

Elizabeth; Series – Advent Presents ☺

Luke 1:5-45, portions

Westside Fellowship CRC; 2 December 2018

Rev. Heidi S. De Jonge



As some of you know, I didn't get Christmas presents growing up. In fact, my side of the family still doesn't do Christmas presents. We do lots of presents at birthdays, but it has just never been our style to do Christmas presents. Growing up, this was a bit tough... And one year – 1988 to be exact – my parents decided to get us 'Advent presents'... At the beginning of advent, we each got one special gift. The first year – 1988 – I got a big teddy bear with a green sweater and hat. That tradition petered out after a while, but I'll never forget the season of my life, when I got Advent presents.

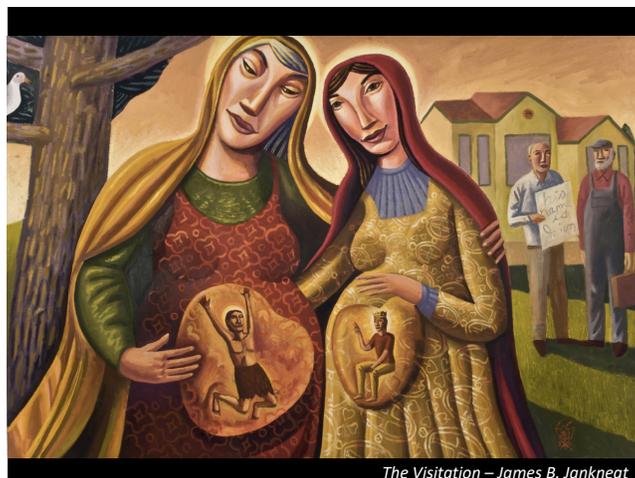


And this year our series is titled ‘Advent presents.’ We are going to talk about the gifts packaged in some of the main characters of the advent story. We’re also going to talk about the weaknesses in these characters and how God uses both the gifts of people and the weaknesses of people (which are often linked together!) to accomplish his purposes in this world.

So, today, we start with Elizabeth. Now, as I was studying Elizabeth, I couldn’t believe my eyes when I realized how many links there were between the messages from the last couple of weeks and the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth. First of all, last week I preached a sermon entitled, ‘Remember me.’ Over and over again, in the last chapter of Nehemiah, Nehemiah prayed that God would remember him... And as the people of God were waiting for the promised Messiah in those 400 years between the voice of the last prophet and the beginning of Jesus’ life, they must have prayed over and over again. Remember us, God! Do you know what Zechariah’s name means? “The Lord remembers.”

The second connection I want to make is this... The gift of Elizabeth that we are going to be focusing on today is her gift of hospitality... and I’ll be unpacking what that means in a little bit. But, it’s fascinating that the first few verses of Nehemiah 13 talk about why it was that the Israelites were not supposed to intermarry with the Moabites and the Ammonites... and the reason was that the Moabites and the Ammonites had failed to be hospitable to the Israelites. “they had not met the Israelites with food and water but had hired Balaam to call a curse down on them” (Nehemiah 13:2). Acts of hospitality – of welcoming the stranger – are very high on the list of what it looks like to be faithful to God.

What do I mean when I say that Elizabeth’s gift was the gift of hospitality?



The Visitation – James B. Janknegt

When I first thought of this as her gift, I had a picture in my mind of Elizabeth receiving Mary to her home – receiving her with such GRACE and HUMILITY. She welcomed Mary as someone who was more blessed than she was. A commentator wrote, “Elisabeth shows no sign of jealousy. In humility of heart she utters her amazement that she is so privileged as to be visited by the mother of her Lord. She rejoices, together with her babe, in the greatness of the coming Redeemer” (*Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, Norval Geldenhuys, p. 83).

It takes the gift of hospitality to welcome someone in your home that perhaps you might perceive has not been blessed with what you have been blessed with... It puts you in the place of Giver and them in the place of Receiver... and lots of us feel really comfortable there. It takes another kind of hospitality, perhaps, to welcome someone into your home whom you perceive has been blessed beyond your blessing... because in that moment or season of hospitality, you realize that they aren't really there to receive your stuff or to admire your clean house or enjoy your excellent food and cooking... (they can get all of that in their own place)... They are really there to be with *you*... it becomes more about hospitality of spirit and less about hospitality of beautiful space and exquisite food. Does that make sense? I mean, really, that's what all hospitality is about at its root... It is hospitality of spirit and person... and each of us can connect with another, whether it's in our home or at a restaurant or in the grocery store... in a way that is hospitable.

