



Visitation, Gracie Morbitzer

Elizabeth's Sacred Encounter

SCRIPTURE

Luke 1:1-24; 39-45

MAIN IDEA

God calls us to make ourselves available for God's purpose.

OPENING PRAYER

Breathe in me, O Holy Spirit, that my thoughts may all be holy. Act in me, O Holy Spirit, that my work, too, may be holy. Draw my heart, O Holy Spirit, that I love but what is holy. Strengthen me, O Holy Spirit, to defend all that is holy. Guard me, then, O Holy Spirit, that I always may be holy. Amen.

Augustine, 354-430

INTRODUCTION

In his book, *Women in the Earliest Churches*, Ben Witherington III writes, "It is Elizabeth and Mary, not Zechariah and Joseph, who are first to receive the message of Christ's coming, who are praised and blessed by God's angels, and who are first to sing and prophesy about the Christ child. Luke

presents these women not only as witnesses to the events surrounding the births of John and Jesus but also as active participants in God's Messianic purposes."²

Luke has a special interest in women and is the only Gospel writer who shows us their prominence in Christ's ministry. Without the inspired writings of Luke, we would not know about the miraculous conception of Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist or the story of the prophetess Anna; the virgin Mary's song of praise or the story of the woman anointing Jesus' feet with her tears and costly oil; or of the women disciples who accompanied Jesus in his travels and helped support his ministry.

Luke raises Elizabeth from obscurity and gives us insight into her infertility, her tenacity to follow the law of God, and her faithful response to the will of God. Elizabeth was honorable and devout but, after a long marriage, still had not borne children (Lk 1:6-7). As a collective society, the Judean world of antiquity considered childlessness a curse from God, and women felt this burden disproportionately to their husbands. Elizabeth was no exception. In today's post-modern western world, women and couples faced with infertility

² Ben Witherington III, *Women in the Earliest Churches* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 128-157.

Luke 1:5–24

⁵ In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. ⁶ Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. ⁷ But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years. ⁸ Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, ⁹ he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. ¹⁰ Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. ¹¹ Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. ¹³ But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him

John. ¹⁴ You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. ¹⁶ He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." ¹⁸ Zechariah said to the angel, "How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." ¹⁹ The angel replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. ²⁰ But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur." ²¹ Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. ²² When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized

that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak.

²³ When his time of service was ended, he went to his home. ²⁴ After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion.

Luke 1:39–45

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

have options that include injectable medication self-administered at home between office visits, surrogacy, and adoption. But in the ancient world, no known medical treatments existed, and their practice of surrogacy could create conflict in the union because it involved sexual intimacy between husband and surrogate. Infertility was referred to as “barrenness” in the ancient world and viewed as unnatural in general and, in Judaism, as a decision from God. In some instances, the inability to have a child was presumed to be punishment from God for sin or disobedience. Overall, the consensus among ancient cultures was that God opened and closed wombs, and that it was not always clear why.

Contemplate

How is infertility viewed in our society? Why do you think infertility is viewed in these ways?

What are some common myths or misconceptions about infertility?

How can we debunk these myths and improve people's understanding about infertility?

EXAMINE THE CHARACTERS

While this lesson focuses on Elizabeth, the first character named in the story is Zechariah. He is identified as a priest who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah (Lk 1:5). According to Luke, Zechariah was on duty in the temple and, as he prepared to offer incense for worship, he saw an angel standing on the right side of the altar. The angel delivered an extensive message to Zechariah detailing the birth of a son, but Zechariah was doubtful of the message since both he and Elizabeth were mature in age and had been unable to conceive. To a man in his older years, the angel's

message sounded ludicrous. As punishment for his doubt, Zechariah lost his ability to speak, a reprimand that was compounded because it would last until his son was born.

