

Elizabeth
Luke 1:5-25, 57-66
December 4, 2022 – Center Harbor Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Dr. Cathryn Turrentine

Dave's dad was a Methodist minister. He started out selling insurance and then felt a call to ministry. This was a radical change in the trajectory of life for the whole family. Dave's mom became a preacher's wife, and Dave and all his rambunctious brothers became PKs – preacher's kids. This was the 1950s, so there were a LOT of expectations about how a pastor's family would behave, not only in church, but all the time. They were expected to be silent and self-sacrificing always. It could be a pretty oppressive role for a spouse or a child back then, a role they did not choose for themselves, and one where all the attention and glory went to the pastor, not to the family.

Fast forward about 50 years. When Dave and I began dating, we were both university administrators. We had long discussions about how we would spend our time and our money if we were to get married. We had it all worked out. Then just a few years into the marriage, I felt a call to ministry. I heard from people in church and other women pastors who were my friends that they also saw gifts for ministry in me. This was not what Dave and I had negotiated about our future. Dave must have felt like he was reliving a nightmare. He had spent a lifetime building a career and a reputation of his own. He was an executive, a leader, a person of substance. He did not want to go back to being judged for every little thing he did by church members. He did not want to go back to being silenced while the pastor in the family got all the voice. He did not want to go back to being "less than." I didn't blame him for that at all, but I still felt this call to ministry. I assured Dave that this was the 2000s, not the 1950s, and besides, churches' expectations for husbands of pastors are just not the same as for wives. I promised he wouldn't have to wear a hat or play the piano. Still, he was leery.

So, Dave went to visit our pastor. She said in a loving way, "It is sometime going to feel like you are in a tug-of-war. You are on one side, God is on the other, and Cathy is in the middle. You are never, ever going to win that contest."

I don't know how Dave got from that moment ... to here ... in his heart, but it happened quickly. He jumped in with both feet. He asked where the seminaries were, and then he entered a nationwide job search so that we could relocate to a place where I could study. It is the most loving, generous gift I have ever received.

The anniversary of my ordination is later this week, and so I want to say thank you to Dave, and thank you to all of you, for the loving and generous way you always treat Dave, not as my appendage, but as the wonderful person he is in his own right. I could not be in ministry at all without his gift, and yours.

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Our scripture story this morning is about another preacher's spouse, Elizabeth. She comes from a priestly family herself, and she married a priest, Zechariah. She knew what she was getting herself into, I suppose, but still, it cannot have been easy being the wife of Zechariah, who stands in the Holy of Holies. Zechariah, who speaks to God on behalf of the people. Zechariah, who speaks to the people with the authority of God. That cuts short any arguments at home, you know? It's that tug of war between the preacher's spouse and God. Zechariah has all the authority in the Temple and at home. Elizabeth is "less than," not only because she is the priest's wife and not the priest, but also because she is an older woman who has not borne any children. It is a public disgrace, a punishment from God. No criticism of her husband is implied. Everyone believes that the infertility is hers alone.

Then one day, Zechariah takes his turn in the temple of the Lord, burning incense. The angel Gabriel appears to him and tells him that Elizabeth will conceive and give birth to a son who will be filled with the Holy Spirit, and they are to name him John. (John the Baptist, as it turns out.) Zechariah is confused and asks, "How can this be, since my wife and I are ... (ahem) ... getting along in years?" The angel doesn't care for Zechariah's backtalk, so he tells Zechariah that he will have to be silent – mute – for nine months, until the child is born and is given the name John.

Sure enough, Elizabeth conceives. For nine long months, this child is growing in her. Something holy is growing in her, despite her age. For nine months, Elizabeth's is the only voice that can be heard in their home. Elizabeth takes center stage. Zechariah the priest recedes.

Eventually the child is born. Elizabeth and her friends rejoice! On the eighth day, the day when baby boys are circumcised and babies are to be named, everyone assumes that the child will be named Zechariah, after his father. But Elizabeth says, "No, his name is John." They argue with her. "There's no

one in your family named John,” they say. Consternation ensues. Finally, Zechariah asks for something to write with, and he confirms what Elizabeth has said. “His name is John.”

Zechariah gets his voice back then, but that is sort of an afterthought in this story. Elizabeth has spoken. Her voice has prevailed. Her voice has carried the sacred message from God about this child. Elizabeth has carried out the priestly role – to speak with authority to the people on behalf of God. She has spoken God’s truth, even though it isn’t the message that the people expect to hear.

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I love our old pastor who cautioned Dave about what it can be like to be a pastor’s spouse, and I hear some truth in what she said. Sometimes it is challenging, especially when the whole family is uprooted and refocused on seminary studies, especially when the ordination process gets stressful. But I disagree with her picture of the tug-of-war. Today’s Bible story tells us that God is not on one side of that contest. God does not just stand on the side of the pastor. Elizabeth’s story reminds us that God stands with all of us.

It is easy for us to think that the person standing in the pulpit is the one with the last word, or maybe all the words, about God. But God speaks through each of us in our turn. This is the great power of the church. It is about God working not just through one of us but through ALL of us. We are never too old for something holy to grow in us. We are never too young to speak the truth. Each of us can pray a powerful prayer when we speak from our hearts. Each person is made in the image of God and each of us carries that divine spark that can illuminate a moment. ALL of us can speak a word of love that heals a heart. For this I say, “Thanks be to God.”

Amen