

November 29, 2009
The Quiet Ones of Christmas: Elizabeth
Luke 1:5-25

Happy New Year!" Perhaps you think I am getting confused. This is not January 1 nor is it the Lunar New Year or the Chinese New Year. Yet it is the beginning of a new year, the beginning of another Church year. Today is the First Sunday in Advent and the beginning of a new Church year. So, *"Happy New Year to you all!"*

Why are these four weeks before Christmas called *"Advent"*? The term comes from a Latin word meaning *'coming, arrival.'* This is a time when we prepare for the coming of Jesus at Christmastime. Advent is intended to be a time of preparation and reflection as we anticipate the birth of Jesus. It is a good time to reflect on some of the other characters that run in the background of the Christmas story - perhaps some of we never really think about or notice: the "nearly silent" people we may overlook, who have lessons to teach us ...

Elizabeth: A Person of Hope

We may think of Zechariah as the "nearly silent one" - after all, he is the one who is not able to speak for nine months. But before the angel makes him mute (Luke 1:19-20) - and after he regains his tongue (Luke 1:64-79), Zechariah has lots to say! As the story unfolds, Zechariah is confronted by Gabriel; he says, *"How can I be sure this will happen? I'm an old man now, and my wife is also well along in years."* His words reveal (1) a lack of faith in God, and (2) a major marital faux pas (calling his wife 'old!'). Nine months later, when his speech is restored, he has a wonderful prophetic message of hope and salvation.

What about Elizabeth? As the story begins, her response is *"How kind the Lord is! He has taken away my disgrace of having no children."* Unlike Zechariah, there is no hint of doubt. Elizabeth is a person of hope - she knows where her life, a life of faith, will take her.

"If you don't know where you're going any road will get you there," said the Cheshire Cat in Alice in Wonderland. When we do decide where we want to go, it will influence what we do and it will guide our choices. If I decide I want to be an engineer or a welder, then I have to take certain steps and make certain decisions. I will not be looking back at where I came from but forward to where I am going.

The same is true of our relationship with God. If I decide that I want a faith in God that actually transforms my life - that shapes my decision making - that brings meaning and purpose to what I do - that is more than just a token tradition - then I am going to have to make some decisions and take certain steps.

I am going to have to discipline myself to actually spend time with God:

- In prayer
- In reading His word
- In reflection
- In remembering that I live every moment of every day in His presence.

I am going to have to discipline myself to actually obey God.

I am going to have to trust Him, even when the situation is challenging.

This is the kind of life that Elizabeth models for us. She is ...

A Person of Faith

"A few days (after Mary was told by the angel that she was pregnant) Mary hurried to the hill country of Judea, to the town where Zechariah lived. She entered the house and greeted Elizabeth. At the sound of Mary's greeting, Elizabeth's child leaped within her, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. Elizabeth gave a glad cry and exclaimed to Mary, 'God has blessed you above all women, and your child is blessed. Why am I so honored, that the mother of my Lord should visit me? When I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb jumped for joy. You are blessed because you believed that the Lord would do what he said.'" (Luke 1:39-45)

How does Elizabeth know that Mary is *"the mother of my Lord"*? When Mary, unmarried and pregnant shows up at her door, Elizabeth should be horrified! In that culture, for Mary to be pregnant out of wedlock was a terrible sin. But somehow God spoke to Elizabeth - and she was listening for God's voice! When Elizabeth's baby moved within her, she was sensitive enough to God's presence, that she knew what this meant. Elizabeth lived her hope so that she could have faith, even when appearances seemed unlikely.

What holds us back from this sort of faith? What is our greatest enemy? Is it not having enough money? Is it people we see threatening our livelihood, rivals in work or business? Let's look back at Zechariah - the man who talked too much and did not have faith! When the angel appeared to him, he *"was shaken and overwhelmed with fear"* (1:12). He was terrified! We sense none of that fear in Elizabeth. We do not even sense that degree of fear in Mary. Yes, Mary is *"confused and disturbed"* (1:29) - we can certainly appreciate why given the attitudes toward unwed Moms in that day - but being confused and disturbed is not nearly as hopeless and helpless as being overwhelmed with fear.

