

Elizabeth: A Wise, Mature Woman – Luke 1:24-25; 39-45

The Three Wise Women of Christmas – Week 1

Scripture Reading: Luke 1:5-7

Introduction

When we think about a Christmas trio of wise individuals we tend to think of the wise men who searched for Jesus

We've all heard of those guys and they are a part of most Nativity scenes we see their image on Christmas cards and ornaments and we even sing songs about them

They're pretty popular guys considering that we really don't know much about them because Scripture doesn't tell us all that much except that they were wise and they came from the east

We don't even know their names even though tradition has given them the names Gaspar, Melchior, and Balthasar

Which is kind of funny when you consider that the Bible doesn't even tell us there were three of them...

We only assume there were three of them because they came bearing the three gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh

And the fact that the Bible tells us the wise men visited and worshiped Jesus in a house and not the stable indicates they most likely didn't arrive on the night of Jesus' birth but showed up months or even years later

That has led to someone mischievously opining:

Three wise women would have asked directions sooner, arrived on time, helped deliver the baby, cleaned the stable, made a casserole, and brought practical gifts...

While that's a bit of a humorous exaggeration, the biblical record of Christ's advent does tell us a great deal about three very wise women and their indispensable contribution to it

Of these three, author Christin Ditchfield writes:

[They were] three very different women, in different ages and stages of life. One single, one married, one widowed. One just beginning to experience life, one coping with the challenges and changes of mid-life, and one coming close to the end of life.

Too often we read over these familiar words of Scripture, barely noticing these women. Yet each one in her own way set a powerful example for us to follow today.

I agree that we would do well to know about these women so we are going to take the first three Sundays of December leading up to Christmas to take a look at the **Three Wise Women of Christmas**: Elizabeth, Mary, and Anna

I decided to take them in the order that Luke mentions them in his gospel so we are beginning this morning by looking at

Elizabeth: A Wise, Mature Woman

We find her story in Luke 1 and her name is first mentioned in verse 5 as we just saw in our Scripture reading

The name "Elizabeth" in Hebrew means "My God is my oath" or "Promise of God" and that's a good thing to keep in mind as we proceed with our study

As we begin I want to first give you a bit of background so that we can fully appreciate the circumstances of Elizabeth's life that serve to accentuate the wisdom she demonstrated

I. The Background

Elizabeth and her two female peers we'll consider in this series lived during a very gloomy period in the history of Israel

The old adage, "It's always darkest before the dawn" would sum up the condition of the nation of Israel at this time

Remember, Israel was raised up by God to be his holy nation for the rest of the world

But, because of their continued dishonor of God and their rejection of God's law, the nation that was meant to lead all other nations was instead dominated by the iron boot of Rome

And Rome was just the latest in a long line of wicked nations that God had caused to rule over Israel

For the past six hundred years the proud Jewish people had endured humiliation and servitude under the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, the Egyptians, the Syrians, and now the Romans

And for the past 400 years since he spoke through the prophet Malachi God has been silent

It was truly a disheartened and depressed age for the people of Israel

To make matters even worse, the king that sat upon the throne of Israel was a profane and vile man named Herod

Known historically as Herod the Great, he wasn't even Jewish but was a self-proclaimed proselyte to Judaism

Herod was actually descended from Esau and, as such, he had no rightful claim to the throne of Israel and this was the first time the throne of Judah was filled by a person who was not of Jewish lineage

Having been given the kingship of several provinces in Palestine by the Roman Senate, Herod served as a Roman puppet who still could have used his position to serve as a spiritual leader to his people

But he chose to be a tyrant who bathed his reign in blood – including the blood of many in his own family, introduced Roman temples into the land, and built idols of the Roman gods

As a result, under Herod's leadership Israel once again became a land filled with idolatry and immorality and spiritual life became a dry formality of empty ceremony and ritual that was devoid of vitality for most of the Jewish people

That's the context that existed as Luke opens his gospel by introducing us to a faithful couple comprised of an elderly priest named Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth

As it turns out, not only was Zechariah a descendant of Aaron – which we know because he was a priest – but he had also married a descendant of Aaron

We want to be sure we don't miss the significance of that – this was a married couple of purebred pedigree

Not only was their genealogy sound but, as we see in verse 6 [**Luke 1:6**], *they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord*

This doesn't mean that Zechariah and Elizabeth were perfectly sinless but that they lived according to the light they had as they were committed to walking according to all of God's law

It's only natural to figure that there was a great deal of rejoicing when the young couple tied the knot as people fully expected that God would surely bless such a marriage

But the couple, now advanced in years, had remained childless throughout their long marriage

And as much of a tragedy and heavy burden infertility can be today, back then it was considered to signify judgment from God

When Kathy and I got married we suffered through all the wisecracks and joking questions about when we were going to make the big announcement that we were starting our family

Somewhere along the line the joking inquiries stopped and the questions took on a more serious tone accompanied by concerned looks and then all questions stopped after a time as people began to assume that perhaps we were unable to have children

What most people didn't know – and what we saw no reason to reveal – is that Kathy and I had made the decision to hold off on starting a family and Jessica wasn't born until we had been married for about 4-1/2 years

So I can kind of imagine just a little bit what Zechariah and Elizabeth must have gone through

Anyway, in verse 8, Luke picks up the account after fast-forwarding past several decades to tell of Zechariah fulfilling his priestly duties in Jerusalem

In fact, Zechariah has been blessed by being chosen by the drawing of lots to burn incense on the altar of the Holy Place and offering the prayer and benediction that went along with it

And as Zechariah is praying an angel appears – which would be shocking enough but particularly so since God had not spoken to his people for 400 years

And the angel told Zechariah, “Your prayer has been heard”

It’s rather doubtful that Zechariah had just been praying for a child – he and Elizabeth had almost certainly prayed that prayer for years but in their minds even the physical possibility of that happening had evaporated long ago

And Zechariah was supposed to be praying for the nation at this time anyway so it’s far more likely that he was praying for Messiah to come

And God’s answer that came through this angel was that both prayers had been heard – which means they had been heard effectively and would be answered

God’s angel told Zechariah not only that he and Elizabeth were going to have a son but that he would be named John and that he would fulfill the 400-year old prophecy of **Malachi 4:5-6** and the 800-year old prophecy of **Isaiah 40:1-5**

Zechariah’s son was going to have the extremely great privilege of preparing the way for the coming Messiah

It’s not surprising that this news overwhelmed Zechariah and that it was really too much for him to immediately accept And as happens to all of us at such times, his faith gave way to logic and reason and he asks in verse 18 [**Luke 1:18**] “How can this possibly happen? I mean, my wife and I are way too old.”

Well, angels aren’t used to having God’s word questioned so the angel rebukes Zechariah’s lack of faith and declares that Zechariah would be mute until the things he had just revealed were accomplished

Being suddenly stricken mute presented Zechariah with an immediate challenge as he was supposed to exit the Holy Place and give a benediction to the crowd who had been lying prostrate praying along with him

It’s kind of humorous to picture what took place because verse 21 [**Luke 1:21**] says the people were beginning to wonder what was taking Zechariah so long and I picture him pacing around the Holy Place sweating as he tried to figure out what on earth he was going to do

Ultimately, he survived that experience and finished his two weeks of service in Jerusalem in spite of being mute and returned home

Luke 1:24-25 tells us –

After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she kept herself hidden, saying, “Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people.”

Elizabeth had no way of knowing but about six months after John’s conception, Gabriel also paid a visit to her cousin, Mary and gave her the glorious news that she, a young virgin, had been chosen by God to give birth to the Messiah

We’ll talk more about that next week but Gabriel had told Mary about Elizabeth hinting she should go visit her cousin

We see that visit recorded in verses 39-45 [**Luke 1:39-45**] –

In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.”

