

LIZ CURTIS HIGGS

Best-selling author of *The Girl's Still Got It*

The
Women
of
Christmas



Experience the Season Afresh with
ELIZABETH, MARY,
and ANNA

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*To my sister-in-law,
Annie,
born on Christmas Day.*



*You are a gift to our family
and to everyone who knows you.
Bless you for encouraging me
in so many ways, dearie,
year after year.
I love you!*

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One

Joy to the world, the Lord is come!
Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepare him room,
And heaven and nature sing,
And heaven and nature sing,
And heaven, and heaven, and nature sing.

—ISAAC WATTS, “JOY TO THE WORLD,” 1719





Let Every Heart Prepare Him Room

Long before silver bells jingled, Christmas lights twinkled, and horse-drawn sleighs went dashing through the snow, God reached down from heaven with the best gift of all.

Love, wrapped in swaddling clothes. Hope, nestled in a manger.

Three women played vital roles in the Messiah's birth: Elizabeth, Mary, and Anna. Even if you've met them before, I think you'll enjoy getting to know them better. And I'll love sharing the journey with you!

Their lives were markedly different. Elizabeth was married, settled, mature. Her kinswoman Mary was young, still living at home, and engaged to a carpenter. Anna was an elderly widow whose every waking hour was wholly dedicated to God. Before we reach the final page, we'll understand why God chose them.

And why—this part boggles my mind—God has chosen us too.


We'll also spend time with the men in their lives, including an old priest called Zechariah, a new husband named Joseph, and a brother of the faith known as Simeon.

Still, it's the women who carry the story, teaching us by example to wait upon the Lord, to trust him with everything that matters to us, to pray until our prayers are answered. We'll also hear from more than two dozen women who shared their comments through my online Bible study. Their honesty and humility bring these ancient stories right into the present, showing us what it means to surrender our lives to the One who loves us most.


And he truly does love you. Always has, always will. If only one message from this book finds a home in your heart, let it be that God's love for you is wider, longer, higher, and deeper than you can ever imagine!

Christmas is so much more than a holiday. So much more than buying and wrapping and cooking and eating and trimming with tinsel and mailing out cards. It's a season for reflection, for preparation, for renewal. The perfect time to put aside our shopping lists and reach for our Bibles, where the story of the Christ child awaits us.

Curl up in a comfy spot, and let's dive in.

 *“This year I want to look up and be refreshed anew by the true meaning of it all.”*

—MIRIAM 

 And so we begin with Elizabeth, our first woman of Christmas.

Anticipation builds as we turn to the book of Luke. We know what’s coming. Or do we? The forgotten details, the overlooked truths may catch us by surprise and teach us something new about God and his love for us. The birth of his Son is a story that never grows old, never loses its power to alter our thinking and realign our priorities.

Mary is, of course, the most famous of our trio, yet her older kinswoman Elizabeth moved into the limelight first, along with the man she married.

In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, . . . *Luke 1:5*

Just an ordinary priest. The streets of Jerusalem were full of them. Depending on the translation, his name is spelled “Zacharias,” “Zachariah,” even “Zachary.” Same guy. Zechariah was

not only a good man; he was also God's man, descended from a long line of holy servants.

...who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah;...

Luke 1:5

Abijah was just one of twenty-four divisions,¹ so there were *lots* of priests. Since the time of Aaron, their duties included handling various offerings, giving thanks, and singing praises at the gates of God's dwelling place.² A worthy calling, though with so many priests, few were singled out for ministry within the temple's Holy Place.

Now that we have Zechariah sorted out, here's the woman we've been eager to meet.

...his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron.

Luke 1:5

A popular name, much loved through the centuries. My mother was an Elizabeth, I'm one too, and so is my daughter-in-law, though each generation picked a different nickname: Betty, Liz, and Beth. The meaning remains the same: "God's promise" or "oath of God."

Like her husband, Elizabeth was in Aaron's lineage, which made her a fine catch since marrying a woman of priestly ances-

try was a special blessing.³ Among her many tasks Elizabeth kept her husband's priestly garments in good repair and welcomed visitors into their home to discuss temple matters.⁴

We know this couple. We've seen them at church, exchanged smiles in the parking lot. Happily married people, busily serving the Lord, always doing good.

Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. *Luke 1:6*

They lived "honorably before God" (MSG) and humbly as well, knowing the Lord alone was their source of righteousness. It may sound as if Elizabeth and her husband were obedient and so earned God's approval, but, in truth, it was the other way around. God's power and strength at work in their lives made it possible for them to do the right thing in the first place.

The same is true for us, of course. Though it's tempting to praise people for their goodness, it's better to praise the One who made them. "For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."⁵

After such cheery news about Elizabeth and her hubby in the opening verses, it's time for the other shoe to drop. When God's blessings are piled on our heads, it's easy to be faithful.

The real test comes when disappointment calls and sorrow pulls up a chair.

But they were childless... *Luke 1:7*

Oh no. Not these two godly souls?

Afraid so. Even with all their goodness and righteousness, sadness had crept into their home. In their world children were seen as God's reward for faithful service.⁶ We can guess the desperate questions that threaded through their minds as each year went by without a child in their arms. *Are we not faithful enough, Lord? Have we dishonored you in some way?*

Whenever they heard the psalmist's words "The fruit of the womb is a divine reward,"⁷ Zechariah and Elizabeth must have steeled themselves, hiding their pain, even as they avoided side-long glances from their neighbors.

...because Elizabeth was not able to conceive...


Luke 1:7

In days of old the woman bore full responsibility. "Elizabeth's infertility" (PHILLIPS) was the problem. She was the one marked as "barren" (ASV). How often had Elizabeth heard that stark word whispered as she passed by? Some women surely had pity in their eyes, others a certain disdain, wondering what

Elizabeth had done to displease God. Whenever she joined them at the well early in the evening, the women's lively chatter about sons and grandsons must have faded into an awkward silence.

In the eyes of her neighbors, Elizabeth "had failed at the most basic level."⁸ A wife was expected to give her husband sons and so maintain the honor of his name.⁹ The consequences for not doing so could be grave: disfavor, humiliation, divorce.¹⁰

My heart goes out to Elizabeth, just as I ache for every couple who has longed for children only to have their hopes dashed.

 *"Though disappointed and quietly suffering, Elizabeth held on to God's promises and clung to the fact that she was God's daughter, all the while waiting, praying, and listening."*

—SHERRY 

A woman in her early thirties confessed to me, "Apparently my husband and I cannot have children." Since they have yet to conceive, she fears it might never happen—a logical assumption based on solid evidence. Still, that word *apparently* is very telling. Faith is believing what isn't seen, what isn't apparent. This wise young woman is quietly leaving a door open for a miracle.

Elizabeth needed a miracle too. She was not only barren; she was also past her prime, and so was her man.

...and they were both very old. *Luke 1:7*

We don't know their ages, whether forty or sixty or eighty. We know only that Elizabeth and Zechariah were "well stricken in years" (ASV). More to the point, they were "too old to have children" (GOD'S WORD), just like the patriarch Abraham, and his wife, Sarah. We know how *that* story ended: with a baby in ninety-year-old Sarah's arms!

The stage was set for God to intervene and make the impossible possible. I get chills even thinking about it, don't you? Christmas is all about miracles. The first one is ready to unfold.

Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God,... *Luke 1:8*

Since priests didn't have a retirement age,¹¹ Zechariah was still performing his priestly duties when an unexpected blessing came his way.

...he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood,... *Luke 1:9*

This business of casting lots—rather like throwing dice—doesn't sound very spiritual, but that's how priests determined God's will. Regardless of the method, Sovereign God selected Zechariah for this assignment.

...to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense.

Luke 1:9

Because there were so many priests to choose from, this would have been the high point of Zechariah's ministry, literally a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to offer sweet incense at the altar. According to the Law of Moses, a priest "must burn fragrant incense on the altar every morning when he tends the lamps. He must burn incense again when he lights the lamps at twilight so incense will burn regularly before the LORD for the generations to come."¹²


And when the time for the burning of incense came,
all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.

