

## CHARACTERS WITH CHARACTER: ELIZABETH

Luke 1:39-45

*A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on the Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost, August 8, 2021, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.*

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*In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."*

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### I.

We come now to the seventh of eight Biblical characters this summer whose lives – because of the moral fibre they exhibit – are worthy of our study and emulation.

We have thus far spent time with:

- Miriam the sister of Moses – who insisted that the voice of God could speak through women as well as men
- The daughters of Zelophehad – who went to tribal leaders with a demand that contrary to law and custom they be allowed to inherit land their father had owned and who secured a reasonable agreement along those lines from those leaders
- Lydia – who supported the church in its earliest days with the abundance of wealth she had accrued from being a dealer in luxurious purple goods
- Lois – whose barely-remarked-upon-life passed faith down to her daughter Eunice and her grandson Timothy, who became an early leader of the church
- Abigail – who stood up to her wealthy, churlish husband and diffused a potentially violent confrontation with the about to become King, David – all the while bringing a measure of justice her husband had refused to acknowledge as legitimate
- And Uriah the Hittite – a military commander who remained loyal to his troops, his commanding officer, and even his corrupt King David while facing his own arranged death with what Hemingway called “grace under pressure.”

We have two remaining *Characters with Character* from the pages of scripture, both from the New Testament.

- Next week: Joseph of Arimathea, who arranges for the body of Christ to receive a decent burial
- Today: Elizabeth, who is a paragon of patience, who listens to God speak through the prenatal movements of her son John the Baptist and who prepares both her son and Mary the mother of Jesus for the roles they play in the birth and life of Jesus Christ.

As we approach Elizabeth, let us pray: *“Augustine said: ‘You were deeper inside me than my deepest depths and higher than my greatest heights.’ God of Elizabeth and our God, let us explore our deepest depths and soar to our greatest heights in, under, around, and through your Word. In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Elizabeth is the sixteenth most popular name for infant girls in America, and yet there is only one Elizabeth in the Bible, and she appears in only in one chapter – the first chapter of Luke.

- Elizabeth is an older cousin of Mary the mother of Jesus.<sup>1</sup>
- Like her husband, Zechariah, she is “righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord.”<sup>2</sup>
- Both she and her husband, who is a priest, are descendants from two separate and long lines of priests, in Elizabeth’s case, all the way back to Aaron, the brother of Moses,<sup>3</sup> from whose wife Elisheba,<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth’s name is drawn.
- Like many Biblical women before her – Sarah,<sup>5</sup> Rachel,<sup>6</sup> and Hannah<sup>7</sup> – Elizabeth has been barren for several decades – a cultural, economic, and religious burden for women in her day. Luke even describes her as “getting on in years” – a somewhat ungraceful description from a writer who is usually eloquent, beautiful, and tactful.
- While carrying out his priestly duties one day, alone in the inner sanctum of the Temple, Zechariah receives an unexpected visit from the angel of the Lord. The angel tells Zechariah that his wife will bear a son, that they will name him John, and that their son will grow up to prepare the people for the coming of the Lord.
- Zechariah protests: “How will I know...for I am an old man and my wife is getting on in years?” Displeased with Zechariah’s response, the angel then renders Zechariah mute “until the day these things occur.”<sup>8</sup>

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Elizabeth becomes pregnant.<sup>9</sup>

One day, six months into Elizabeth’s pregnancy, her younger cousin Mary, who is three months pregnant, comes and visits. When Mary enters the house, the moment that Elizabeth hears Mary’s voice, the child in Elizabeth’s womb leaps. Luke then tells us that Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit, and Elizabeth proclaims to Mary in a loud cry:

*‘Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.*

*And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?*

*For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy.*

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 1:7 describes Elizabeth as “getting on in years,” in contrast to Mary, who in 1:27 and 1:34 is described as a virgin, which can also be translated “young woman.” Mary is clearly much younger than Elizabeth, no matter how we choose to translate the word.

<sup>2</sup> Luke 1:6.

<sup>3</sup> Luke 1:5.

<sup>4</sup> Exodus 6:23.

<sup>5</sup> Genesis 16:1.

<sup>6</sup> Genesis 30:1.

<sup>7</sup> I Samuel 1:5.

<sup>8</sup> Luke 1:8-23.

<sup>9</sup> Luke 1:24-25.

*And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.’...*

Mary then breaks into song praising God for what God will do through her son, a song that comes down to us as the Magnificat. Mary remains with Elizabeth three months and then returns to her home.

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When Elizabeth gives birth, the neighbors and relatives rejoice. On the eighth day, when Zechariah and Elizabeth bring their son to a circumcision and naming ceremony, the gathered friends and relatives assume they will name the child Zechariah after his father, but Elizabeth stands firm – twice.

“His name is John,” she says.

The still mute Zechariah gives his support to Elizabeth’s announcement by writing on a pad “His name is John.” Luke tells us that Zechariah’s mouth is then opened and his tongue freed.<sup>10</sup> Like Mary, Zechariah then sings of the role and destiny of his son, who will prepare the way and baptize the Savior of the world.<sup>11</sup>

Elizabeth and Zechariah then exit the stage, never to re-appear in scripture; and Luke closes out the story: “The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.”<sup>12</sup> Their son becomes known to history as John the Baptist.<sup>13</sup>

## II.

What are the character traits we see in Elizabeth?

