

Meditation

Elizabeth – grace born in the wilderness

In the run up to Christmas 2014, Mosaic Church Leeds ran an unusual teaching series for Advent. Called 'Christmas from a distance,' it included a series of sermons exploring the perspectives of the less central characters in the Christmas story. Barbara and Kevin Macnish spoke on Elizabeth and Zechariah and as part of this Barbara – who has previously shared incredible visual art pieces with the Sanctuary – used her creative writing skills to help bring Elizabeth's voice to life.

We felt it was too good not to share more widely and so we are delighted to be adding this specially adapted version to our family of Christmas monologues. (You can find the others – together with spoken word audio tracks as they become available – at www.thesanctuarycentre.org/whereworldandworshipmeet-seasonal)

It is quiet out here on the edge of the wilderness. Quietness settles on me like the rare snows that fall on the heights; it fills my soul now that I am old.

I was like the wilderness. Quiet. Beautiful but desolate; empty; barren.

Childlessness marked my life. I had born its disgrace so long it was like an old coat wrapped around me; on view for all to see and judge: "What sin has she committed? What curse lies upon her and her family?"

But like an old coat it had its comforts too. Familiar, patched and worn. I submitted to its presence and there was a peace there.

It was not always so. There had been many days of weeping and pleading where every month brought fresh despair and then the sharper pain of renewed hope. On and on in a bitter circle stretching wide into years until the hope and despair and bitterness burned themselves out and left only the quiet ashes of loss and longing – for the longing remained – to hold; to suckle; to bring forth new life; to pass on the priestly heritage; the name; the honour of our house; to have a son.

It cost me greatly, this childlessness. I could not even speak. I had no voice amongst the other women. My wisdom did not count for I had no children. I had no voice amongst my husband's family for I was the woman who had brought him disgrace.

But I always knew that God heard my voice. It was hard to understand but I submitted to it and God blessed me. Zechariah loved me well through it all. We walked the pain and longing together and found our peace in silence and in seeking the honour of the Lord's name; in earnestly desiring righteousness and serving his House.

That long slow distilling of pain into peace through gratitude and service was a journey of years. It laid a trust in me that served as fundamental preparation for what came next.

How life can change in the twinkling of an eye! For that was all before the angel and the altar and my husband struck dumb.

What is it that has come to me? I bear a son who will be great in the sight of the Lord. A joy and delight; such joy and delight! I cannot contain them..... and the angel knew my name!

He is called John. The Lord is gracious! Born of grace. The one who will call the people to repentance from sin is named for grace. The one who takes away my disgrace is named for grace.

The precious days of deep rejoicing and gratitude that followed – just me and the Lord alone – will stay in my heart forever. I wrapped the delicious cloak of God's favour around me and dwelt in it for five months. It was like drinking the choicest wine each day. I am full. I am full and overflowing. A wilderness no more!

I never imagined such signs and wonders could be in our time and in our family. The Messiah has come and I carried the one who will make a way for him. Who am I that such an honour should fall to me? The old, ragged coat of disgrace is gone and there is a new one enfolding me. The lord has clothed me in joy and I cannot stop praising him!

I returned from my seclusion to receive a visit from my niece Mary. The angel who knew my name had told her what had happened to me as proof of what the Lord would do for her. What wonders!

John – "The lord is gracious" prepares the way for Jesus – "the lord is salvation".

The moment I saw Mary, John leapt in my womb; Grace dancing for joy at the presence of Salvation – the tiny chosen one, the Messiah, even now growing in Mary's womb. That joy filled me too. My quiet voice shouted out "blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb. Who am I that the mother of my lord should come to me? Blessed is she who has believed that the lord would fulfil his promises to her."

And Mary's great praise came tumbling out too. God himself was speaking through *us* – two humble women, after centuries of silence from the prophets. An unmarried virgin and an old barren woman spoke of the great works of God and cradled within them the ones who will bring those plans to pass.

Together we sang and praised the Greatest one of all who raises up the lowly, dishonoured, unheard ones. How we are blessed!

She stayed with me until the birth. And then my voice was needed to speak for Zacharias whose voice had been taken away. To say, "his name is John." The lord is gracious.

Each one of us plays our part in the story no matter how small; each one is seen and known by God our Father.

I who had no voice speak out prophecies and praise.

My disgrace is changed by Grace to honour.

I who was barren am blessed with joyous fruit.

I who was empty am filled to overflowing.

The lord gives and the lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the lord.