

“Christmas Carols I: Elizabeth’s Song”  
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I Advent

Luke 1:5-25

Not long ago, I was in a restaurant in Delaware, and a couple came up to me and greeted me like a long lost friend. They asked how I was, where I was serving now, how my family is. They were warm and friendly, and genuinely cared about me - and I had no clue who they were! But (not wishing to look uncaring or foolish, I might add) I was warm and friendly and caring back with them. “How are you, where are you living, where are you working?” And then, as they began to answer those questions, it became abundantly clear that I had married them years and years ago at Aldersgate Church. Then, there was a glimmer of recognition, but I still to this day, don’t remember their names.

Well, I may not remember their names, but I can tell you what I do remember about them. Their path to the altar started the same way as every other couple over whose wedding I have been privileged to officiate. Their path started with pre-marital counseling. I meet with most couples at least three times before I will marry them.

And during the course of that counseling, we talk about a lot of things together - how they met, when did they know that he/she was “the one,” how do they get along with each other’s families? We also get into what might seem like mundane subjects, but actually are the source of much upheaval in some marriages - like expectations of who will do what in their home - like clean and shop and cook and do the lawn; or even more potentially explosive - who will manage the money, and how will they budget their money? Will they have a joint account or keep their money separate? Finally, usually we get around to their plans about a family - do they want to have children? How will they raise their children in the faith? Will both of them work outside of the home or will one of them stay home and work there? Basically, the conversations are all about their expectations as they prepare to join their lives together for the rest of their lives.

Today’s Gospel lesson is about a married couple - Elizabeth and Zechariah. Now, I don’t know what went on in the days when they were married. I’m not sure they had pre-marital counseling, but I’m fairly certain people talked to them about marriage beforehand, and I’m fairly certain they both had expectations about their

marriage before they said their “I do’s.”

And I can tell you, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that one of their expectations was that they would have children - if possible, lots of them. That’s what was expected of everyone in that day and time. And particularly because Elizabeth was from a priestly family (she was the daughter of a priest) and Zechariah himself was a priest - even more were they expected to have children. Because having children, in that day and age, showed that you were faithful, and that God was smiling on your faithfulness and blessing you with a family of your own.

So, Elizabeth and Zechariah went into their marriage with all the hopes and dreams of every engaged couple. They expected to marry, settle down in a home, he would go to work in the Temple, she would stay at home, and soon enough, they would get pregnant. Trouble was, it didn’t work out that way. Month after month, disappointment. Then month after month turned into year after year.

A pastor friend of mine says that the saddest thing he has ever encountered in ministry, bar none, is couples who want to have a baby but cannot conceive. They have love to give and want to give it, and month after month, their hearts break a little.

That was what Elizabeth and Zechariah went through. One pastor poignantly wrote that, “Elizabeth had once lived with a great hope of having a child, particularly as a young woman; hope that was gnawed away each month as she knew once again that she was not pregnant, hope that gave way to anxiety and then panic as she grew older, and finally was shattered when she had to face the reality that she would never have a child. Every time her husband came home from a circumcision, every time there was a family gathering and all their relatives brought the children and grandchildren, every time she - always an aunt but never a mother - cared for a neighbor’s child, the grief must have been there, the product not of a devastating single event like a death but of a slow process of attrition of hope over many years. Very often (she concludes) this is how our hope and faith are undermined, it just creeps up on us.” (On-line, “Advent Hope - Elizabeth and Zechariah’s story,” Rev. Rosalind Brown)

Thanks be to God, that doesn’t appear to have been the case with Elizabeth and Zechariah. Though their hearts were broken, they kept the faith. Though they grew older and older and no child came, they kept on going, and lived life with that reality. Elizabeth still kept the home, and Zechariah still did his priestly duties, day in and day out.

Then, one day, Zechariah was given a special honor. He was given the honor of offering the incense offering inside the Temple. (You may remember that the

Temple was divided into different courts, starting on the way outside for lay people, then another court closer to the altar for members of the faith, then another court even closer to the altar for priests, and then the final court - behind the curtain called the Holy of Holies - for the high priests.) Well, this offering Zechariah was going to place was at the high altar - behind the Holy of Holies. This honor was given to a priest only once in his lifetime, and the day had arrived for Zechariah.

Well, that was not the only honor that would fall upon him that day - actually the real honor came when an angel visited him. What the angel said was absolutely incredible - stunning, in fact! The angel Gabriel told him that he and Elizabeth would become parents - the parents of a boy they were to name John. And this boy would be special - he would point the way, lay out the path, for the One to come.

And that is exactly what did happen. Elizabeth, at an age well past traditional child-bearing years, gave birth to their son, and they named him John, whom we have come to know as John the Baptist, and he did exactly what the angel Gabriel said he would do - pointed the way, prepared the way for Jesus.

It was a miracle, of that, there is no doubt. But that's not all I want us to consider together this morning. What I want us to consider is how Elizabeth and Zechariah, two faithful people, handled their expectations not being fulfilled for so long. Because I think their example is very helpful for us in dealing with disappointments of our own.