That’s the background and the situation so let me give you three ways that Elizabeth demonstrated that she was a wise woman

II. Three Ways Elizabeth Demonstrated Wisdom

First, Elizabeth was wise in the way she responded to the inequities of life

A. She was wise in how she responded to the inequities of life

Country singer/songwriter Sturgill Simpson sings – Life Ain't Fair and the World is Mean – and he's not wrong

From a purely human perspective, Elizabeth got a raw deal – she experienced terrible unfairness

Despite of her godly lifestyle, despite her years of faithful obedience to God's laws, despite her prayers and overall devotion to God – decades passed and Elizabeth and Zechariah remained childless

As I said earlier, infertility was seen in those days as God's judgment

The Jewish people viewed children as a gift from God and a "heritage from the Lord" [Psalm 127:3]

And of course they are!

Children are a precious blessing from God and the Jews were correct in recognizing this but they went too far as they came to believe that if someone didn't have children, it was because God was punitively withholding his blessing

Infertility was seen as God's way of penalizing a couple for some reason and the wife usually bore the brunt of the blame as she was typically suspected of harboring some secret sin

For decades, Elizabeth was childless in a culture where a woman's worth was measured by the number of children she produced and she alludes to this mindset in verse 25 [Luke 1:25] where she exclaimed –

"Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people."

Again, from a human, and particularly from a Jewish, perspective Elizabeth had every reason to be angry and even bitter toward God

She certainly wouldn't be the first woman – not even the first woman in Scripture – to react that way

People want to challenge God's goodness when life isn't fair but the truth is – **God is always good but life's not fair**

One of Satan's most powerful weapons is the idea that God isn't fair

He loves to trumpet the inequities and struggles of life we all face as *proof* that our God is not good, that he's not loving, that he really doesn't care about us – at least not as much as he loves the other guy who seems to be prospering more

That was Satan's tactic in the Garden of Eden as he convinced Adam and Eve that God was withholding good things from them – and he still uses the exact same tactic against us today

And when we swallow the hook of his lie, we suffer the consequences as he turns us away from or even, against, God

I'm confident Satan tried this tactic on Elizabeth year after year because that's his mode of operation

But Elizabeth wisely refused to fall for it and instead of turning from God she ran to him

She chose to believe God's Word and she trusted God's heart as she embraced the assurance of his goodness

I believe Elizabeth clung tightly to the promise God delivered through his prophet Jeremiah in **Jeremiah 29:11-13** –

For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart.

I don't know how you cope with the disappointments and inequities of life but, if you're like me you struggle

I have to honestly admit that I have to be very careful to not fall into disappointment and begin to complain and grumble when things don't go the way I think they should – are you like that?

If I'm not careful, I can forget that God knows far more than I do and that he has a glorious plan for my life that is better than anything I can imagine or design

I need to remind myself that God is all wise, all-powerful, and all-knowing and his timing is never other than perfect so I can patiently trust him

God waited decades to answer Elizabeth's prayers for a child – but I'd be willing to bet everything I have that all those decades of unfulfilled prayer were swept away when she held little John and looked into his eyes

Elizabeth's account serves to underscore that no matter how long it might take, God *will* accomplish his stated purposes

God is always at work and he never hurries or dawdles

God knows exactly what to do and when to do it in order to accomplish his perfect plan and we don't – we need to remember that when we are tempted to be disappointed or even bitter over the inequalities of life

Next we'll see that Elizabeth was also wise in how she responded to the implausibilities of life

B. She was wise in how she responded to the implausibilities of life

Look at verse 24 [**Luke 1:24**] where we read that Elizabeth kept herself hidden for five months after conceiving John

We aren't told directly why Elizabeth hid herself away for five months and that has led to all manner of speculation

Some are convinced that she hid herself to hide her pregnancy because it would be scandalous for a woman of her advanced age to be pregnant

But I think that's unlikely since she would have been in hiding when her pregnancy would have been the least noticeable and we see further along in the narrative that when John was born her neighbors were quite supportive and rejoiced along with her