Henri Nouwen has given me my definition of hospitality of spirit. He says that being able to extend hospitality requires “first of all that the host feel at home in her own house, and secondly that she create a free and fearless place for the unexpected visitor” (*The Wounded Healer*, p. 89). That applies to your literal house, but also to your internal house—to your spirit.

Elizabeth in her being was someone who was at home in her own house. First of all, we trust that this is the case because she was (as it says in verse 6) “righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly.” She was close to God – and when we are close to God – we are more likely to be at rest in our person and in our circumstances, whatever they are.

But secondly, she had an even greater opportunity to be at home in her own house, in her own person, in those first months of her pregnancy. It's easy to skip over this little bit in the

story, but it says in verse 24 that after Elizabeth became pregnant she remained in seclusion for 5 months. “It is ... likely that Elisabeth purposely sought retirement in order to glorify her God in silence with grateful worship for the miracle accorded to her and her aged husband. She would naturally also long for quietness in order to meditate calmly upon the glorious event that had befallen her husband in the temple and upon her supernatural pregnancy... Everything was so radically important and supernatural that she could not but seek retirement” (Geldenhuys, p. 69).

Elizabeth centred herself in gratitude to God and in humble worship of God by withdrawing. This centering is an important part of hospitality. Nouwen says,

Paradoxically, by withdrawing into ourselves, not out of self-pity but out of humility, we create the space for another to be [herself] and to come to us on [her] own terms ... When we have found the anchor places for our lives in our own center, we can be free to let others enter into the space created for them and allow them to dance their own dance, sing their own song and speak their own language without fear. (*The Wounded Healer*, p. 91-92)

And this is exactly what happened. Elizabeth was in seclusion for a time (finding an anchor place for her life in her own centre in God)— creating the space necessary, and when the time was right, she was ready to receive Mary. The child leaped in her womb (dancing his own dance!) and she told Mary so... and there was joy and there was space for Mary to sing her own song and speak her own language without fear (reference to the Song of Mary).

Now, I mentioned earlier that each week we are going to talk about a gift that a person had in the story, but that we were also going to talk about a weakness or a need or a brokenness that that person had. In the case of Elizabeth, there’s a shadow behind her hospitality, and that is the shadow of her barrenness. She and her husband were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive... and she and her husband were both very old (v. 7). So not only were they childless, they were beyond the years of hopeful childbearing. There was, of course, a disgrace associated with this... Not only a personal grief, but a communal disgrace in that the lack of a child meant that you would not have had the opportunity to be in the line of the Messiah, whenever he was to come.

I believe this longing and this sorrow for Elizabeth were perhaps a part of what made her joy and her hospitality so deep and so true. Sarah Bessey, author and speaker, preacher and

teacher, [wrote a post about advent](#) where she says that “the joy born out of suffering and longing is more beautiful for its very complexity. ... The joy doesn’t erase the longing and the sadness that came before but it does redeem it, it may even stain backwards changing how we look at those days or years. But the joy is made more real, richer and deeper perhaps, because we longed for it with all our hearts for so many days.” Advent, she says, “is for the ones who know longing.”

And this was Elizabeth. She knew longing. And in her longing, she stayed close to God, and in the fullness of time, he blessed her with the gift of a son. A son who she was to name John, which means, in Hebrew etymology, ‘the gracious gift of God.’ (An Advent present!) She was filled with a child who was to be filled with the Spirit... And what’s more, Elizabeth herself was FILLED WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT. What had the prophet Joel said? “In those days, I will pour out my spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy... Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my spirit in those days” (Joel 2:28-32). She was filled with the Spirit and exclaimed in a loud voice, “Blessed are you among women and blessed is the child you will bear!”

Blessed was she among women and blessed is the child she bore. That child that she bore was, of course, our Saviour, Jesus. Jesus was and is the most hospitable being in the entire universe. Jesus is centred in his own being, of course, and from that place of being at home in who he was and is, he creates the space for you and for me to dance our own dance, sing our own song, and speak our own language without fear. He did that throughout the years he walked this earth. He does this now through the Holy Spirit, and he did this with his death. He created space for you and me. He welcomes us to this table and into his body.