretty strong stuff! And as my John preached, many of our people did confess their sins, and John baptized them in the river.

One day while John was baptizing, Jesus, the son born to Mary, came to be baptized. John had been telling people that he was the forerunner of one who was more powerful than he, who would baptize the people not with water, but with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Suddenly the Spirit opened his eyes, and John realized that **Jesus, his close kin, was the Messiah!**

Though John objected, Jesus persuaded John to baptize him. As John baptized Jesus, he saw the Holy Spirit coming down on Jesus in the form of a dove, and he heard God speak from heaven. I wasn't there, but John told me about it before his death . . . but I'm getting ahead of my story.

After his baptism, Jesus began to attract many followers, so many that those who had been following John were upset about it. John told them, *“God in heaven appoints each person’s work. You yourselves know how plainly I told you that I am not the Messiah. I am here to prepare the way for him—that is all.”⁸* My John was a complicated combination of weirdness, boldness, courage, and humility.

John preached about political matters—about public righteousness—as much as anything else, and he publicly denounced King Herod for taking his brother's wife. That boldness landed my boy in prison.

We were seldom able to see John after that. The long days and longer nights in a prison cell caused John to begin to question whether or not Jesus really *was* the Messiah. I guess Jesus wasn't behaving in the ways John had expected Him to do.

At one point, John sent some of his followers to Jesus to ask Him point blank whether or not He really was the Messiah. Jesus sent back a puzzlement of an answer, but it made sense after a while: *“Go back to John and tell him what you have seen and heard—the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life, and the Good News is being preached to the poor. And tell him, ‘God blesses those who are not offended by me.’”⁹*

The months wore on, and finally Herod found some pretext for killing my boy. Zechariah and I had known this was coming. We had tried to prepare ourselves . . . but there is no preparing. We took John's body and laid it to rest in the hill country that he loved . . . and through our tears and heartbreak we wondered what it all meant.

⁷ Luke 3:7-9

⁸ John 3:27-28

⁹ Luke 7:22-23

As time passed, we began to understand who Jesus really is, and little by little our joy returned. We were grateful that our John really had been the one to prepare the way for Messiah!

And I suppose that you, too, will have to decide for yourselves the same thing we and our John had to decide. Is this Jesus, or is He not, the Son of God?