



Roanoke, Virginia

December 8, 2024

## *“Elizabeth”*

Sing in Exultation Sermon Series Part II

*John 11:17-44*

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### Introduction:

Just before we come to our passage, the angel Gabriel visits Mary. Mary is young and technically unwed, betrothed to Joseph, a carpenter. Gabriel tells young Mary that she is to bear a child destined for great things. Through her, God’s promises to David are about to be fulfilled. And she learns that her relative, believed to be her cousin, Elizabeth, is pregnant despite being old and barren. Mary consents to God’s call, and places her will within God’s plan.

Mary’s next, immediate move is to leave Nazareth for the hill country to visit Elizabeth.

Luke 1:39-45. <sup>39</sup>In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, <sup>40</sup>where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. <sup>41</sup>When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit <sup>42</sup>and exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. <sup>43</sup>And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? <sup>44</sup>For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. <sup>45</sup>And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”



I am drawn to stories of women in scripture. A large part of that is most likely because I am a woman. But I think a bit of that interest comes from the fact that glimpses of women in scripture are rare. You may have heard me share this fact before, but there are 93 women who speak in the Bible, 49 of whom are named. These women speak a total of 14,056 words collectively — roughly 1.1 percent of the total words in all of scripture.<sup>1</sup>

Here in Luke, we have two women who are named, and a passage that is almost all women's dialogue. And it's at the start of Jesus' story. Elizabeth and Mary are cousins. They are two women of lowly stature, at opposite ends of the childbearing age. In most any other circumstance, history would never find it worthwhile to remember their story, let alone their conversation, their song.

In Elizabeth and Mary's culture, a woman's primary purpose in life was to bear children. Elizabeth, an older woman, had spent her married life infertile. She had endured her adulthood being treated as a failure. Some of us may remember Hannah in 1 Samuel. She was thought to be barren, and the cruelty she experienced from other women was almost more than she could endure. A woman who didn't bear children, people assumed, must be being punished by God for something she did or something that is wrong with her.

For years, Elizabeth waited and watched families around her grow and grow. At last, in her old age, a miracle. She could finally be seen as an honorable woman, pregnant with her husband's son.

In our passage, you can see she hasn't forgotten where she comes from. She greets her young cousin with honor, overturning social expectation. Mary is an unmarried pregnant woman. She might expect judgment, shame, even ostracism from other women, even her older relative. But Elizabeth remembers her own experience, and opens her arms and her home to a young girl her neighbors would expect her to reject. Instead of shaming Mary, she welcomes, blesses, and celebrates her.

*“Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. <sup>43</sup>And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?”*

The pregnancy that might have brought Mary shame brings joy and honor instead. Elizabeth sees beyond the surface to the reality of God's love at work, even among those whom society would have her reject and exclude.

Debie Thomas describes this scene as nothing less than the first Christian worship service in history. The call-and-response of Mary's greeting and Elizabeth's leaping womb, Elizabeth's



prophetic blessing and Mary's glorious song (that George will tackle in next week's sermon), is the first liturgy enacted in a gathered celebration of Jesus Christ. She writes that "when Mary, the first evangelist, and Elizabeth the first convert stand at this Advent threshold, what happens between them is Good News. It is the Good News proclaimed, honored, savored, and adored, nine months before the Son of God makes his way through a birth canal."<sup>ii</sup>

The setting for this momentous first worship is domestic and earthy. It's not in some temple far away, but at the threshold of Elizabeth and Zechariah's humble door. The mundane and intimate become a place for the divine.

I know it is fine to contemplate the great and glorious gifts God brings in Jesus' birth – salvation, a miraculous new kingdom, glory and majesty. But we make a mistake if we separate our worship of God from the world in which God dwells. The story of Mary and Elizabeth reminds us to return again to the center of the mystery. It is God's alignment with the embodied, the material, the ordinary, the messy. It is God looking with favor on what so often we try to look past: real bodies, real lives. The story of Mary and Elizabeth's worship teaches us that God's preferred realm is the realm of the forgotten, the fragile, and the uncertain.

Luke tells us that when the angel Gabriel leaves Mary, she runs "with haste" to her cousin's house. The pregnant teenager travels, likely by foot, toward the hills many miles away, not slowing down until she reaches Elizabeth's door. Luke doesn't tell us why, but we can imagine why a girl in her circumstances might choose to leave her hometown for awhile.

