

Elizabeth – waiting but living in the moment

Ecclesiastes 3: 1-11

Luke 1: 5-25; 36-45; 57-61

Michael asked me to preach on a woman that I fancied in the Bible. The woman I fancy in life is called Elizabeth – or Biz for short, so my choice was easily made for today's sermon.

Elizabeth was married to Zechariah, a Priest. They would have been in their 50's or 60's – which would have been considered old age at that time. Both of them were faithful, prayerful, doing their duties.

Elizabeth for most of her life has been waiting for a baby. She would have been married at 12 – 14 years and from that point on, would have been waiting for a baby – 30 years and then after the news to Zechariah – another 9 months. Actually, Luke's Gospel starts with people waiting: Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary and also Simeon and Anna who were in the Temple when Jesus was brought in, are all waiting. All waiting for something new and exciting to happen.

In fact, the whole nation of Israel was waiting. Between the last OT book Malachi and when John the Baptist and Jesus came on the scene was 400 years – 400 silent years – during which Israel had been waiting for a word from God – for the coming Messiah, waiting for something new and exciting.

I love new and exciting but find the waiting part difficult – and God knows that. So, God teaches me to wait.

We arrived in Nepal in 2014 and a year later in 2015, God showed me the need for people to work in the south of the country. So, I started praying for people to come. I wanted to start immediately! I wanted things to happen yesterday! But actually, I had to wait 3 years before anything happened – and that was a good thing. Because loads of things had to be worked out and then in 2018, we could start the programme with Kesi: reaching pre-school children, tutoring and friendship ministry. Three years of praying and waiting was long enough for me – but to start something new, was exciting!

Waiting: we wait in our lives for a wide variety of things, don't we? When we are young we wait for Christmas, the holidays, exam results, as we get older we wait for a partner, God's guidance, a job, for a friend/a child/a family member to come to God, for the right time to buy a house, for doctor's results to come through. And as a community – you had a waiting time when you were evicted out of your church and were in the school waiting for God's leading to 'here'? And now again, we are waiting for Mike & Mandy, Izzy, Marcus, Jojo and Annie.

Elizabeth waited over 30 years to have a baby and what a road that must have been. The text doesn't say that she became bitter, restless or resentful, but it does say that she thanks God for ²⁵*taking her disgrace away from among the people*. In the culture of the time, being barren was shameful and people would have asked among themselves, 'what you had done wrong'.

Elizabeth didn't give up on God. It says that both she and Zechariah were upright; ⁶*observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly*. They were human and no doubt there were slip-ups, but this is how they lived. Through all those years, Elizabeth was godly, trusting, hoping, waiting.

The Dutch writer, Catholic priest and theologian, Henri Nouwen, says that waiting is part of our spiritual life. We have waiting times at Advent, Lent and now we wait for Christ's Second Coming. And also, personally, we wait for God to act. This means saying to God: I trust you in this, I'm believing in your word, your promises, I can't see the bigger picture. It is a waiting with a promise in our hearts. <https://henrinouwen.org/meditation/active-waiting/>

So, what can we learn from Elizabeth about waiting? How was Elizabeth able to wait? How can we wait?

1. Elizabeth waited with a sense of promise

Elizabeth was able to wait for a baby because the OT promised that *God would give her the desires of her heart* Ps 37:4 Her waiting wasn't empty, it was waiting with a promise in her heart. In Luke 1,2, others are also waiting with a sense of promise.

Zechariah is told: ¹³*your wife Elizabeth is to bear you a son.* And Gabriel said: ³¹*Mary, listen! You are to conceive and bear a son.* And of Simeon we read: ^{2:26}*It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ.*

Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary, Simeon, were all living with a promise that nurtured them, that fed them, and that kept them going. And in this way, the promise itself could grow in them.

Receiving a promise helps us to wait. This promise is at work, like a seed that has started to grow. Waiting is a journey of faith, believing in the promise.

I find it interesting in this story that looking at Elizabeth, old age need not be a barrier. God may ask us to keep waiting even in our old age. Also, we all need to look at each day and be expectant, waiting for God to tap us on the shoulder. God uses us whatever age we are in – Mary's age as well as Elizabeth's age.

2. Elizabeth waited actively, she lived in the moment

Elizabeth lived in the moment. I don't think she sat around waiting for God to act – she continued in prayer, remained committed doing her ministry in the home and in her village among the women and children. She lived each day in the moment – devout, righteous, following God. As she was from the priestly 'caste' like Zechariah, she would have been present at weddings, funerals, births, listening to neighbours, explaining Scripture, drinking cups of tea, was all part of her ministry.