Luke 1:10

So how many were present "at the hour of the perfume" (YLT)? We're told a "whole multitude" (ESV) gathered to pray, though not everyone in Jerusalem came. Just "pious Jews who loved to be near the temple when sacrifices were offered."¹³

Elizabeth was surely among them, stationed with the others in the Court of Women, all “silently lifting up their hearts to God in prayer.”¹⁴ It was quiet enough in the open courtyard to hear the tinkling of the bells around the hem of the high priest’s sky-blue robe as he and several other priests led Zechariah into the Holy Place to burn the sacred incense.

Her husband’s big moment had finally come. How proud Elizabeth must have been! She’d not given Zechariah a son, but she’d provided constant support during their many years together. You can be sure Elizabeth did her part that day in the Court of Women, perhaps whispering the words of David: “May my prayer be set before you like incense.”¹⁵

 *“Elizabeth didn’t take matters into her own hands.
She trusted her future to God’s capable hands.”*

—MARBARA 

Another elderly woman, far older than Elizabeth, was no doubt present since “she never left the temple.”¹⁶ We’ve not met Anna yet, but we will in a later chapter. For now we can picture her among these devout women, worshipping God.

Meanwhile, the other priests withdrew from the Holy Place, leaving Zechariah alone to perform the offering.¹⁷ Since he had never done this task before, if he was nervous, even a little jumpy, no one would have blamed him. He was expected

to burn incense each morning and evening for a full week¹⁸ in the very presence of the Lord Almighty.

Before him stood the altar, made of wood and covered with pure gold. Twice as tall as it was wide, the waist-high altar had a golden horn on each corner. On one side stood the golden table with the bread of the Presence.¹⁹ And on the other, the golden lampstand.

Everything was in place. All was in readiness.

But Zechariah was not alone.

Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him,
standing at the right side of the altar of incense.

Luke 1:11

Oh my. Even serving God in his holy temple, Zechariah was unprepared for something holy to happen. Yet it did. God swept away the cloud of incense and made his presence known by way of an angel.

When Zechariah saw him, he was startled...

Luke 1:12

Who wouldn't be? His response is captured in "a word of deep emotion,"²⁰ meant to convey everything he was thinking and feeling: "amazed" (NIV), "bewildered" (KNOX), "alarmed"

(GNT), and “shaken” (NLT). We’re right there with him, imagining this heavenly creature close enough to touch.

Zechariah knew about God’s messengers, but he’d never encountered one before, nor had any priest of his acquaintance. For more than four hundred years, God had not spoken a fresh word to his people, Malachi having been the last prophet, about 435 BC.²¹

Now an angel stood beside the altar of incense. *An angel.* “The thin veil between the seen and the unseen had been rent for an instant.”²² No wonder Zechariah was “paralyzed” (MSG).


...and was gripped with fear. *Luke 1:12*

We know from descriptions found elsewhere in the Bible that angels are bigger than life, whiter than snow, and scarier than all get-out. Maybe that’s why Elizabeth’s husband was “terrified at the sight” (CJB).

But the angel said to him: “Do not be afraid,
Zechariah;...” *Luke 1:13*

The angel wasn’t scolding Zechariah; he was comforting him. “Fear not” (KJV), he said. “Calm down!” (VOICE). I need these words embroidered on a pillow, framed on my wall, scrib-

bled across my mouse pad—anywhere I might see them—to remind me that God is in charge, God can be trusted, and God does everything out of love. *Fear not. Calm down.* Why do we fear the worst from God, when he loves us completely and always gives us what is best?

 “*Even the things we don’t understand are a display of the goodness of God.*”

—STEPH 

“...your prayer has been heard.” *Luke 1:13*

Good news indeed. But *which* prayer of Zechariah’s? The one about Elizabeth? About her infertility? If so, his next question might have been “What took you so long?” Surely this righteous couple had prayed for the gift of children for decades. Why the delay?

According to God’s magnificent plan, the perfect time had only now arrived. And if Zechariah’s prayer went beyond the personal—if it was for the redemption of Israel, a fitting petition for a devout priest—God had heard that request as well and was ready with an answer.