When she arrives, did Elizabeth expect her? Was her house hostess-ready? Most likely, no. The impromptu worship we see on Elizabeth's doorstep doesn't take place in some fancy or sanitized setting. It is not removed from the pain, fear, and loss of this world. Theirs is worship in the midst of it all. Theirs is worship which brings healing, hope, and trust. As they fall into an embrace, the two women exchange stories. They confirm each other's testimonies with loving acceptance and genuine praise and wonder follow. They don't have to scrub their worship clean of reality and "real life." Their worship emerges on a doorstep. Neither-here-nor-there, in the liminal space between yearning and fulfillment.

Their worship, too, sits right alongside their hardest questions. Will Joseph stick around? Will Zechariah speak again? Will Mary's parents disown her? Will the older Elizabeth live long enough to see her son grow up? Will both women survive the dangers of childbirth? Will these mysterious babies really change the world?



Standing together on the threshold, Mary and Elizabeth find a way to sing God's praises right from the heart of their unspoken questions. Elizabeth worships by pronouncing a blessing on Mary's strong faith, bridging the gap between the uncertainty of the present moment with God's promised future. In Elizabeth's mind, Mary's "favored" status has nothing to do with her wealth, position or comfort. Her blessing lies completely in her willingness to trust God.

We all need someone like Elizabeth in our lives. We all need someone who can encourage us and help us see the way before us when we feel uncertain. We all need someone who can remind us of God's presence and promise in our lives, help guide us and hold us.

It's one of the many reasons we bring our daughter to church week after week. I want her to have someone like this woman of faith to look up to, people she can turn to when she needs support and help. In her book *Traveling Mercies*, Anne Lamott spends a whole chapter explaining why she goes to church and why she made her son Sam go as a child. She writes:

*Sam is the only kid he knows who goes to church – who is made to go to church.... He rarely wants to go. This is not exactly true: the truth is he never wants to go.... you might wonder why I make this strapping, exuberant boy come with me most weeks, and if you were to ask, this is what I would say.*

*I make him because I can. I outweigh him by nearly seventy-five pounds.*

*But that is only part of it. The main reason is that I want to give him what I found in the world, which is to say a path and a little light to see by.... When I was at the end of my rope, the people at St. Andrew tied a knot in it for me and helped me hold on. The church became my home in the old meaning of home – that it's where, when you show up, they have to let you in. They let me in. They even said, 'You come back now.'*

*Sam was welcomed and prayed for at St. Andrew seven months before he was born. When I announced during worship that I was pregnant, people cheered. ... And then almost immediately they set about providing for us. They brought clothes, they brought me casseroles to keep in the freezer, they brought me assurance that this baby was going to be part of the family.'<sup>iii</sup>*

I like to think that Elizabeth offered something like that "old meaning of home" for Mary. And I like to think she assured her cousin that the child she carried would be part of the family, too. She let her cousin know that her child-to-be was welcome, and that his mother was not only accepted, but blessed. Little did Elizabeth know, not only would that baby boy be welcome, he'd usher in a whole new family, a whole new kingdom, a whole new way to live.

"Wherever two or more are gathered..." (Matthew 18:20). Something powerful and transformative happens in that threshold worship at Elizabeth's door. Something powerful and



transformative happens when we share the fullness of ourselves in worship. We see the face of God; we feel the mysterious presence of God. All around us, it may seem as though the world is falling apart, but when we gather and worship with all the truth and messiness of our lives, something happens. Time bends, allowing us, if even for a few brief moments, to see the world as God sees it, bruised and beautiful, raw and redeemed.<sup>iv</sup>

The days are growing shorter; the nights are growing longer. It is almost time. It is almost time to encounter the divine in the ordinariness of a stable, in the earthiness of a laboring woman and a baby's first cries. Let us prepare your hearts. May we linger in this in between, this sacred threshold, and lean into the promise God brings, as Elizabeth and Mary did. Have faith, it is almost time.

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<sup>i</sup> Antonia Blumberg, "This Is How Many Words Are Spoken By Women In The Bible," HuffPost (Feb 4, 2015), [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/bible-women-words\\_n\\_6608282](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/bible-women-words_n_6608282).

<sup>ii</sup> Debie Thomas, "At the Threshold," Journey With Jesus (Dec 12, 2024), <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/3260-at-the-threshold>.

<sup>iii</sup> Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies* (New York: Anchor Books, 1999), 99-101.

<sup>iv</sup> *Ibid.*

