

December 13, 2020

“Altar-ed Christmas: Elizabeth”

[Luke 1:39-56](#)

What do you do . . . when you don’t know what to do?

Do you panic? Act impulsively?

Get on your knees and pray?

Shut down and become paralyzed?

Isolate? Do you make a list of pros and cons?

Go out to coffee with a trusted friend?

How about if this decision of what to do is connected to what God wants you to do?

What’s your first move? Go to move? Best move?

Let’s go so far as to say you’ve heard clearly from God. You know what He wants you to do. You’ve even agreed to it! Let’s say, in an amazing moment of faithful and devoted discipleship, you even said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to Your word.” (Luke 1:38) What if your at that place?

Is there anything left to do?

Do you still need some help with the ‘Now What?’

Of course, you do. And of course, Mary did too. And here’s what happened next in the Life-Altering work of God.

[\[Read Luke 1:39-45\]](#)

As all of us have discovered, are discovering, or will discover as we follow Jesus, life altering/altar-ing moments don’t necessarily crystallize immediately into some clear action plan. Nor does having clarity about what God wants from us and in us mean we don’t need more help along the way. I don’t know anyone who doesn’t need someone! Do you?

Let’s back up. Let’s not put ourselves fully in Mary’s shoes; nobody really can. Let’s just say, maybe you’ve heard from God but it’s still a little murky. OR God has been clear about . . . His plan regarding giving and generosity; or His desire for how He wants you to pay attention to the words you use and how you use them; or His road map regarding sexuality – whether you’re married or single; or His call for just and fair living . . . [He’s been clear] but you’re not yet at the “Here am I” stage. In times when we really want our lives to be in God’s hands, but things are still a little fuzzy, or we’re not necessarily ready to take the clear plunge He’s calling us to take, is our first instinct to process on your own?

Or do you have a trusted friend you can turn to?

Someone who cares about you AND about God’s Kingdom?

I don’t know anyone who doesn’t need someone! But you don’t just need ANYONE; you need an Elizabeth. Sometimes we settle for isolation and ‘rugged independence.’ And that’s almost always a terrible plan. But even when we turn to others for help, finding the right person is another tricky task. I think we actually need God’s help to figure out who it is He has prepared to help us. Mary gets some very direct guidance of where to go next to figure out what to do next. Gabriel says, “And now your relative Elizabeth . . .” (Luke 1:36) Elizabeth? I know where I’m going. “Mary set out and went with haste . . .” (Luke 1:39)

Who is that go-to person for you? And how quickly do you go to them for encouragement, guidance, a listening ear, and their collaboration in the Kingdom-work God has called you to?

Did you notice Mary doesn’t go to her parents right away? Or Joseph? That would have been a disaster. They were NOT ready or able to help; not in the way Mary needed help.

Have you ever gone to someone for guidance and help concerning the things of God (or life in general) and then came to realize God wasn’t sending you to them or that they were the wrong person to help you in your time of need?

I was thinking about some of the times I needed help discerning God’s calling and plan for my life. They were all connected to my calling to vocational ministry, but I share them with the hopes that they might trigger thoughts about people you thought might be helpful as you were seeking God’s will for your life. I thought of:

- 1) My mom’s inability to help me navigate my calling to ministry during college.
- 2) My youth pastor’s theological tunnel vision regarding where I should go to seminary.
- 3) Our pastor in New Jersey’s advice on getting an extra degree were I to stay an extra year after my M. Div. He missed what I was asking and only spoke about which degree would further my pastoral career.
- 4) My first year field education pastor’s advice on my resume when I started to seek my first call. He made the assumption that I didn’t really want to do youth ministry; that youth ministry wasn’t real pastoral work.

These were all good people; godly people. And they all had advice. But none of them were a God-ordained Elizabeth for me; at least not at that time.

What made Elizabeth the perfect person to go to (beyond being female and pregnant), and how does that help us think about the person God may be directing us to when we are seeking His will and needing encouragement to surrender to Him?

What kind of person does God tend to use to help Him in His life-altering work?

Elizabeth had been quietly listening for the last 5-6 months. She had been in The Ultimate Lockdown with Zechariah. They had been pondering God's Word and His promises (even in the silence and hand motions/sign language). She was caught up in something larger and bigger than herself. I don't think she had a 'friend to go to' but I'm assuming that her and Zechariah were good for each other in those 5 months of seclusion. They didn't have their own Bibles, or apps on their phones, but they knew the scriptures from memory and must have been rehearsing specific promises from the Law and Prophets about Messiah. They were reviewing the when and where of it all.