The first thing that is fairly obvious from their stories is this - that sometimes things don't work out as we plan. And I don't know about you, but I'm a planner - and I suspect most of you are too. I think most people have some plans that they'll graduate from high school, then either go on to college, or get trained for a career, or get a job. Most people too probably plan to be in a long-term relationship that may or may not include marriage, and may or may not include children. And most people's plans include vacations and investments and eventually retirement. Don't most of us have at least loosely laid-out plans? We know what we want, and when we want it, and pretty much how we can go about getting it.

And it's all okay, until things don't work out as we planned. Maybe that special person never comes along. Maybe that college you want to attend sends you a "thanks but no thanks letter." Maybe you can barely make the mortgage payment, let alone take a vacation. Maybe you lost your investment money in the recession or because of a shady money manager. Maybe you had a job one morning and by the end of that day, not only your job, but the whole company was gone. And maybe you wanted to be a parent, but month after month and year after year have gone by, and that has not happened.

Sometimes, things don't work out as we planned, as we expected. Then we have a choice to make. We can throw up our hands, say "to heck with it all," and turn our backs on God; we can be really angry at Him; or we can, like Elizabeth and Zechariah, still trust in His love for us, still worship Him, still have faith that He is at work in our lives.

Elizabeth and Zechariah kept the faith anyway - even though they had been bitterly disappointed. Perhaps it was because that knew that God loved them, and that God was still at work in their lives. Or perhaps it was that they knew they couldn't handle life without Him - no matter how that life had turned out.

I read this week a moving account of the day that General Paul Kelly, the Marine Corps Commandant, went to visit some of the Marines wounded when their barracks were bombed in Beirut a number of years ago. They were in the military hospital in Frankfurt, Germany. Gen. Kelly came up to the bedside of Corporal Jeffrey Lee Nashton, who had been severely wounded. He had so many tubes running in and out of his body that a witness said he looked more like a machine than a man; yet he survived.

As Gen. Kelly neared him, Nashton, struggling to move and wracked with pain, motioned for some paper and a pen. He wrote a brief note and passed it over to the General. On the slip of paper were two words - "Semper Fi" - the motto of the Marines, which means "forever faithful." (On-line, Dobson and Bauer, *Children at Risk*)

Forever faithful - whether it is a brave young Marine, or two elderly Israelites - forever faithful - says it all. When life doesn't live up to your expectations, when your plans go awry, still - forever faithful - trusting that God is there in the midst of even that.

I think a second thing that kept Elizabeth and Zechariah going was just that - their trust that, indeed, God was there, God was present in their lives, God was not silent. So if God didn't grant them children, God would give them something else. And God did - God gave them a strong marriage, God gave them work which was meaningful to each of them, God gave them a home, God gave them a faith community - God gave them so much. Surely they were grateful for that, and remembering all that they had, not just what they didn't have, led them to lead full and faithful lives.

All of us have probably known persons who let the sadness and bitterness over what they didn't have overwhelm them and affect their whole lives. It's tough to be around people like that - because they're angry, they feel cheated, and they're

all too willing to let others know it.

And yet there are others, who even having known disappointment and sadness, choose to be grateful for what they do have. It's all in the way you look at it, and how you feel about God.

Once there was a young man, terminally ill, who went into the medical clinic for his treatment. Once there, he encountered a new employee who thoughtlessly and casually commented, "Oh, you're the one who they think won't live out the year." The young man started to leave, and as he did, he stopped by the Director's office and wept. "That man took away my hope," he said. "I guess he did," the Director replied, "maybe it's time to find a new one." The one who told their story said, "Is there a hope when hope is taken away? Is there hope when the situation is hopeless? That question leads us to Christian hope, for in the Bible, hope in no longer a passion for the possible. It becomes a passion for the promise." (On-line, *Our Daily Bread*, 12/19/96).

You see, I think that's what Elizabeth and Zechariah had - a passion for the promise. To them, having a baby no longer seemed possible, so they had faith in God's promises for their lives, whatever they might be.

That's a choice we can make, when life disappointments us, when our plans don't go as we expected. To have faith that God is still there, and have faith in His promises for us, whatever they might be.

Which leads me to my final point. God's promises for us might be the impossible - you never know. God can do anything God wants to! In the case of Elizabeth and Zechariah, He gave them the gift of a child way past the time when it should have been possible.

Who knows how God will act in your life and mine? What we think may be impossible, may be just what God has in mind for us! So never rule anything out. God will do what God will do, in His time, and in His way.

And, in His time, and in His way, God gave Elizabeth and Zechariah a son, John. And, by the way, while they waited for the birth of that child, Elizabeth poured love and support on another person who had a big change of plans in her life - and her name was Mary.

When she was just pregnant, Mary traveled to see Elizabeth, her cousin and together they lifted each other up, and together they praised God who had blessed them both beyond their wildest expectations!

Friends, wherever you are today, whether your dreams have come true, or

your hopes have been dashed, Elizabeth and Zechariah's story - their song - has so much to say to each one of us. No matter what - keep the faith. No matter what - trust that God is still God, God is still present, and God will do what God will do in His own time! And finally, be ready for anything! For God is not only the God of the possible, but sometimes the God of the impossible too!

As we continue on our Advent journey - we'll see that again and again and again! Thanks be to God! Amen.