

"THE STORY OF ELIZABETH AND ZECHARIAH"

A Sermon by

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Park Avenue United Methodist Church
New York, New York
December 6, 1981

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INTRODUCTION

This is part one of a two part sermon dealing with two wonderful people that we tend to overlook and to pass by.

It's a tough business having to live in someone else's shadow. The Chrysler building in our own city - a handsome structure by any reckoning - has been all but lost in the sheen of that majestic lady that stands at 34th Street and Fifth Avenue and who not too long ago celebrated her 50th birthday. The New York City Opera suffers from being in the same town with the Met. And for years in the Yankee outfield, Tommy Henrich - "Old Reliable" - was eclipsed by that stylish super-star who played Center Field and who now bats for the Bowery Savings Bank, Joe DiMaggio. It's not easy to live in someone else's shadow.

And coming closer to home, for years this Church was over-shadowed by Christ Church, that magnificent "Cathedral of Methodism" at Park and 60th Street. Our sister Church down the street didn't know we even existed a few years back.

OVER-SHADOWED IN THE BIBLE

When it comes to being over-shadowed in the Bible, consider the case of Elizabeth and Zechariah. Elizabeth who? Zechariah what's his name? Most people know about Mary and Joseph, but you're apt to get some blank expressions and puzzled stares at the mention of Elizabeth and Zechariah. Have you ever heard a sermon about them?

Well, who were they? They were the parents of John the Baptist and John is one of the towering personalities of the Advent Season. His parents deserve a bit of attention because they raised a good boy who went on to become a great man. They're less celebrated than they ought to be because the action in which they were involved is seen as a sub-plot of the larger Advent saga. Chances are that a television editor would likely drop them from the story entirely and get things moving with Mary and Joseph and the trip from Nazareth up to Bethlehem by way of Jerusalem.

I've been living with Elizabeth and Zechariah for a few days this week and I appreciate their achievements. I'd like to share their story with you both today and next Sunday and win your affection to them.

GOOD WORD FOR THE ORDINARY

First-off, this story provides me with a bit of a launching pad to speak a good word for the ordinary in religion.

Both Elizabeth and Zechariah were of priestly lineage and both were well up there in years. Zechariah must have been close to 70 when we first meet him in chapter one of Luke's Gospel. He was not a "name" priest serving a prestigious congregation. He lived in the hill country of Judea, and I suppose we'd refer to him today as a rural pastor. Doubtless he drew the scorn of his more sophisticated colleagues down there in the city of Jerusalem.

On the face of it, there isn't much to notice about this couple. Luke puts them before us with this statement:

"In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah; and he had a wife of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth"

(Luke 1: 5)

Now there are three names that matter in that verse: Herod, Zechariah, Elizabeth. Herod's name, of course, was the significant one - the name all knew and before which all trembled. By comparison, Elizabeth and Zechariah were a couple of nobodies.

Herod. His every word, every edict, we would have carefully examined. We would have feared his wrath and cursed his gall. The name suggests the awesome, cruel, feared power of the state. But how wrong we would have been. For that ruthless, cruel ruler had no future. God uses Herod only to date the truly important. "A mere shadow on God's sundial" as someone once put it.

The future was not with Herod, but with that dottering old priest and his barren wife. Call them, if you will, "ordinary people"...and doing very ordinary things. Oh, two weeks out of the year, Zechariah would go up to Jerusalem to serve as a priest in the Temple. But other than that - day in and day out - year after year - they just stayed with it...priesting, comforting, encouraging, interpreting Faith and telling and re-telling the story of their Faith and how God was with them.

When you think about it, it was people such as these who galvanized the very soul of Israel. Israel wasn't much on military power. It had no outstanding genius for government, like Rome. Its land was not spectacular or that good. Their forte, their very strength was their faith, and men like Zechariah helped to keep the flame of faith burning.

UNDER-ESTIMATE THE ORDINARY Now charge me, if you will, with some professional self-interest, but I say it nonetheless: in our society we under-estimate the influence....under-appreciate the contributions of ordinary religion to the common good.

I have in mind here the divine worship offered up week after week, year after year, in the churches across our land...and around the world...the regular celebration of the Sacraments, the preaching of the Word, the marking of festal occasions - Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter. I have in mind the daily prayers and constant pastoral oversight that are performed by relatively obscure men and women of whom the world is hardly aware.

I always have an interest in finding out where the people who worship here come from. In most cases, it would seem, those on whom the life of this Church rests - humanly speaking - come from small, non-descript congregations in "out-of-the-way" places. Think about it...somebody did a good job on you.