I know that's a LOT to ask of another person, but for the weighty matters of life this is the kind of person you and I need.

Elizabeth was so in-tune with the will and plan of God, and so un-distracted by all that was swirling around her, that she quickly saw, felt and discerned what was going on in God's larger story when Mary entered. Elizabeth was able to distinguish between just another kick from little John and a revelation from God that the young, virgin standing before her was somehow connected to God's promise and plan of Messiah.

We all need an Elizabeth if we are committed to being "Rooted in Jesus, Growing in His Love, and Branching Out to Serve Others." If we just need advice about investment strategies, vacation options, or what to do about our bad back (which aren't wrong things to inquire about); if our biggest questions have to do with whether so-and-so likes us or whether or not an outfit is the right color or which church has the best music ministry (also not wrong to wonder about) . . . but if that's all we're contemplating, then we don't really need an Elizabeth. A trustworthy person who knows us somewhat and has a decent head on their shoulders will do just fine.

But if we're dealing with the stuff of redemption and restoration; if we're trying to find God's place for us in His larger story; if we're interested in the Kingdom of God breaking through into the kingdoms of this earth . . . then you don't just need ANYONE; you need an Elizabeth.

For Mary, Zechariah and Elizabeth, this is about more than a couple of babies – although it includes that. This is about the breaking in of the Kingdom. Everything in the scriptures was coming into focus. Grace and truth were on the way. Mary ended up singing about BIG THINGS as a result of her time with Elizabeth. She sang, "God has scattered the proud . . . He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty . . . [what was about to happen in the birth of Jesus and John had to do with God keeping] the promise He made to our ancestors, to

Abraham and his descendants forever.” (Luke 1:51-55) This was a BIG deal! And for big stuff like that, I don’t know anyone who doesn’t need someone!

If you and I have or are going to have any connection with some of God’s big stuff, we’ll definitely need someone to come alongside us. Not only can’t we do it without God. We can’t do it without others. We are in desperate need of being in the company of others in deep, life-altering ways. Walter Brueggemann says, “What human persons and human community most need is abiding, committed, transformative solidarity.” (Walter Brueggemann in *Celebrating Abundance*) Elizabeth, who may have been 4-6 times the age of young Mary, joins her in solidarity. I would love to have a video of their next three months they spent together. What did they talk about? Pray about? Sing about? Whatever it was, they experienced abiding, committed, transformative solidarity. And now, because of her time with Elizabeth, Mary is ready to go home and deal with the fallout of – as I said last week – a life that would get worse before it got better.

This Advent, may you and I pay attention to the BIG STUFF God has for each of us – something that has to do with His work of redemption and renewal. May God grant us and lead us to an Elizabeth. And, for many of us, may He remind us that He is preparing us (or has prepared us already) to be an Elizabeth for someone else.

Advent is a great time to prepare, train and become more proficient as a person who is alert to others and God’s coming kingdom. Advent is a great time to practice being silent and still so that we can be more present with others when they come to us with thoughts and questions and hopes and dreams swirling around them. Advent is a great time to let ‘what is growing in us’ keep growing – while finding ways to help others clarify and celebrate God’s growing Kingdom-plan in their lives. And because I don’t know anyone who doesn’t need someone . . . Advent is a great time for more life-altering Mary and Elizabeth moments.

Questions for Personal Reflection and Small Group Discussion

1. Did anyone come to mind as I asked if you had an Elizabeth?
What did you go to him/her for? Why did you go to them?
2. Has God ever led you to someone who you needed to help you sort out your life and God's will? How did that come about?
3. How prevalent are people like Elizabeth in our culture? What keeps us from having more like her? What's keeping us from being more like her?
4. What's the difference between actively looking for someone to mentor and waiting for God to send someone to you? Which approach are you more drawn to?
5. What two or three disciplines and routines could you put into your life – this Advent and beyond – to prepare for the arrival of someone who needs you to be their Elizabeth?
6. What does this passage have to say about being "Rooted in Jesus, Growing in His Love [Together], [and] Branching Out to Serve Others"?