Our greatest enemies are fear and anxiety, especially about the future. Many of our choices and decisions are because of these fears. Think about how fear runs our lives? In Luke 21:25-26, there is a description of the future when *"The nations will be in turmoil, perplexed by the roaring seas and strange tides. People will be terrified at what they see coming upon the earth ..."* This is a fairly accurate description of the world! And yet,

Jesus says our reaction should not be fear. *"When these things [the signs of the end times] begin to take place, stand up straight, hold your heads high, because your liberation is near at hand"* (Luke 21:28). It all depends on my priorities and attachments. If I am principally concerned about the value of my house, my job, and my investments, then I have good reason indeed to be anxious when *"that Day"* comes.

A great deal of our fear stems from our wanting to control the future and the world in which we live. It is a very difficult thing to do. It is also a very unrealistic approach. It makes far more sense to come to terms with the realities which face us and find our happiness in those circumstances. There are some things, obviously, that we can change; if necessary, change them. There are many other things we cannot possibly change; the only choice is to accept them and live within them. Wisdom, as they say, consists in knowing which is which. It is also a great source for peace of mind. Elizabeth teaches us that sort of resolute faith and patient wisdom.

A Person of Commitment

"When it was time for Elizabeth's baby to be born, she gave birth to a son. And when her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had been very merciful to her, everyone rejoiced with her. When the baby was eight days old, they all came for the circumcision ceremony. They wanted to name him Zechariah, after his father. But Elizabeth said, "No! His name is John!" (Luke 1:57-60)

Elizabeth is not about to take the easy way out. She is a person of hope, faith, and commitment. Call it integrity. Call it taking your faith seriously. Call it stubborn determination based upon one's principles. Elizabeth knows what is right - and she does it! She does allow her faith to transform her life.

She knows where she is going: she is going to allow God to shape her decisions, her values, her perspectives. She is going to spend time with God - and obey Him. She is not going to have nice theological discussions, but go on living like God does not exist. He is going to transform her from the inside so she lives differently on the outside.

Frank Doyle likens our lives to a journey on a bus. When we take a bus we know our destination and we know, more or less, how much time we need to get there. But on the bus of life we also need to know our real destination and not just one we dream about. Unlike riding on a bus, we do not know how much time we have for the journey. For some it may be very long (90 plus years). For others it may be much shorter (30, 20, 10 years or even only a few months or weeks). The length of the journey is not really that important although we worry about it a lot. What is important is what we do during the journey.

On a bus, you have people who chat, some who study the sports pages of the paper, others

who are doing nothing or day dreaming. For many, the journey is only an unavoidable means to get to their destination; it has no value in itself. Yet others are fully aware of what is going on as they ride. They are aware of their surroundings, of the people around them. They may admire the beauty of a morning sky or the loveliness of trees or buildings they pass on their way. The journey and the destination are part of one reality. The going is as important as the arriving and one contributes to the other.

In the journey of life, Elizabeth encourages us to have a similar approach to life. If we want to truly celebrate the Coming of Jesus we need to be aware of his coming into every moment of every day. The Scripture for today tells us that on the bus of life we should:

- a. Be ready to get off the bus at any point, that is, be ready to meet the Lord whenever he calls us to himself, whether that be in the very near future or many years away. The important thing is: Be prepared.
- b. Do not be afraid, do not worry. Fear, worry and anxiety do not solve any problems. Fear, worry and anxiety are about things which do not yet exist and most probably will never exist as we imagine them. *"Why worry? If you worry, you will die; if you don't worry, you will die. So why worry?"* (Father Tony de Mello)
- c. Improve our relations with the people around us. A good life consists not so much in the kind of work we do or how *"successful"* we are but how we have related with other people - with family, other relatives, friends, colleagues and total strangers.
- d. Use every opportunity to be in touch with God and Jesus our Lord who is with us wherever we go, whatever we do. We will meet Him, talk to Him, listen to Him, help Him, be helped by Him through every person and every experience, if we open our eyes and ears to His presence. Spend time worshipping Him.

This Advent - this New Year - keep Jesus at the centre. It is possible to live Advent in fear: fear of running out of time to shop; fear of not knowing what to buy Uncle Otto; fear of not getting the turkey cooked right; fear of disappointing that special someone. Don't let fear sabotage the season! It's about hope, faith, and commitment: *"It starts with Jesus. It ends with Jesus. This is the holistic approach God had in mind for Christmas. It's a season where we are called to put down our burdens and lift a song up to our God. It's a season where love wins, peace reigns, and a king is celebrated with each breath. It's the party of the year. Entering the story of advent means entering this season with an overwhelming passion to worship Jesus to the fullest."* (www.adventconspiracy.org)

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