

Sunday 30th November 2025 - Advent: Elizabeth & Zechariah

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 30 November 2025

Preacher: Laura Edwards

- [0 : 00] So this morning we are entering Advent, which means arrival, because it's a time we remember and celebrate the arrival of Jesus over 2,000 years ago.
- ! And the arrival date is traditionally celebrated on the 25th of December. So until then, we can wait and we can prepare.
- These things are typically done during pregnancy, which is fitting because a lot of the Christmas story revolves around not one, but two pregnancies, particularly in Luke's Gospel.
- So this morning, as we begin our Advent thinking, I would like us to think about the first pregnancy and what we can learn about God and each other through the characters.
- The story is that of Zechariah and Elizabeth, parents to be of John the Baptist. Though this morning I will be particularly focusing on Elizabeth.
- [1 : 04] We only catch glimpses of Elizabeth as she weaves in and out of Luke's focus. Yet we are hard-pressed to find a more compelling vision of faithfulness and humble obedience than in this woman.
- So let's revisit the story. In the time of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah.
- His wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly.
- But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old. Once, when Zechariah's division was on duty, and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense.
- And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshippers were praying outside. Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense.
- [2 : 35] When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. But the angel said to him, Do not be afraid, Zechariah.
- Your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord.
- He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God.
- Zechariah asked the angel, How can I be sure of this? I am an old man, and my wife is well along in years. The angel said to him, I am Gabriel.

I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time.

[3 : 51] Zechariah followed by a man, The angel said to you, I do not believe his report. The angel said to you, I do not believe his report. The angel said to you, do not believe his report. The angel said to you, do not believe his report. The angel said to you, do not believe his report. Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple.

When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.

When his time of service was completed, he returned home. After this, his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion.

The Lord has done this for me, she said. In these days, he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people. So Luke starts his gospel by telling us the context of the story which is important.

In the time of Herod, king of Judea. Judea was under Herod's rule. The Romans appointed him king of Judea. But not like a real king as the Jews didn't really accept him.

[5 : 09] He was known for flexing his powers, building ornate things, always trying to impress the Jewish people and prove he had authority. He divorced his first wife.

Later, murders his second wife and his whole family. He's a dangerous, unpredictable, constantly shedding blood.

The people are hungry for a true king. A true ruler that is of their lineage and of their people. So there was plenty of political unrest.

And the general feeling was that there had not been a definitive prophecy from God heard in over 400 years. It is in this context that Luke introduces his characters, a married couple, Zechariah and Elizabeth.

As Luke tells us, they were both very old. The classic King James translation of the Bible describes them as well stricken in years.

[6 : 13] So I'll let you decide what very old or well stricken in years might be. I'm not daft enough to define a number. But fair enough to say they've most likely got their free bus passes.

But more importantly though, Luke tells us that both of them were upright in the sight of God. Observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly.

And that's important because sadly in their time and culture, being unable to have children, as was their case, was often seen as some kind of punishment or even a curse from God.

But here Luke dispels that cruel notion by saying, no, these are good, godly people. It's just for whatever reason, they've never been able to have children.

Indeed, Luke, who we know as a doctor, would have been all too familiar with the grief that infertility and miscarriage can bring. So here he seems right to keep keen to nip any dodgy theology in the bud that blames people for being unable to have children.

[7 : 26] We then told that on one of Zechariah's priestly shifts that the angel Gabriel suddenly appeared to him, telling him that his wife Elizabeth, that they're going to have a miracle baby.

A baby there to call John, who would grow up to do great things as John the Baptist. And how does Zechariah respond, given that an actual angel is in front of him, giving him a direct message?

He asks, well, how can I be sure of this? Luke leaves him slightly diminished in the eyes of the reader with his fear and disbelief.

Because of this, the angel renders him silent or mute until the day the baby is born. And many talks and sermons about this story tend to focus on Zechariah becoming mute, because it is fascinating and we can all relate to having doubt.

However, I would like to turn to Elizabeth to look at her character and perspective. So what do we know about Elizabeth?

