

## Sermon series on 'Women in the Bible'

### Week 2: Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist. (Luke 1:5-25)

Last week, our series began by looking at Mary the mother of Jesus. Today the focus turns to her cousin Elizabeth, who becomes pregnant through her husband Zechariah and they have a son who is to be called John. John is the forerunner who Isaiah promised would come to prepare the way for the LORD and make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

#### Background

Luke provides us with some interesting background about Elizabeth.

She was married to Zechariah and he was one of the priests who had the honour of being sent into the holy place of the temple, and of offering incense on the altar before the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement. Once a man had performed that duty, he was held in high esteem among the people for the rest of his life. So, Elizabeth had an important husband.

Not only was her husband a priest serving at the temple, but Elizabeth herself was from a priestly line. She was a daughter not only of the priestly tribe of Levi, but specifically of lineage of Aaron, from the tribe of Levi that God had set apart to serve in the sacred work of the temple..

So, Elizabeth and her husband are the kind of people who are looked up to and respected in their culture in first century Palestine. They are upright, held in high esteem, people of good standing.

#### Shame and disgrace

But underneath all this respectability, Elizabeth is carrying a deep sense of both private and public shame and disgrace. Because she is barren, childless. Why was that a source of private shame and disgrace? Well, because your children were your retirement plan, your care package, your pension. They would be the ones to look after you when you couldn't do it for yourself. How will she and Zechariah manage as their old age progresses further? Maybe Elizabeth is also feeling that there is something wrong with her, as I'm aware many childless couples often feel.

But it's also a very public source of shame and disgrace because under the Old Testament Law, barrenness was regarded as a sign of unfaithfulness to God. In giving

the law to God's people Israel, God had explained that as long as Israel is faithful to God, there will be no barren Israelite women. Perhaps the Palestinian gossip was that Elizabeth was unfaithful, to her God and to her husband.

Over the years, the causes of shame and disgrace have changed and evolved. But there's plenty of shame still around in one form or another. It's an interesting contrast between Elizabeth and her cousin Mary, because Elizabeth suffers the shame of not being pregnant, while her cousin Mary suffers the shame of being pregnant (and unmarried). Being pregnant and unmarried has been a deep source of shame that's been in the news recently, with reports of cover-ups and forced adoptions in Ireland.

Being gay has been a source of shame to many over the years, not so much in recent years perhaps but certainly a generation ago. If you've been watching 'A very English Scandal' on TV then you will know the lengths some go to to cover up that sense of shame.

I've been reading a good book called *Daring Greatly* by Brene Brown and there is a whole chapter on shame. She is a researcher and did extensive research among men and women about shame. She makes a helpful distinction between guilt and shame. She says guilt is what you feel when you have done something bad. Shame is what you feel when you think that you are something bad. Shame is an issue of identity.

Here are some of the responses she records from asking the question 'What is shame to you?'

- Shame is getting made redundant and having to tell my pregnant wife
- Shame is telling my fiancé that my Dad lives in France when in fact he is in prison
- Shame is my husband leaving me for my next door neighbour
- Shame is hiding the fact that I am in recovery
- Shame is having someone ask me 'When are you due?' when I am not pregnant
- Shame is shouting at my children

Brene summarises her research like this. She says the key sources of shame for women are to do with appearance, (how they look) and their potential as good mothers. And for men, the key source of shame is around being seen as weak and as a failure, whether it is at work, at home, in the bedroom, to do with money or responsibility. Basically, men live under the pressure of one unrelenting message; do not be perceived as weak.

Whatever the source of shame, whether you are male or female, the underlying sense is 'I am not enough.' I am not thin enough. I am not strong enough. I am not able to earn enough. I am not patient enough with my children. I am not good enough.

The good news:

Here's the good news. God is in the business of taking our shame away. God takes away Elizabeth's disgrace. She is able to say, "In these days he has shown his favour and taken away my disgrace among the people."

More than that, God redeems our shame and turns it into something beautiful, something purposeful. Elizabeth's baby plays a key role in God's purposes for humanity, one who will "*go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.*"

God takes away and redeems our shame. That doesn't mean that all those who are childless will get the children they so desire. It doesn't mean that those who feel the shame at shouting at their children will never do so again. It doesn't mean that those who long to be thinner will find it easier to lose weight. It doesn't mean that all those who lose jobs will find new ones. Life isn't that straightforward.

But what it does mean is that **YOU ARE ENOUGH! I AM ENOUGH.** God has dealt with our shame. It has been removed from us. We need not live under its shadow. Whatever deficiency you see in yourself is covered by God's grace. Just as you are, right here, right now, **YOU ARE ENOUGH** for God. Tell that to yourself this week. When shame creeps up on you, remind yourself that 'I am enough. God loves me as I am.' Join your words with those of Elizabeth, who is able to say from her heart, "In these days God has shown his favour and taken away my disgrace among the people."

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