The angel’s next words must have shaken Zechariah to the core.

“Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John.” *Luke 1:13*

A son? A son! Zechariah had waited the whole of his life to hear those words. And this holy messenger really cut to the chase. So much information packed into one brief sentence.

“Your wife Elizabeth” made it clear that Zechariah was not to seek out some younger, more fertile woman (shades of Abram and Hagar in Genesis 16). Elizabeth was the one chosen by God. “Will bear you” was a promise that left no room for doubt. Not it *might* happen; it *will* happen. Every conception has a touch of the miraculous—this one far more than most. Elizabeth barren? Not anymore.

“A baby boy” (ERV) was always welcome in ancient Israel, where sons were “like arrows in the hand of a warrior.”²³ “You must call his name John” (AMP) assured this frightened father-to-be that he would have the honor of conferring upon his son the name John, meaning “the Lord is gracious.”²⁴

While Zechariah was still reeling from the thought of having an heir, the angel told him more about this extraordinary child to come. It was an impressive list, a veritable top ten, spelled out in Luke 1:14–17:

He will be a joy and delight to you.

He will cause many to rejoice because of his birth.

He will be great in the sight of the Lord.

He will never touch wine or strong drink.

He will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born.

He will bring back many people of Israel to the Lord their
God.

He will go before the Lord in the spirit and power of
Elijah.

He will turn the hearts of parents to their children.

He will turn the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom
of the righteous.

He will make ready a people prepared for the Lord.


The last one is how we best know John, who would one day be known as John the Baptist: “A voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’”²⁵ Imagine hearing all those accolades about your son even before he was conceived! Everything a godly parent could hope for.

Our father-to-be should have been joyful and grateful. Instead he was doubtful. Zechariah believed in God, but he wasn’t certain the Lord could overcome an obstacle like Elizabeth’s infertility. No, the man wanted proof.

Zechariah asked the angel, “How can I be sure of this?” *Luke 1:18*

Really? Wasn't the appearance of an angel enough? This elderly priest should have known God was trustworthy. Instead, he asked, "By what sign am I to be assured of this?" (KNOX).

It's easy for me to find fault with this man—and hard to admit how many times I've done the same thing. *Show me, Lord. Convince me.* Beneath my bravado hides a frightened child. *Do you really mean it, Father? Do you love me that much?*

 *"I understand Zechariah's uncertainty. I fear I may be keeping God from working with my own doubts and fears."*

—STACY 

Like Zechariah, we sometimes forget whom we're talking to. The promises of God seem "too good to be true—too hard to believe!"²⁶ Yet *believing* is what Christmas is all about. Believing Jesus is the Son of God. Believing he was born of a virgin. Believing he came to earth to rescue us from our doubts and save us from our sins.

Zechariah, however, was a practical fellow. After asking the angel, "Do you expect me to believe this?" (MSG), he justified his lackluster faith with facts.

"I am an old man..." *Luke 1:18*

From Zechariah's viewpoint, fathering a child at his age would be impossible. He was also worried about his "old woman" (MSG).

"...and my wife is well along in years." *Luke 1:18*

Scholars believe Elizabeth was menopausal, perhaps forty.²⁷ Whatever her age, in her husband's opinion she was "beyond her childbearing years" (GOD'S WORD). But she wasn't beyond the touch of God, the Creator of all things, the Author of life. His own Son would later say, "With God all things are possible."²⁸ Why would a person's age matter to our eternal God?

The Lord hadn't forgotten Elizabeth, nor had he tarried in answering her prayer without a good purpose. He chose her—an older woman with an unproven womb—in order to display his power, his might, his authority. And he blessed her to honor her faithfulness.

The truth is, God's strength is fully revealed when our strength is fully depleted. His power is made perfect in our weakness.²⁹ He's a refuge for the oppressed; he's a stronghold in times of trouble.³⁰ He is God, and believe me, he's got this!

An old man filled with doubt and fear was about to find

out just how powerful a God he served. And his wife, Elizabeth, praying with her sisters of the faith, would soon discover that, whatever her age, she was still precious in God's sight.

As are you, beloved. Absolutely.