I think it's far more likely Elizabeth secluded herself to spend time with God and to contemplate all that God was doing

Contrary to Zechariah's incredulity that led him to question what the angel had said, I believe we see Elizabeth respond in faith and take time to understand what God was doing and to prepare to raise the child that was to be instrumental in carrying out God's plan

We have to figure that Elizabeth found out what God was going to do from her husband

And I can't help but think of another elderly woman who heard the news the implausible news that, after she had prayed for years and eventually determined it was never going to happen, heard she was going to have a child

We read in Genesis 18 how the Lord visited Abraham and Sarah and told them that Sarah would have a child within the year and Sarah laughed – she was a lot like Zechariah in that logic overtook her faith and she disbelieved

In a very real sense, both Sarah and Zechariah had come to doubt God's ability to answer their prayers because they thought the passage of time had made the possibility so implausible that it couldn't happen

How often do we pray without real expectation that God will answer?

It's sad that we often give up on receiving an answer because God often waits until things seem impossible to act

But God answers prayer according to his own timing and his delays are not the same thing as his denials

Neither Zechariah nor Elizabeth could have known what God had planned for them and that – what seemed to be a cruel denial of a godly couple's prayers – was really God working out his perfect timing in bringing salvation to the world

But we have no indication that Elizabeth doubted the news as she expressed thanks to God and hid herself away to take time to commune with God

Any time we allow human reason to overshadow our active trust in God, the result is sinful doubt

We need to lift our prayers to God secure in the knowledge that he loves us and that he can and will act for our ultimate good in his own timing and be prepared to receive even when what we are praying for seems implausible

Elizabeth demonstrated wisdom by being prepared to accept the implausible

She was also wise in how she responded to the interruptions of life

C. She was wise in how she responded to the interruptions of life

Life was a lot different in Elizabeth's day and visitors most often just showed up without prior notice

Elizabeth was in seclusion when the angel Gabriel visited Mary to give her the news that God had selected her to bear the Messiah and she didn't expect Mary to just show up on her doorstep after travelling some 4 days

But when Mary interrupted her seclusion she welcomed her and then she welcomed the prompting of the Holy Spirit as she blessed Mary in **Luke 1:42-45** – look at those verses with me

"...she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord."

It occurs to me that Elizabeth could have easily been jealous of her little cousin and suddenly dissatisfied with her role of playing a sort of "second fiddle" to Mary

But she was just the opposite

In her words recorded here we see Elizabeth become the first person in the New Testament to offer a prophetic word and the first person to refer to Jesus as Lord

We also see little pre-born John the Baptist give his first, silent prophecy in his life's role as the herald of the coming Messiah as he leapt for joy in his mother's womb

Elizabeth could have easily seen Mary's arrival as a nuisance since she already had so much going on but she saw it as a divine appointment

And I imagine Elizabeth was something of a spiritual mother and encourager to Mary during the next three months as Mary stayed with her

I would also imagine that Mary came to Elizabeth feeling very alone and, if she had any doubts or fears, that Elizabeth's wise counsel was quite a comfort in her time of need

Wise people are interruptible people who are willing to be inconvenienced

They make themselves available to listen to, talk with, and pray with those who are troubled or in need of counsel

They are always ready to take time to help others or to offer encouragement to those who need it

Conclusion

What about you? Are you demonstrating wisdom as Elizabeth did?

Are you trusting God even when life seems unfair and avoiding the root of bitterness that springs up so easily?

Are you open to and expecting God to answer your prayers in spite of all the evidence that tells you it's impossible?

Are you sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit as you hurry from one thing to the other – that is to say, are you ready and willing to take the time to possibly make an eternal difference in someone's life; or are you just too busy?

How we handle the inequitable, the implausible, and the myriad interruptions of life reveal how wise we are

This world has enough cynical, negative, insensitive people and needs a whole lot more wise, mature Christians like Elizabeth

Let's ask God to make us wise

Let's pray