Back yonder, somewhere in the hills upstate, Pulaski or Stirling, perhaps... or down there in Glenn Allen, Virginia, or East Bend or Brevard, North Carolina. Or way out there in the North West, Moses Lake, Washington, or Long Beach, California....the small towns and thriving cities across the land...or Annotto Bay in Jamaica, or the Baptist Church in Lusaka, Zambia, or a little Church in the Philippines. Anyway, somebody did a good job on you. Some Zechariah priested you and helped bring you to Jesus and helped to get us started on the path. And now it's your turn to do the same...here in this place.

In his book, The Children of Pride, Robert Manson Myers has given us a collection of letters that depict life in the South before, during and after the Civil War. The letters follow one another without much editorial comment. I

was especially fascinated by the influence of a small congregation in Midway, Georgia. Midway is just a little south of Savannah. Writes Myers,

"A bronze tablet to the left of the entrance identifies this imposing landmark as the Midway Congregational Church, erected in 1792. The Church has been called, 'The Cradle of the Revolutionary Spirit in Georgia....two of its sons, Lyman Hall and Button Gwinnett, were signers of the Declaration of Independence; two others, Daniel Stewart and James Screven, became Brigadier Generals in the Revolutionary Army. In recognition of the marked patriotism of the Midway Community during the War, the county of which the parish later became a part was honored by the name of Liberty...."

Six counties in Georgia today bear the names of Midway sons: Lyman Hall, Button Gwinnett, Daniel Stewart, James Screven, John Baker, Augustus Octavius Bacon. Four sons of Midway became early governors of Georgia: Lyman Hall, Button Gwinnett, Richard Howley, Nathan Brownson.

Among distinguished Midway pastors were Abiel Holmes, father of Oliver Wendell Holmes and Jedidiah Morse, father of Samuel F. B. Morse.

Descendants of the Midway community have found their way to the White House: Theodore Roosevelt was a great grandson of General Daniel Stewart, of Revolutionary fame; and Ellen Louise Axson, the first wife of Woodrow Wilson, was a granddaughter of the Rev. I. S. K. Axson, for 17 years pastor of the Midway Church.

It would be impossible to name or even to number here the countless clergyman, doctors, lawyers, professors, teachers, scientists, judges, legislators and soldiers who have left this tiny church to assume positions of influence and distinction throughout the nation and the world. For a rural community which at no time boasted more than a few hundred souls, and which was dispersed only a little more than a century after it was settled, such a record is indeed astonishing if not unique!"

All of which underscores the first point: the ordinary in religion. Don't sell it short. Its influence is long and its travelling power is great!

GOOD WORD FOR THE ELDERLY

among us.

This Bible story also provides us with an opportunity to say - a good word - for the elderly

~~Time doesn't permit me to develop this point this morning. I'll simply launch it and come back to it next Sunday.~~ This story reminds us that we're never too old to become spiritually pregnant. Zechariah and Elizabeth argued with the angel because they believed that they were too old to create and bring up a child. And too many people continue something of the same argument against the aging today. "Too old" is an epithet which becomes an epitaph. We are

burying people in America today under the tombstone of age. We deny them dignity and a place in our society and in our hearts because they're "too old". Time doesn't...

Let me leave you with these thoughts regarding Elizabeth and Zechariah, because some of you may not make it back next Sunday. They may have been old of body, but they were young of soul. They didn't stand around like sanctified versions of Archie and Edith Bunker singing, "Those were the days."

When it was still dark in Israel, they rose to chant their matins and anticipated the dawn. Or, to change the figure, when those around them were sounding taps, these two people were blowing reveille. And that's why we salute them today. Remember this: it isn't the number of candles on the cake that matters, but rather it's the candlepower of one's faith. And we have a few "seniors" in our church who remind me of them. They're my heroes!

We also may be creative if we refuse to believe that we are ever too old to produce love, beauty and truth. So I say to the seniors in our midst...I say to all of you: go on with your life, carry out your ministry to others and you will find as did Zechariah and Elizabeth and Mary and Joseph that "with God nothing shall be impossible".

LET US PRAY Grateful we are, O God, for this story of old filled with meaning for us even today. It reminds us that You so often speak to us through ordinary people who have remained faithful to you, and that the elderly among us have many blessings to share with us all. Grateful we are for the music and the poetry, the kindness and the wisdom that they quietly share with others. In the spirit of Christ, we pray. Amen.

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When it comes to being over-shadowed in the Bible, consider the case of Elizabeth and Zechariah. Have you ever heard a sermon about them? In twenty years in the ministry, this is my first time to preach on this venerable couple, a portion of whose story Jan read to you earlier in the service. Most people know about Mary and Joseph, but Elizabeth and Zechariah will draw some puzzled stares and blank expressions. Who were they?

Elizabeth and Zechariah were the parents of John the Baptist, and John is one of towering personalities of the Advent Season. His parents deserve a bit more attention than we give them. They're less celebrated than they ought to be because the action in which they were involved is generally seen as a subplot of the larger Advent saga. A television editor would likely drop them from the story altogether and begin with Mary and Joseph.