Mary plays a central role in the story and, in an event referred to as the Annunciation, is also visited by the angel Gabriel. She is introduced to us as a “young woman pledged to be married to a man named Joseph” (Lk 1:27). Gabriel's announcement to Mary that she would conceive and give birth to a son was a perplexing surprise, but Mary was convinced to accept and believe the news when Gabriel told of Elizabeth's pregnancy as proof that God can do impossible things (Lk 1:31–38).

Aware of the cultural and religious humiliation that Elizabeth and other infertile women endured, along with Gabriel's miraculous news, Mary visited Elizabeth to share in her joy. One cannot help but notice that while their stories intertwine, stark contrasts are evident between the two women. According to Luke, Elizabeth was married, old, and from a priestly class; and Mary was unwed, young, and from a separate class. Despite their differences, both women were chosen by God for significant roles in the story of salvation. Unlike Zechariah, Elizabeth did not doubt the news of her conception, instead, she gratefully recognized the power of God acting through her life.

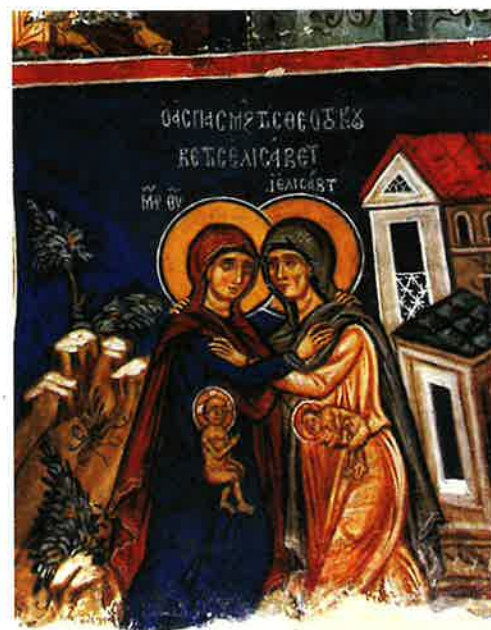
SACRED ENCOUNTER

Elizabeth's sacred encounter is unique because it happened during her meeting with Mary. This meeting is often referred to as The Visitation (Lk 1:39–45). Unexpectedly pregnant, the two women shared in each other's delight. Elizabeth encountered the presence of God through the baby in Mary's womb and had a physical and spiritual experience when “the child leaped in her womb and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit” (Lk 1:41). This sacred encounter led Elizabeth to profess, “Blessed are you among

women and blessed is the fruit of your womb” (Lk 1: 42). Overwhelmed by feeling unworthy in the presence of the divine one, she asked, “why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?” By speaking the words, *my Lord*, Elizabeth has recognized the presence of God in her midst and has become the first gospel bearer recorded in the New Testament writings. Elizabeth has proclaimed the Lordship of Christ, and Mary has proclaimed the reign of God through Christ. Together they usher in a new era of hope, led by a God who will reign in justice and liberation.

By recording the profession of Elizabeth, Luke breaks through the patriarchal structure of Judeo-Christian culture. He dismantles the notion that God only reveals God’s-self to male figures and the idea of the male as the specific agent of human action and history must now retire into the background. There is a charming post-Byzantine wall painting of *The Visitation* in a Greek Orthodox church on the island of Cyprus. In it, Mary greets her cousin Elizabeth who has traveled from Galilee to Judea to be with her. Providing us with a sort of X-ray view, the artist shows us not only the outward embrace of Mary and Elizabeth, but the children hidden within their bodies. The little figures of Jesus and John make visible the words of Elizabeth to Mary, “And how does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?” The iconographer chose to emphasize Elizabeth’s recognition, through the power of the Holy Spirit, showing baby John bowing in adoration and worship toward Jesus.

