

ADVENT HOUSE GROUPS 2024

SESSION 1



The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. ISAIAH 9:2

Opening Antiphon

To you, I lift up my soul, O my God. In you, I have trusted; let me not be put to shame. Nor let my enemies exult over me; and let none who hope in you be put to shame.

Opening Prayer

Grant your faithful, we pray, almighty God, the resolve to run forth to meet your Christ with righteous deeds at his coming, so that, gathered at his right hand, they may be worthy to possess the heavenly kingdom. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God, for ever and ever.

Amen

To Share

- As you begin Advent, what are your hopes for the next few weeks?
- Do you see Advent as potentially a grace-filled time, a struggle, or both?

To Listen: Luke 1.5–15, 24–25, 39–45

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. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. Now at the time of the incense-offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. 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. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord.' . . .

After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, 'this is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favourably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.'

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

Advent through the eyes of Elizabeth

I was always waiting in the wings. Always wondering when it would be my turn to go on. My sisters and my friends were cleverer than me, prettier than me, more confident than me. I was always waiting to be picked. My marriage has not been without love. But there hasn't been much joy. It just feels as if life has never really got started. And I have stored up regret. I have spent too long saying 'if only'.

I don't blame Zechariah. He is a good man, a holy man, a godly man, a priest descended from Aaron. But he was embarrassed by it. And he was embarrassed by me. You know how men are; they can't talk about their shame. They bury themselves in their work. They look the other way. Everyone assumed it was my fault that we had no children. But it could have been his. Does anyone really know? We didn't talk about it. We just went our separate ways, together, but not united. There was emptiness between us. The emptiness of the absent child we dreamed of, and a fulfilment that will not be.

When my friends got pregnant, I was pleased for them at first. 'It will be my turn soon,' I said. But nothing happened. And then, after a few years, nothing happened that would make anything happen, if you know what I mean. My sterility was more than an embarrassment. It was a curse. It was as if my body was laughing at me every month, flushing away the possibility of another life. I saw women heavy with child, some of them for a fourth or fifth or sixth time, and I was covetous and angry. I would hold the limp rolls of flesh that my stomach had become and ache with the empty disappointment of it all. Life hadn't really got started. I was a woman, a healthy woman, a healthy woman in her prime; but my womb was as dry as a riverbed in a drought, and my sagging breasts as empty as the grave. There was life in me; but it was on hold. There were possibilities in me, but they never came to anything.

I retreated into myself. I was a good wife in the sense that I did as my husband bade me: I cared for him, I kept the house proudly and diligently. But it was all a charade. Inside, I was stewing with disappointment and envy. It was eating me up, gnawing into my womb, mocking its barrenness, filling me with bile. But even this never came out. I was like a kettle of water that simmers on the edge of boiling. But I never hissed. I never spilled over. I never embarrassed anyone. I never told them how I felt. I never lived. Mine was the shadow of a life. I perfected the contented smile that hid the rage and sadness. But that didn't prevent people's pity. They would wait till I had passed them on the street, and then whisper their torrid suppositions. They knew I was barren. And they enjoyed speculating why. Whose sin and whose failing had caused this emptiness?

It affected my dreams. I stopped hoping for anything. Hope had only let me down. I would just get through each day. And at night I would retreat to the safety of childhood where I could still, just about, remember a time when hope existed, and when I thought life would be good; a time when I thought, I will have my turn, I will be loved and I will love in return; I will fill my quiver with sons, and teach my daughters the joys of hearth and home. But there were no joys. Just each day passing, each day fading into the next, the endless cycle of day and night, waking and sleeping, and the dawning realization that it would never be different.

Until the day it was. And even then, me an old woman bearing a child, there is a kind of mockery to it. This is not how it is meant to be. Don't get me wrong. I am pleased, so pleased, so overjoyed that there is a child growing within me; but why now? And who is this child? And how is it that my dry womb and my dry breasts are now so filled with bursting energy and life?

It happened on the day that Zechariah was serving in the sanctuary. As I say, he is a priest. This is what he does. His section was on duty, and as is the custom, someone was chosen to make the offering of incense, and the lot fell to him. Now at the time the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. Zechariah went inside the sanctuary, he was making the offering, when – and I know this sounds crazy – an angel appeared to him, standing bolt upright before him at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw the angel, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. 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. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord.' And the angel went on: 'He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. 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.'

But Zechariah – like me, I suppose – was filled with doubt as well as fear. After all, that's what age and disappointment does to you. It makes you cynical. It makes you suspicious of joy. So he says 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.' And he was only speaking the plain truth: me an old woman, him an old man; and years of disappointment behind us. But 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. But now, because you do not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.'

