



First United Church of Oak Park

More Than Dreams
Luke 1:5-23
The Rev. John Edgerton
December 1, 2019

Elizabeth and Zechariah were both priests, through and through. Zechariah had devoted his life to serving as a priest, as part of the order of Abijah. He had even served in the Temple of Jerusalem itself—no small honor. Elizabeth, too, was of the priestly caste, from a family with impeccable pedigree. She was a descendent of Aaron, Moses' right hand man. Aaron was the creator, founder, and progenitor of the priesthood in Israel.

Their family life revolved around the priesthood: caring for the temple, maintaining the religious life of the people, learning and practicing the complex and arcane rituals of religious and cultural life. They were devoted to it. The gospel says they were righteous and upstanding in every religious discipline, the perfect family of priests. But there was one thing. One thing that society expected of priests that Elizabeth and Zechariah could not do. Priests were supposed to have children. Being a priest wasn't a job at all. It was a caste, a tribe, a family business, nobody was hired as a priest, they were born into it. It was a strong societal expectation that priests have big families—that's where the priests came from.

But Zechariah and Elizabeth, they had no children.

They had been married long years, and waited and hoped for a child. In the temple they helped maintain, they prayed for a child. They day-dreamed and star gazed about the child they wanted. Zechariah could take the child out on clear nights to read the stars to tell the times and seasons, so that where others saw fish or goats this child could see a map of years and months and ages yet to come. Elizabeth could give the child lessons in reading Hebrew and teach the child the laws and the prophets and the writings, so that where others saw musty incomprehensible scrolls this child could see the story of their people's salvation. But year after year it didn't happen for them, and they started to give up hope.

Until one day, an otherwise ordinary day, when Zechariah was fulfilling his duties in the temple; lighting incense while people gathered to worship to pray. An angel appeared to him and spoke to him: the angel Gabriel who stands in the very presence of God. And the angel was there bearing the most welcome news. They were to have a child, a son. The family line would continue, the work would continue. Zechariah, no doubt, would rush home to tell Elizabeth. This was literally an answer to their prayers, a fulfillment of their dreams, a way to meet society's expectations, but...

The angel wasn't done yet. They would have a child, a son, but he was not going to be a priest. The child Elizabeth and Zechariah were to raise, he would not be named Zechariah, after his father. But John: John, who was to be called the Baptizer, he would not live the life of a priest, but something completely different. He would not care for the temple, but would live out in the wilderness. The child would not drink the sanctified wine—would never drink wine at all—but would instead drink deep of the holy spirit. The child would not care for the traditions and festivals of the faithful; the child would herald a new era for the faith, would announce the coming of someone both ancient of days and green as new grass. John the baptizer, he was to go ahead—just ahead—of one whose birth the angels would sing.

Elizabeth and Zechariah wanted a child in order that the child might continue the tradition of the priests. They wanted to raise a child to be able to do with his life what they had done with theirs. This was a dream that was dear and precious to them. But they didn't get their dreams. They got their callings instead.

God was calling them to a path that was different and wilder than society's expectation, wilder even than their own dreams. And yet, even though raising a prophet was not what Elizabeth and Zechariah had dreamed, they were exactly who God needed at that moment. Exactly as they were with all their disappointments and all their hopes, all their strengths and all their failings—God needed them exactly as they were.

John the baptizer, he would spend his life tangling with religious authorities, what better preparation could there be than to be raised by people who were righteous and upstanding in every religious discipline? Every childhood argument, every adolescent conflict, every adult conversation over dinner, they were forming and preparing a prophet who would be able to best any religious authority in the land. After all, he'd been raised by the best, impeccable pedigree; Elizabeth was descended from Aaron.

John the baptizer; he would do his work by welcoming people with a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. His ministry was one of extending grace, offering release, giving people a new way forward. What better preparation could he have than to be raised by people who themselves had left behind an old way of life and taken up a new purpose? This baptism, he learned it from his parents. Every time John baptized in the Jordan, pronouncing a blessing of forgiveness over a person seeking new life, watching the water close over their heads with the flow of living water passing from what had been into what God might yet have life be. The baptism John offered, new life for all who wanted it, he had learned that from his parents. They lived it every day.

Elizabeth and Zechariah were exactly who God needed, exactly as they were with all their disappointments and all their hopes, all their strengths and all their failings. God needed them exactly as they were.

They had dreamed of raising a son to be a priest. They didn't get their dream. They got their callings instead. And in being who they were, exactly who they were, they became a part of God's work in the world.

Calling: it's what this story is about. Calling, mine, calling is not the same as my dreams for what my own life might be. And calling is certainly not the same as what society expects me to do with my life. Calling is deeper than that. Touches a deeper place in me, in you. Calling is who God made you to be and how you, just as you are, how you can be part of what God is doing in the world.

Make no mistake: God is at work in the world. And sometimes, that work is being done through people. People like Elizabeth. People like Zechariah. People like me. People like you.

Perhaps your life has not turned out exactly how you would have drawn it up in a picture book. Perhaps a marriage did not end with happily ever after. Perhaps when you came out of the closet to your family you found them faithless and love-poor at the most crucial moment of all.

I give you, then, an early Christmas present. I give you Elizabeth and Zechariah. Perhaps you think calling is something you missed when you were younger. Elizabeth and Zechariah were not young up-and-comers when God called them. People called them over the hill, and God called them to something that demanded every scrap of their experience and wisdom. Perhaps you think calling is something for people with world-beating dreams and stars in their eyes, people without mortgages and car payments and college funds to fill

and a job that leaves them tired every day. Elizabeth and Zechariah, they didn't stop being priests; they kept their day jobs, but God put that to use in a wilder and holier way than they would have dared dream up on their own. Calling is who God made you to be and how you, just as you are, how you can be part of what God is doing in the world.

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