[8 : 34] Well, there are many images of Elizabeth available, many pictured with Mary, mostly painted in previous centuries, which quite rightly acknowledge her for the important role she played in the coming of Jesus.

Elizabeth was a descendant of Aaron and was likely to have been chosen to be Zechariah's wife, as priests could only marry a pious woman.

She had lived the life and learned lessons as a priest's daughter, raised in worship, prayers, custom, reverence and teachings under Jewish law.

She would have been exposed to the feasts, the offerings, sacrifices and daily demands of Jewish life. Along with her husband, Elizabeth lived in the hill country, about seven miles south of Jerusalem, and they would have been frequent visitors to the great temple of Jerusalem.

Above all, though, I think there are two aspects of Elizabeth's character that set her apart. Firstly, she was devoted to God.

[9 : 47] It's interesting, Elizabeth's name means God is my oath, and that is how she lived her life. As I mentioned earlier, Elizabeth was living in an age where the common belief was that there had not been a definitive prophecy from God heard in over 400 years.

Yet, she remained wholeheartedly devoted to God, and along with her husband, they're described blameless by Luke. But they're not presented as an outdated form of piety that will be replaced by a new spirituality of those who follow the Messiah Jesus, but as living examples of what it means to be a faithful follower of God.

Despite this devoted life, Elizabeth was considered barren. A pretty harsh label to be given, but it was the way women who were unable to have children were described in those times.

What's more, being childless was considered a sign in those days of God's disfavour. From all that we know of that culture and see of Elizabeth, it would have been Elizabeth's dream and desire to be a mother to a son.

It is likely that she and Zechariah had prayed for a son for most of their married life. And yet, in the midst of this personal heartache, she would have undoubtedly been subject to scorn and ridicule.

[11 : 19] So what would have that felt like for Elizabeth? So in this book, *Raised from Obscurity*, it looks at the characteristics of women in Luke's Gospel.

And it has this to say about women at the time. It is beyond doubt that in an ancient Jewish life, women's labour construction was centred in the domestic sphere, where to produce and nurture children was the major avenue to security and prestige.

Conversely, infertility was a mark of public disgrace and viewed as a sign of divine disfavour. One biblical scholar, Samuel Terrian, says that women lived a socially reclusive life with a status slightly above that of a Greco-Roman slave.

And another scholar, Phyllis Tribble, states that in the eyes of many, women were impure, subordinate, and inferior human creatures. I think it's pretty hard to hear some of that, isn't it?

But it is important to recognise that in certain respects, aspects towards pregnancy and children sadly remain much the same today as they have in the past. Whatever choices you make or circumstances you are in, whether you have children, choose not to, can't have them, have one child, have lots of children, you go back to work or you choose to stay at home, it always seems that someone will have an opinion you haven't got it right.

[13 : 00] So we've still got a way to go with this, I think. And for those involved, it can be difficult. So for Elizabeth, it must have been hard.

Both the grief of not having a child and society's attitude alongside that. But she didn't give up on God. She didn't waver at seemingly unanswered prayers.

Along with Zechariah, she remained obedient and faithful. We can also assume she was a loving and supportive wife. Zechariah could have easily divorced her as she did not conceive, but they remained married and faithful to God.

However, as we saw in the video of the Bible passage, one day the angel Gabriel appears to Zechariah to tell him their prayers have been answered. But Zechariah is pretty sceptical though.

Since I am an old man and my wife is well on in years, he says. And the angel tells him because of his doubts, he will be unable to speak again until the child is born.

[14 : 09] We do not know how Zechariah manages to tell Elizabeth the news in the pregnancy. I'll leave you to imagine the sign language used. But when she hears, in contrast to Zechariah, she has unwavering faith that this message is from God.

And we're told Elizabeth remains in seclusion for five months. But this wasn't common practice. So perhaps she was unwell or feared miscarriage.

Whatever the reason, she must have praised God for the miracle that had happened in their lives. Not only were they awaiting the birth of their son, but they were waiting for the forerunner of the long-awaited Messiah to be born.