And that was what happened. The people were waiting outside the sanctuary, wondering what on earth was happening. And when Zechariah does at last appear, he has been struck dumb. He gestures to them, but he can't speak. And they realize that he has seen a vision. or at least they think they realize. In my opinion, those crowds are always a smidgeon too eager to believe that God has spoken, or angels have visited. But this is the plain truth of it. I am pregnant. You can't argue with it. As I sit on my porch scanning the horizon, waiting for my cousin to come, the baby is kicking inside me.

When his time of service ended, Zechariah came home. Of course, he couldn't speak to me either. But almost straight away I felt different. I knew something had changed. In those next few weeks, my body started changing. I hid myself away. For five months I saw no one. But then, when I was sure, when there was no mistaking it, when my belly was as round and as proud as any mother to be, I told it plain; I showed the world: 'this is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favourably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.'

And here she comes: Mary, my cousin. How do the Scriptures put it? – leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills like a young gazelle. She is a bundle of joy and energy. She is a force. She also bears a child in her womb. She also has a strange story to tell. I watch her coming and I see in her youthful exhilaration what I could have been. But I am not envious. The passing years, and this sudden influx of life, have not made me bitter. Like the lengthening shadows of the evening, there is a sadness in me, but also a growing recognition and a joy that somehow, I am being used for the purpose of God, and that my child, like Elijah, directs the heart to God.

But where is God in this encounter? For as Mary arrives, standing before me like the rose of Sharon, like a lily among brambles, flushed, confident, exultant, fabulously alive, the child in my womb leaps. It is as if the unborn child in me recognizes and greets the unborn child in her. There is a movement, and it is of the Spirit of God; for, dare I say it, God is here. I know it, but I don't know how I know it. God has come with Mary, in her womb, and my child knows it. And I shout out with joy, with the first searing flush of joy; and as I say them, the words cast away the agonies of a lifetime: 'Blessed are you among women,' I say to Mary, 'and blessed is the fruit of your womb.'

And Mary looks at me. We stand there on my porch. The afternoon sun beats upon us. We are both breathing heavily. She is tired from her walking, but also elated, jubilant. And I am like one reborn. The child within me has seen and done something that seems to say that everything is changed. There is a new song in the air. And I say to Mary, perplexed, but very, very happy, 'Why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'

Then we embrace. We laugh and we shout out loud. We punch the air. We raise our hands in celebration. We cannot yet hear the music of this new song, but its words are forming in our mouths, and for Mary, suddenly, it is on her lips: a new way of looking at the world, a new way of inhabiting life. 'My soul magnifies the Lord,' she cries out. 'My spirit rejoices in God my Saviour. He has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant. All generations will call me blessed. The Mighty one has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm. He has scattered the proud. He has brought down the powerful. He has lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry. He has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.'

Now it is evening. Mary sleeps and I watch. Darkness falls, but it is no longer dark.

There is fire in my belly. Hidden in the darkness of my womb, and of Mary's womb, there is life and light. I stroke my swollen stomach. Six months. Only three more to go. The child isn't leaping any more, but turning slowly. I feel his gentle movement inside me. God has helped his servant Israel. He has remembered his mercy. He has made good his promise. My child points to Mary's child. My child prepares the way for her child. I don't understand it, but the evidence that God is here is plain within us and between us. There is music in the air. Lights are being kindled. A fire is burning, and it will not be put out.

Discussion Questions

- Which person in the story did you most relate to?
- What surprised, shocked or delighted you the most?
- How has this changed your understanding of the Christmas story?

Additional Questions

- Elizabeth describes a life of waiting, disappointment, and longing. How does this resonate with times in your life when you've felt like you're "waiting in the wings" for something to change? How has this affected your faith or your relationship with God?
- Elizabeth's barrenness is a silent burden, never fully discussed. Are there parts of your own life or faith journey that feel like silent struggles? How might bringing these hidden struggles into the light of a community or your relationship with God bring healing?
- Elizabeth and Mary's meeting is filled with recognition of God's presence in each other's lives. How can we become more attuned to seeing God in those around us? How can we encourage and uplift one another in our faith journeys, even when life seems barren or uncertain?

Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father, as we have gathered in the warmth of this house, we thank You for this season of Advent, a time of reflection, anticipation, and renewal. We have shared in the hope and joy that Christmas brings, and we ask for the grace to see Christmas in a new light.

Help us to look beyond the familiar and seek the deeper meaning of Your Son's birth. May we see Christ in every act of kindness, every gesture of love, and every moment of stillness. Open our hearts to the wonder of Your presence in unexpected places—whether in the humble manger or within our own hearts.

Amen

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