In their old age, they were still childless and, in the tradition of their time, had Zechariah not loved his wife, her childlessness could have been a reason for divorce and remarriage for him. Yet, through their many years the two had stayed together as strong committed marriages do, they actively waited together, and lived in the moment.

The good thing is that they had not become bitter in their waiting which is so easy to do. They remained a godly couple and unbeknown to them, they were chosen by God for the significant duty of carrying and bringing up

John the Baptist. They spoke the truth and walked in the commandments of God and were righteous, blameless.

When we wait, what do we do when things don't work out? Like Elizabeth, do we keep on praying, hoping, expecting for a positive outcome when a job doesn't come around, when a child's behaviour doesn't improve? At those times, does our relationship with God strengthen us, or are we then disappointed with God? How do we live in that moment?

The waiting time is never wasted. Ecclesiastes 3 talks about, that there is a time for everything: *2a time to be born, and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot* – and that time is set by God. *4a time to weep and a time to laugh*, each time is a time for God to work out His purposes in our life.

How do we wait for God? We wait with patience. Henri Nouwen says: The word patience comes from the Latin which means “to suffer”. Waiting patiently is suffering through the present moment, tasting it to the full, and letting the seeds that are sown in the ground on which we stand, grow into strong plants. Waiting patiently always means paying attention to what is happening right before our eyes and seeing there the first rays of God's glorious coming. <https://henrinouwen.org/meditation/waiting-with-patience/> Waiting and praying allows Jesus more deeply, more fully into our situation.

But patience does not mean passivity. Waiting patiently is not like waiting for the bus to come, the rain to stop or the sun to rise.

We need to live in the moment, as *tomorrow has enough trouble of its own* *Matthew 6:34*, and *living in the past is impractical as well* *Is 43:18*. Forget the 'if only' of the past, and the 'one day' of the future. Like Elizabeth we need to live actively in the moment.

3. Elizabeth waited in community

When Mary heard that she was to have a baby, she went to Elizabeth for encouragement in what she had just committed herself to. These two women supported and created space for each other to wait. They affirmed for each other that something was happening that was worth waiting for.

This is what waiting and prayer is all about. It's coming together around the promise. The whole meaning of the Christian community lies in offering support to each other while we wait. Christian community is the place where we keep the hope alive among us, so it can grow and become stronger in us. In this way we can live and wait with courage. Community allows us to wait without being overtaken by despair, lostness, and darkness.

As Elizabeth must have found in her barrenness, waiting can be a lonely place, a disappointing place, a place of suffering. And because it is often a long road, we, like Elizabeth, need others – a community – to stand with us in prayer and support, to affirm us, to keep the vision before us. We need to have others, prayer partners, a home group, who can give and receive support and pray.

Shortly after arriving in Ethiopia in 1988, God gave me a burden for the poor, the people living on the side of the road in plastic houses. I started talking to friends about it and together we set up an urban prayer group, which met monthly to pray.

Every 6 months, our organisation had Council meetings where the leadership would come together to make decisions. So, every 6 months I wrote a proposal to ask our leadership if I could start working with the street people. And every 6 months they rejected this.

After 3 years we were evacuated out because of civil war. When we returned 6 months later, finally permission was given and the work in the city started.

It was God's time and the ministry blossomed; people came to know God, a church for people working in prostitution was started, children attended school and land became available for street people to build their own homes. If we had started earlier, it wouldn't have been God's time – it wouldn't have worked out.

To keep me going, and to keep God's promise alive while I was waiting, I needed a group of people to support me – the monthly urban ministry prayer group.

For Michael – to keep on waiting and praying for Mike and Mandy and the children to come, he needs us as a community to stand with him.

As Elizabeth waited in community, we too need to support each other as we wait.

Micah 6:6-8 is my life verse.

*⁸He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.
And what does the LORD require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with your God.*

Waiting, but living in the moment, means walking humbly with our God. It means taking our time to sit with God and to allow Him to direct our path. Everything has a waiting time, an incubation time. A cake in the oven takes 45 minutes to bake, a baby takes 9 months, so, before we can see an answer to our prayers it may be years later – or not in our lifetime.

To wait with open hands and trust is radical. It is choosing to hope that something is happening for us that is far beyond our own imaginings. It is giving up control over our future and letting God define our life. It is living with the conviction that God's timing is right.

Our spiritual life is a life in which there is times of waiting, trusting in promises, being actively present in the moment, being together expecting that new things will happen to us, new things that are far beyond our own imagination and prediction. This, indeed, is a very radical stance toward life in a world preoccupied with control. <https://henrinouwen.org/meditation/radical-waiting/>

Elizabeth waited and only in her very old age, when all cards were stacked against her and Zechariah, did the answer come. And God did it. Everyone in their community praised God. That's the end goal of waiting. Ephesians 3 says

²⁰Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, ²¹to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.