(a)

First, we see *patience*.

- Elizabeth waits several decades to become pregnant.
- Then she waits thirty years following the birth of her son for him to step forward into the destiny which she knows to be his.
- Half her life she waits for her child.
- Then half her life she waits for him to fulfill his destiny.

Yet as she waits, based on the way Luke describes her, she remains “righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord.” Though she exits the stage of scripture after the circumcision and naming, it is likely she remains faithful and committed as she awaits the day when her son steps forth from the wilderness to announce and baptize the Messiah. Elizabeth is patient.

In a quote I shared from this pulpit several years ago, Renita Weems says: “We live between the last time God showed up and the next time God is going to show up.” Like Elizabeth, we wait, with patience.

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<sup>10</sup> Luke 1: 57-66.

<sup>11</sup> Luke 1:67-79.

<sup>12</sup> Luke 1:80.

<sup>13</sup> Luke 3:1-22.

(b)

Second, Elizabeth has the wisdom *to listen to her body*.

If you have any remembrance of Elizabeth prior to this sermon, it is likely from Luke's *startling* report: "When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child *leapt* in her womb."

Though my wife and I are on something of a kick – she more than me – of watching "Call the Midwife," pregnancy is something rather far from my experience, since I am both male and an adoptive father. The closest I have come to being around childbirth is the joy of visiting some of you in birthing centers in those days when mothers stayed for longer than a day we were not shut down from COVID.

Even though I have never been around pregnancy or childbirth, I have, over the years, learned to listen to my body.

- I know when my body is telling me I need to listen to what someone is saying to me, as uncomfortable as what they are saying makes me, as much as I don't want to hear it.
- I know when my body is telling me that something is going on in the family, in the room, in the church, that doesn't seem right and might need my attentiveness if not my direct attention.
- I know when my body is telling me that my mind is engaged in wishful thinking, that I am doing all I can to avoid admitting that what is going on is evil and destructive and calls for action on my part and the part of others.
- I know when my body is telling me that the path down which I have chosen to walk is not the right path, that that I need to reverse course at once.
- I know when my body is telling me I need to speak up, as much as I don't want to ruffle feathers, hurt feelings, alienate friends, lose popularity.
- I know when my body is telling me I need to keep ploughing the field, even though the results are not all that encouraging at the moment.
- I know when my body is telling me I need to slow down.
- I know when my body is telling me I need to rest.
- I know when my body is telling me I need to have it checked out by someone trained in diagnostic arts rather than in my own arts of surmising, speculating, dismissing potential seriousness or being filled with worry over unverified possibilities.
- I know when my body is telling me that there is too much of it and that I need therefore to curtail what I put into it.
- I know when my body is telling me that I am "underdoing it" in the category of exercise and movement.
- I know when my body is telling me to put my hand in front of my mouth, to hold my lips tightly together, to press against the back of my throat the cruel and angry words that are trying to burst out like inmates rattling the bars of the jail cell.
- I know when my body is telling me it is time to get up and go to work no matter how discouraged or desolate or depressed I am.
- I know when my body is telling me I need to stop and pay attention to the person with whom I live.

When my body is talking to me, it is one of the most reliable and prescient voices I hear. It rarely speaks obliquely. It rarely minces words. It is almost always right. And though occasionally it wants to take me down paths I know I should not go, it nearly always gives me the chance to say no.

Concerning the leaping Elizabeth felt in her womb, Luke says: “Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.” When we listen to our bodies, more often than not, we are – like Elizabeth – listening to the Holy Spirit, to the voice of God calling our name, seeking our attention on something of importance.

(c)

And finally, part of Elizabeth’s character is that *she knew when to exit the stage*. She blesses Mary, turns the musical over to her operettic voice, re-enters the play to give birth, stands her ground with those around her who want to name the child something other than what the Lord has spoken, then exits the scene of scripture as Zechariah sings a solo and the play moves on to focus on the child to whom she has given birth as he grows, becomes strong in spirit, and steps onto the stage himself as John the Baptist, preparing the way for Christ, who then takes the play to new heights.

In the brief chapter in which we meet Elizabeth, she:

- Receives the blessing of conception
- Recognizes a similar blessing within Mary
- Nurtures that blessing within Mary for three months
- Experiences the culmination of her blessing in the birth of her son
- Then exits the stage that he may assume his destiny and role and prepare the way for Mary’s child.

Part of Elizabeth’s character is knowing *when* and *how* to exit so that others may flourish.

### III.

In a few precious moments, we will celebrate of the Sacrament of Holy Communion, in a way that “must needs” still be truncated, but in a way that does not diminish it as “the Word Made Visible.” It is the Word of God that we can see, touch, taste, smell, and if we listen to the pouring of wine and breaking of bread, hear. This Word Made Visible is always, in our Presbyterian tradition, accompanied by the Spoken Word, the sermon or homily.

I hope that as you partake of the Word Made Visible you will also ingest the Spoken Word, that together these two expressions of God’s singular Word will help you to have greater patience, to listen to the Spirit speak through your body, and to know when and how to step aside so others may assume their roles and duties.

Amen.

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