The Visitation is often neglected by Protestant churches who may skip the story and proceed directly to the nativity narratives. By doing so, the church misses the opportunity to see the power of God in the lives of these two women. Elizabeth and Mary recognized that God was doing wondrous things through them, and they found safety and solidarity in each other’s presence. Like women



14th-century wall painting of *The Visitation* from Timios Stavros Church in Pelendi, Cyprus

before them, they were connected through their lived experiences and their struggles. The forerunner and the Messiah were physically present, each in the womb of their mother. Here, a young Galilean carried within her womb the one “who is and who was and who is to come” (Rev 1:8). At this remarkable point in time and space the new covenant of God with God’s people has begun.³

TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCE

Elizabeth’s story is linked to a rich tradition of women before her like Sarah (Gen 21:1–7), Rebekah (Gen 25:20–24), Rachel (Gen 30:21–26), the wife of Manoah (Judg 13:2–25), and Hannah (1 Sam 1:1–20) all of whom conceived and gave birth after a long period of infertility. Though Elizabeth’s narrative is rich and significant, it should be preached and taught to our congregations with caution. Many women who experience trouble getting or staying pregnant will not find an end to their stories with conception and the

³ “Luke 1:39–45,” Sacred Space; sacredspace.ie/content/luke-139-45.

birth of a healthy child. Biblical narratives of infertility may lead some women who cannot conceive to feel that they are not in God's favor. Birthing and raising children are beautiful experiences, but a woman's value should not be measured by her ability (or perhaps her choice) to do so. Luke's purpose in telling Elizabeth's story is to show the value of women in God's reign. While Luke utilizes Elizabeth's body, her pregnancy, as the instrument through which she fulfills God's purpose, we learn that she was a mature woman with a lifetime of devotion who was chosen by God to play an important role in God's salvific work. She did not doubt God's omnipotence in the way that Zechariah did, instead, she yielded her life to the will of God.

Therese Koturbash of Women's Ordination Worldwide, a network working for women's equality and ordination in the Catholic church, asserts that Elizabeth's naming of John is the first truly great prophetic act of his ministry.⁴

While the priest was silenced, the woman exercised authority by naming the child. Elizabeth chose to name her son John, even though the custom was for the child to be named Zechariah after his father. By doing this, Elizabeth did not acquiesce to custom and used the name John for the first time.

The act of naming and the choice of name become symbols of women's liberation in the story of Christ. According to Koturbash, Elizabeth independently exercised her personal agency. In the story of Christ, she was empowered to open the door to a new way. Her son will go on to be called the Prophet of the Most High, for he will go before the Lord to prepare the way, and to give people knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins.

⁴ Therese Koturbash, "Undoing the Knots: Elizabeth Says 'He Will Be Called John'—A Woman's view of Gospel Liberation," Women's Ordination Worldwide, December 24, 2019; womensordinationcampaign.org/blog-working-for-womens-equality-and-ordination-in-the-catholic-church/2019/12/24/elizabeth-says-he-will-be-called-john-a-womans-view-of-the-gospel-it-is-a-sign-of-the-times.

Contemplate

How can you be an instrument for God?

What are some practical ways that you could allow God to do extraordinary things in your life?

In what ways has God tried to achieve something through you that your fear has not allowed? List the things you are most passionate about and spend time contemplating whether these things could be a calling from God.

CLOSING PRAYER

Let nothing disturb you. Let nothing frighten you. All things pass. God does not change. Patience achieves everything. Whoever has God lacks nothing. God alone suffices. Christ has no body now on earth but yours; no hands but yours; no feet but yours. Yours are the eyes through which the compassion of Christ must look out on the world. Yours are the feet with which [God] is to go about doing good. Yours are the hands with which [God] is to bless [God's] people.

Teresa of Avila, 1515-1582

Elizabeth's Sacred Encounter

Overview: Our first sacred encounter challenges us to listen to the voices silenced by biases that limit our belief in someone's potential. With Mary's pregnancy, the presence of Jesus empowers the prophetic praise of the expectant Elizabeth and the not-yet-born John the Baptist, who become among the first witnesses of the reign of God on earth.

