

Elisabeth

My name is Elisabeth. You probably know me as the mother of John the Baptist. When my parents arranged for me to be married to Zachariah, I was pleased. He was a righteous man and a priest. I was also of a priestly family.

It seemed that a completely predictable life was set out before us. I certainly expected that children would come along, as happened with all my friends, but that was not to be. As the years slowly passed, we were estranged from both family and friends. My parents wanted grandchildren. My friends' conversations were filled with stories of their own children, and I had nothing to add. Then my friends' tone seemed to change as they apparently began to think that something was wrong with me.

It must be different for men. Zechariah's focus was on his work and the affairs of the Temple. But he *had* been thinking about our situation. He prayed for a child. He studied the scrolls. Childlessness was sometimes a curse but not always and, in some cases, an unexpected pregnancy was the sign of special favor.

Regardless, our lives began to take on a comfortable routine. Zechariah progressed in his responsibilities and duties. I became a model homemaker and mentor to the young women.

Then, our lives were turned upside down. I was not at the Temple when it happened and the first news that came to me was garbled and disturbing. Zechariah had been visited by an angel and struck dumb. When he returned home, at first he was not only silent but withdrawn and troubled. Then he began to communicate with me by writing. I had been to Synagogue school (even as a girl, because we were a priestly family) so I could read.

Zachariah had seen an angel as he offered incense before the LORD. The angel said, "Your prayer is heard, and your wife Elisabeth will bear you a son." I asked why he was struck dumb. He didn't want to tell me but finally admitted that he questioned the angel's authority. I guess he had spent too much time with Sadducees, who do not believe in angels, and the angel, who said his name was Gabriel, took away his voice as a sign, until all things were fulfilled.

The pregnancy progressed and I began to show and feel movement. I stayed hidden at home although I would have enjoyed going out just to see the looks of wonder from my friends as they realized that I was pregnant. Then my young cousin, Mary, showed up at my house and greeted me. Immediately the baby in my womb leaped. And a flood of beautiful words came into my heart and into my mouth. They were not my words. I had not heard yet that she had been visited by Gabriel. The words were from the LORD! "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?"

Mary stayed for three months. She was considered disgraced by the ignorant who did not believe that her pregnancy was from the LORD. I had been disgraced for having no children. Is life not hard enough without heaping shame on others? Then the time came

for my baby to be born and 8 days later, his circumcision and naming. Zachariah was still not speaking. They were going to name the boy after him and would not believe me that he was to be John. Zachariah was not about to challenge the words of the angel a second time and wrote on a tablet, "His name is John!" Then his tongue was loosened and he proclaimed a prophetic message that included, "And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the LORD to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sin."

You may think that the story now jumps to the fulfillment of those momentous words, but there was the infancy and childhood of John to account for. Zachariah and I were old, and raising a child is more than labor and delivery. Although that is painful and stressful, it is then over and done. Caring for an infant involves months of sleepless drudgery and endless repetitive tasks. And raising a child involves dealing with the developmental stages that every child goes through. We are called the "Children of Israel" and I begin to see that phrase more realistically, not just as a vague image of a sleeping baby or obedient child. Children are selfish and willful as well as lacking in wisdom, as Solomon wrote.

Was John a difficult child? Aside from the challenges of elderly parenthood, we faced the task of raising a prophet. As an adult, he would speak truth to power and as a child the power he felt most was us. His childish understanding of truth at that time was also self-centered. Zachariah's sermons and my teaching of the Scriptures were put to the ultimate test by the necessity of shaping our young prophet's development towards his mission of becoming a holy vessel for the service of the LORD.

When John grew old enough to begin that ministry, we were too old to follow him closely but were attentive to all the reports of his disciples. Think about it! Our son had disciples! We heard of the things he was saying and cheered his call for repentance. But we worried that naming the sins of that evil usurper, Herod, put John's life in danger. Yet we entered the sunset of our lives with the assurance that we had raised the prophet who prepared the way so that, "The rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace."

Luke 1