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Charge me, if you will, with professional self-interest, but I say it nonetheless: in our society we under-estimate the influence and under-appreciate the contributions of ordinary religion to the common good. I have in mind here the divine worship offered up week after week, year after year, the regular celebration of the sacraments, the preaching of the word, the marking of festal occasions. I have in mind the daily prayers and constant pastoral works that are performed by relatively few obscure men and women of whom the world is hardly aware.

I always have an interest in finding out where all of you come from. In most cases, it would seem, those on whom the life of this church rests - humanly speaking - come from small, non-descript congregations in out-of-the-way places. Think about it. Somebody did a good job on you. Back yonder...somewhere in the hills upstate, perhaps, or down in Pennsylvania, or out in Ohio, or in the mountain country of Virginia, West Virginia, North Carolina....or the small towns of the South, or the Western plains of Texas, or in the small villages of New England, or places in the mid-west, some Zechariah priested you.

In his book, The Children of Pride, Robert Manson Myers has given us a collection of letters that depict life in the South before, during and after the Civil War. The letters follow one another without much editorial comment. I was fascinated by the influence of a small congregation in Midway, Georgia. Midway is just a little south of Savannah. Writes Myers,

"A bronze tablet to the left of the entrance identifies this imposing landmark as the Midway Congregational Church, erected in 1792.....the Church has been called, 'The Cradle of the Revolutionary spirit in Georgia'.....two of its sons, Lyman Hall and Button Gwinnett, were signers of the Declaration of Independence; two others, Daniel Stewart and James Screven, became brigadier generals in the Revolutionary Army. In recognition of the marked patriotism of the Midway Community during the Revolutionary War, the county of which the parish later became a part was honored by the name of Liberty.

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Among distinguished Midway pastors were Abiel Holmes, the father of Oliver Wendell Holmes and Jedidah Morse, the father of Samuel F. B. Morse. The scientist Louis LeConte, world-famed for his

"Do not be afraid Zechariah, for your prayer
is heard and your wife, Elizabeth, will bear
you a son, and you shall call his name, John"

Zechariah demurred. Even angels get mad, and Gabriel responded by stating that the chosen priest would be dumb until the child was born. So Zechariah emerged from the Holy Place dazed and deaf and dumb to face a people waiting for a blessing from his lips that he could not deliver.

Prosaically Luke reports, "When his time of service was ended he went to his home". What a long day it must have been. Perhaps he had tried to leave earlier. His wife had to know about this. If only we had a video tape of that scene where Zechariah tried to share his gladness with his wife. How do you tell a wife that she is going to have a child if you can't talk? Did he rush into the back room for the cradle, wipe the cobwebs off it, blow away the dust and begin to rock it? How did he say it? In due time, Elizabeth was with child. And her experience proved a source of great comfort and encouragement to Mary.

Most of the heroes and heroines of the early part of Luke were old people. Three Gospel Psalms grace those pages, and they were all written by elderly people. Elizabeth turned to bless Mary. Zechariah gave us the famous Benedictus. At the time of the dedication of the infant Jesus, another old couple - Simeon and Anna - gave us the Nunc Dimittis.

CONCLUSION I do not wish to ~~thump~~ the obvious and speak at length about the shameful way we often deny ourselves the wisdom, the poetry, the music of the aged. We see signs that say, "Don't Waste Heat", "Don't Waste Light", "Don't Waste Water", "Don't Waste Food". Heaven help us, we need yet one more sign, "Don't Waste People". Aren't you glad that God trusted someone over thirty? Aren't you glad that the priests were smart enough to retire a person when he became dysfunctional and not when he reached a certain age. Part of our problem in America today is not unrelated to the tragic waste of people, especially older people. Think about it.

Sure there's a biological age - don't fight it. There's a social age - when they change our membership classification at the club, or when we're given the gold watch at work. There is psychological age, but there is also spiritual age.

Elizabeth and Zechariah were old of body, but they were young of soul. They didn't stand around like sanctified versions of Archie and Edith Bunker, singing, "Those were the Days". When it was still dark in Israel, they rose to chant their matins and anticipate the dawn. Or, to change the figure, when those around them were sounding taps, Elizabeth and Zechariah were blowing reveille. And that's why I salute them, and others like them among us today. Remember: it isn't the number of candles on the cake that matters, but rather it's the candlepower of one's faith. How true as we think of the elderly friends that bless our lives. Amaze you

The elderly. Don't sell them short. There's a lot there that they can share with us as we encourage them and invite them to do so. There's still one more thing that this story has to tell us, but we'll save it for next Sunday. Shall we pray.

PRAYER Grateful we are, O God, for this old story filled with meaning. It reminds us that thou dost speak to us through lives of ordinary people who have remained faithful to thee, and that elderly folks have many blessings to share with us all. Grateful we are for their music, people
poetry and wisdom. In the spirit.