Materials: aromatic candle (unless someone in your group is allergic to perfumes, if so, choose an unscented candle); matches (or a battery-powered candle); an image of the painting *The Visitation*, a post-Byzantine wall painting on page 16 of the study book; notebooks to use throughout the study for intercessory prayers. If you are meeting online consider showing a video or image of a burning candle.

Prayer

Light the candle (or show the video of the candle online) to prepare the group to read the prayer.

Invite the group to observe the candle flame and how it moves at the slightest movement of air.

Read: "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Mt 18:20).

Lead the group in the opening prayer.

Perform Luke 1:1-24; 39-45

Assign participants to read the parts of the text said by the narrator (Luke) and the different characters (Angel, Zechariah, Elizabeth, and Mary).

Participants can wear costumes and move to dramatize their presentation as they read, or they can sit and read together as a group.

Online option: Search for and share a short video of a performance based on the text.

Introduce the Lesson

Use the Introduction on page 13 to present this lesson to the group. When you discuss the topic of infertility and infertility treatments, acknowledge that people in your group may have deep

personal experience with this issue and may need extra support or space to express their thoughts and feelings.

Contemplate

Discuss the *Contemplate* questions on page 15 with the group. Encourage everyone to listen openly. When participants share their stories, practice active listening by working to understand what is being said and thank them for sharing. If someone is anxious or hurting, refer them to a pastor, church leader, therapist, or friend who can provide support and care.

Examine the Characters

Explain that, as sterility was considered a punishment from God, disabilities were also interpreted in the Bible as a product of sin and even seen as divine curses on families for generations. When we read that Zechariah was made mute after doubting the angel, we might fall into the temptation of interpreting it as a punishment, which could reinforce the persistent prejudice experienced by people with disabilities. However, silence can also be a spiritual discipline and an opportunity for reflection. How does understanding Zechariah's silence as an opportunity change or reinforce your understanding of the story?

Sacred Encounter

Before the lesson, ask each person to bring a personal notebook or journal to keep track of their prayers of intercession. Praying with notebooks and journals will be used now through the end of the study as a spiritual practice. Six sheets of paper stacked and folded in half can make a simple notebook.

Turn to the painting, *Visitation*, by Gracie Morbitzer in the study book on page 12. Take a moment of silence to look at the painting with the group.

Ask participants to write in their notebooks about what they see in the image.

Invite them to share their observations and feelings about the image with the group.

Contemplate

Explain that contemplation is a spiritual discipline that helps to develop an

intentional, open, awake, and restful receptivity to the presence of God. When we are quiet and paying attention to what others say or express, we make ourselves open to the Holy Spirit.

Discuss with the group the questions from *Contemplate* on page 17. Give priority to those who do not usually speak in the group and listen without judgment.

Transformative Experience

In this story, the Gospel of Luke gives voice to women and the offspring in their wombs while the powerful are made mute. What silenced and oppressed voices should we listen to now?

Ask the group to list the people who are silenced by their struggles, social prejudices, or stigmas. Examples might include women who are unable to have children, teenage mothers, people who are older, people with disabilities, children, and others.

Invite participants to list those mentioned above in their notebooks for prayers of intercession.

Ask: Do we know the needs of these people, their joys, and their dreams? In what ways could we be quieter to listen to them? Can the church be part of the answer to their prayers?

Closing Prayer

Explain that silence is a healing discipline that helps us pay attention to God in the quiet that is allowed when we do not speak. Lead the group to sit comfortably in silence for a minute and be attentive to the presence of Jesus. Read the angel's words in Luke 1:13 "Do not be afraid . . . for your prayer has been heard."

As a group, read the closing prayer.

Until the Next Lesson

Invite the group to use their notebooks to continue to pray for the people on their prayers of intercession lists until the next meeting and to pay attention when they meet silenced people.

Next time we'll add people who struggle with spiritual and mental affliction to the prayer list.