



**WESTLAKE HILLS**  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

## "Elizabeth"

*A Sermon Series on the Women of Advent*

*Luke 1:5-19, 23-25, 35-45*

*Rev. Dr. Peter Barnes*

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### **Introduction.**

Bill Edwards was a pastor in this church back the 1980s, and he and his wife Anne were much-loved by this congregation. The people of this church walked with them through a very difficult period of their lives, and it was one of the times when our church was at its best in caring for this couple. Bill and Anne struggled with infertility, and they had trouble getting pregnant.

They decided to try infertility drugs, and by means of this medical technology Anne became pregnant, and with triplets no less! However, after only 4 ½ months she went into labor, and two of the babies were stillborn. The other one lived only a short while. Three years later, they tried again, and this time she became pregnant with triplets once again. However, when the babies were delivered, one was stillborn and another, a little boy named Davis, lived for only a year and he never was able to leave the hospital.

Mercifully, the third child, Will, who is now 26, survived, and today he's working in Washington, DC, after graduating from Texas A&M. Bill and Anne later adopted a girl named Maggie, and surprisingly Anne became pregnant once again, this time by natural means, and Trig was born in the late 1980s.

The pain and sadness the Edwards family experienced twice over with their triplets was heartbreaking. It was a sadness our whole congregation felt. Their story is one of thousands of couples who struggle with infertility. Research indicates that 10-13 percent of all women during their childbearing years have trouble getting pregnant, and when you take into account the problem of some men to produce enough sperm, it is estimated that as many as 16 percent of all couples of childbearing age struggle with infertility.<sup>1</sup>

Two thousand years ago, a Jewish priest named Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth could relate to the story of Bill and Anne. They knew the same disappointment, the same frustration, the same sadness of praying and trying to get pregnant, only to have their hopes dashed month after month after month. The years passed by, they got older, and still no baby. It is a heartbreaking tale that is repeated far too often.

### **I. The Struggle of Elizabeth.**

We don't know exactly what the problem was that caused Elizabeth's infertility, and nothing in the text indicates the reason. The passage does say she and Zechariah were righteous people, and they were diligent in observing the Old Testament Jewish law. So it's clear from the text childlessness wasn't the result of anything they had done wrong. Rather, it was an opportunity for God to do a miracle and bless the world.

People who battle infertility experience a whole range of emotions which can be so devastating. This is true for men as well as women. I'm told that many couples who battle infertility feel a sense of shame and failure. They think something is wrong with them, and they feel so inadequate and rejected. Elizabeth surely did. In the ancient world where there weren't any opportunities for women outside the home, her infertility was all the more painful. There was nothing worse for a woman in antiquity than the inability to have a child.

Have you ever been a place like that emotionally? A time when you felt rejection, shame, and failure? Maybe it was when you lost a job, or your spouse told you they wanted a divorce. Perhaps a child left home, and you haven't talked to them in years. Maybe you made some very bad choices, and you've had to live the consequences of things you did in the past. Perhaps you're struggling with infertility yourself right now. Feelings of rejection, shame and failure can cripple the soul.

In the midst of Elizabeth's struggle God showed up, and He provided a miracle which would bless not only this older couple but the whole world as well.

## **II. The Miracle of Elizabeth.**

The passage tells us that when Zechariah was serving as a priest in the temple in Jerusalem, he was chosen by lot to burn incense at the altar in the Holy of Holies. This was a rare privilege, and a priest would only get to do this once or twice in their lifetime. While he was performing the sacred task, an angel appeared to Zechariah, and he experienced a vision.

The angel Gabriel assured the priest that his prayers had been heard. He and his wife Elizabeth would bear a son, and he was to give the boy the name John. This barren couple which had hoped for a child all these years was now going to be given a wonderful gift, and the boy would be great in the sight of God. He would be filled with the Holy Spirit, and he would lead many of the people of Israel back to the Lord. In fact, he would be one like the prophet Elijah who would prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah.

Zechariah couldn't believe his ears, and he balked at the news, so much so that he stood there in disbelief and said, "*How can I be sure of this? I am an old man, and my wife is well along in years, too*" (1:18). The consequence of his lack of faith was that he became mute and was unable to speak for the duration of the pregnancy until John was born. Only then was his capacity for speech restored, and then they couldn't shut him up. Filled with the Holy Spirit, he praised God and prophesied regarding the goodness of the Lord and the promise of this son who would be a prophet of God.