So Elizabeth was devoted to God. But alongside this characteristic, she was also a great encourager.

To see this, let's move to the next part of the story. Mary is also visited by the angel Gabriel with the news that she too would have a miraculous baby.

[15 : 16] Elizabeth, thought to be her cousin, welcomes her into her home. Welcoming an unmarried, pregnant young woman would have been a thing of shame.

Many would have just turned her away, especially at a priest's household. But Elizabeth rose above the gossip and she trusted and listened to God.

And Luke tells us, When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice, she exclaimed, Blessed are you among women and blessed is the child that you will bear.

But why am I so favoured that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy.

Blessed is she who believed that the Lord would fulfil his promises to her. Elizabeth didn't sneak Mary round the back of the house hoping no one would notice.

[16 : 22] We are told she was full of joy and exclaimed loudly. Though Elizabeth is only featured in this chapter of Luke, she's the first person to confess Jesus in the flesh.

Why am I so favoured that the mother of my Lord should come to me? What beautiful words and how encouraging to Mary who would have been in the early weeks of her pregnancy and I would imagine would still be shocked and scared.

While God has silenced her husband for a season, Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit and has a prophetic voice. And as I said, she uses it to encourage Mary by confessing her unborn baby as my Lord.

She's the first person in Luke's gospel to be filled with the Holy Spirit and to prophesy. And this encouragement and prophecy led to Mary's song of praise, the Magnificat.

And interestingly, Mary's song did not come after her encounter with the angel Gabriel, but after Elizabeth had declared Jesus as Lord.

[17 : 38] And Matt's going to talk more about Mary next week. Mary stayed with Elizabeth for three months and then shortly afterwards, Elizabeth gives birth to her son, John.

Luke tells us that all the community rejoiced with her. And we finally hear from Elizabeth in the temple when she declares her son's name as John before Zechariah can even speak again.

So, what are we to make of all of this? Well, it's no accident, I think, that the Christmas story starts with these pregnancies, these conceptions.

First, of John, who would grow up to be the one who pointed the way to Jesus. But secondly, of Jesus himself, the one who would grow up to be the saviour of the world.

God is in the business of using the smallest and humblest of beginnings to do great things. And we can take both great comfort and encouragement from that.

[18 : 45] But thinking of Elizabeth and her devotion to God in particular, as we enter Advent, I invite you to reflect on, is there anything you are waiting on God for?

Maybe a prayer you might have been praying for a long time. Where in our lives do we need God to act now? How might we follow Elizabeth's lead and learn to trust God in the waiting?

Well, one of the ways we can do that is to follow Elizabeth's lead in being people of encouragement. Indeed, while thinking about Elizabeth's story, it reminded me of what an encouraging church you are and have been to me.

In my first six months, many of you have encouraged me through all of my nerves in my first times here. And I'm very grateful for that. And I wonder if there's been particular times when you have been encouraged by someone.

What was it about them? Or what did they do or say that made it encouraging and memorable? Maybe you could inhabit or do some of those things and be an encourager to others.

[20 : 04] Help others recognise and connect with God within or outside of church. Do we speak encouragement to others?

For example, when we notice what God is doing in their lives, are we even looking for it? And I know many of us are busy doing lots of roles within our church community.

But I wonder if you've ever considered what role you could play supporting and encouraging someone younger or earlier on in their faith journey. It could make all the difference.

As a faithful woman of God who played a key role in events surrounding Jesus' birth, Elizabeth is worthy of attention. God is still using each one of us today as participants and spokespeople in the continuing outworking of his salvation and continues to bring hope and joy to those who remain faithful to him.

And so, as we enter Advent, may God continue to meet with us all in our waiting, in our times of frustration and our joys, that we may encounter him, discover more of his love, his purposes, his plans for our lives and the wider world.

[21 : 30] Let us look for opportunities to share his love, to encourage others on the journey. And whether we respond in silence like Zechariah, in joy like Elizabeth, in song like Mary or somewhere in the middle, may we be open to receiving him, his blessing of hope, peace, love and joy this Advent, this Christmas time and beyond.

Amen.