When hope had gone, when they had given up on their dream, God provided a wonderful blessing that was beyond Zechariah's capacity to believe. Our God is all-powerful, and He can do even the impossible in order to accomplish His purposes in this world.

Have you given up on a dream? Do you feel like the world has passed you by and there's no hope? Don't give up, friend. God is in the business of doing miracles, and He shows up when we least expect Him. Hang in there, and keep praying.

## **III. The Ministry of Elizabeth.**

The result of God's miracle was a dynamic ministry for Elizabeth, and this ministry was expressed in a number of ways. **First**, Elizabeth became **an example** for her relative Mary,

and the angel Gabriel used Elizabeth as a model of someone who not only believed God could do the impossible but also experienced this amazing truth herself. The angel pointed to Elizabeth as someone who took God at His word and one who even though she was old and past childbearing years God blessed with a bay in a miraculous way. Elizabeth's example gave courage to Mary to take God at His word, too, and she responded in faith, *"I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said"* (Lk. 1:38).

Elizabeth also had a ministry of a **prophetic blessing** in at least two ways. The first was when the baby in her womb, John the Baptist, leaped for joy when they heard Mary's greeting. Elizabeth understood this to be John's first prophetic act in recognizing the mother of the Messiah. Then Elizabeth joined her son in this prophetic blessing, and she said, *"Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!"* (Lk. 1:45).

The **final** aspect of Elizabeth's ministry was the work she and Zechariah did in **raising their son**. Nothing is said in Scripture about what exactly this older couple did to help shape their child's character, but whatever they did had a powerful impact on the young prophet's life. When he grew to be a man, John the Baptist had a remarkable sense of self and a strong understanding of his identity in God. He enjoyed incredible popularity, yet it didn't turn his head. Then he saw his popularity wane and people begin to follow Jesus instead, and his response was simply, *"He must increase, and I must decrease."* It takes a person with a strong sense of self to be a rock star one year and then take a back seat the next.

Last week, my wife Lorie spoke to the Mom to Mom group of young mothers here at our church, and she talked about our task as parents in raising our kids. She used an illustration of an apple and an onion, and she contrasted the difference between children. She said an apple has a core; the tough fibrous seedy center remains intact even if the outside is bruised or chipped away. However, an onion has no core when peeled away. Nothing remains, and it's most likely to make you cry. My heart aches for onion kids because they are so vulnerable. However, apple kids might be torn by life's experiences, but they are able to get back on track.

John the Baptist was an apple kid, and Elizabeth and Zechariah had a profound ministry in his life which helped change the world. What ministry is God calling you to fulfill in the coming days? What's His purpose for your life? Ask Him to reveal it to you and have the courage to step out in faith and do it.

#### **IV. The Sacrifice of Elizabeth.**

For Zachariah and Elizabeth the good news of the birth of their child didn't mean theirs would be a happily-ever-after kind of life. No. Later, this elderly couple would see their son arrested by King Herod, and he languished in prison for a long time. Then John was executed because of his prophetic ministry of speaking truth to power and the impulsive request of a young girl. Elizabeth sacrificed a great deal in her life, and she felt the pain of loss and disappointment.

As I've experienced the pain of loss in my own life, my faith has become all the more important to me. It provides assurance and the presence of God in the midst the highs and lows of life. When I receive answers to prayer and see God work miracles, I know He is with

me. But when the answer is “no” and I experience loss, I know God is still with me then, too. We are never alone, and God is with us every step of the way. In the power of God’s Holy Spirit we can draw strength and courage to put one foot in front of the other as we make my way toward Christmas.

Our faith as Christians isn’t a security blanket designed to protect us from accidents, suffering, or even death itself. Our Lord came into the world not to make life easy, but to make us strong to face it and to produce in us a character that can meet life’s toughest demands.

Elizabeth experienced the exhilaration and joy of answered prayer and a remarkable miracle. She saw her son become a rock star. Crowds of people flocked to him at the Jordan River to hear him preach and receive a baptism of repentance. But then the crowds started to follow someone else. And then he was arrested by Herod and thrown into prison. Then he was beheaded because of the whim of a seductive step-daughter of the king. What began in such a promising way ended in such great tragedy. That’s the way life is sometimes.

Let us never lose sight of the fact that God was with Elizabeth in the miracle and the answered prayer, and He was with her in the midst of her tragedy and loss, too. There was never a time when God was not present in Elizabeth’s life. He sustained her during all those years of infertility, all those years of raising John, as well as those years of his imprisonment and death.

## **Conclusion.**

A few months after Mary visited Elizabeth in the hill country of Judea, she gave birth to her own son, and Mary gave Him the name Jesus because He would one day save His people from their sins. Matthew writes in his gospel, “*All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet Isaiah: ‘The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel’ (which means ‘God with us’)*” (Mt. 1:22).

Many years ago, I received a Christmas card that had the images of many of the great figures of history down through the ages. There was Buddha, Caesar, Mohammed, Napoleon, Hitler, and many others. The caption read, "History is filled with men who would be God..." Then you opened the card which had a depiction of the baby Jesus in a manger, and the card read, "...but only one God who would be man." The Hebrew name Immanuel literally means "God with us."

The promise of Immanuel is the greatest promise of Christmas, for it says that God will be with us no matter what. And the promise of Immanuel is a promise that continues through the ages, for Jesus said, "*Lo, I am with you, even to the end of the age....Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you*" (Mt. 28:20; Heb. 13:5). In the good times and the bad, in joy and in sorrow, God is with us; He is Immanuel.

My friend Jerry Sittser is a professor of theology at Whitworth University. He writes about a time when he and his wife Lynda decided to try and start a family. But no children came for many years. He says that those years of waiting led to a crisis in their faith. Lynda ached to be a mother; it was a pain of longing in her soul that would not go away.

They ran the gauntlet of infertility procedures, and they tried everything, including surgery. People volunteered all kinds of suggestions, most of them more akin to folk

medicine than genuine science. A few of their comments were helpful; most were silly; some were even hurtful. Eventually, they began adoption proceedings. But they still prayed, every day, though for a time Lynda, in utter despair, stopped praying because she felt that God was simply too distant and uncaring.

Eventually, at age 34, Lynda conceived and gave birth to a daughter, who was followed in quick succession by three more children! After their youngest was born, they wrote in their annual Christmas letter, “If you’ve been praying that God would give us children, STOP! Your prayers have been answered!”

However, the good news of the birth of their four children didn’t mean they would live happily ever after. A few short years later, Jerry would lose Lynda, his mother, and his youngest daughter, Diana Jane, in a tragic car accident. He writes about this awful loss in his book *A Grace Disguised*. Jerry raised his three remaining children as a single dad, along with the help of wonderful friends and a great church family. And then, 19 years after the accident, and after launching his kids, Jerry got married again last year to a wonderful woman, and I’ve never seen him happier.

Jerry would tell you that God was with him in the years of infertility. God was with him when he lost his wife, mother, and daughter. God was with him as he raised his kids as a single father. And God was with him in the gift of his new bride. Through sunshine and shadow, the Lord is with us, and He will be with you this Christmas.

Jerry writes: “I remind myself that suffering is not unique to us. It is the destiny of humanity. If this world were the only one there is, then suffering has the final say and all of us are a sorry lot. But generations of faithful Christians have gone before and will come after, and they have believed or will believe what I believe in the depths of my soul. Jesus is at the center of it all. He defeated sin and death through his crucifixion and resurrection. Then light gradually dawns once again in my heart, and hope returns. I find reason and courage to keep going and to continue believing.”<sup>ii</sup>

These are words Elizabeth could have written, too. She believed the Lord was with her in all circumstances, and He will be with you as well.

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<sup>i</sup> “Fertility, Family Planning, and Women’s Health: New Data from the 1995 National Survey of Family Growth,” *Vital and Health Statistics* 23, no 19 (Washington, DC: national Center for health Statistics, 1998), 68. And “Infertility,” [www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/infertility.html](http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/infertility.html) (accessed May 29, 2008). Cited by Dennis Hollinger in *The Meaning of Sex*, p. 201.

<sup>ii</sup> Jerry Sittser, *A Grace Disguised*, p. 152.