

Time of Grace Ministry
Heroes of Christmas: Elizabeth
Luke 1:32-45
November 12, 2017

Pastor Jon Enter

Welcome to Time of Grace! I'm Pastor Jon Enter. It happened to me twice recently. I ran into an old friend I hadn't seen for a while, greeted them and said, "Hey, great to see you! How are you doing?" And the person answered me back - both times; both people - "I'm fine. How are you?" I could tell though by the look on their face, the way that they said that, they weren't fine. And so, I asked them, "No, really. Really, how are you?" And that's when they opened up; the deep hurt, the deep pain that was on the inside, just came flowing out of each one of them.

What's the pain that's in your heart and on your life right now? And you're stuck; you're stuck waiting on God. And waiting on God is never fun; it's always difficult because we know God's got power. God's got might. God's got ability. He spoke and the world came into existence. God spoke his almighty word and the mountains grew just so tall. God spoke his almighty word and the oceans depths went just so low. God spoke and things happened. So why doesn't God just speak? Why doesn't he speak right now for you to help you with the pain that you're in right now?

Pastor Mark Jeske is going to open up the Scriptures to you and study yet another hero of faith. We're looking at Elizabeth today and the pain that she had in her life that she did not have a child; a pain that a lot of people feel. A hurt, waiting on God, wondering, "God, when are you going to help me? When are you going to show yourself and reveal yourself and give me the peace that I need in my life?"

Terry Horton felt that same exact way. Terry Horton was a retired female truck driver; crisscrossing the nation on 18 wheels of glory. And she finishes out her career as a truck driver and she doesn't really have a lot of money to her name. She's kind of broke and she takes up window shopping at thrift stores just to kind of pass the time. A little angry, a little upset, that God has forgotten her. She's been so faithful in her work and she doesn't have anything to show for it. Well, one day she's at a thrift store, she finds this canvas folded up. A lot of paint splattered on it; she thought it was ugly. Thought it would be perfect to throw some darts at. It was marked for eight dollars, she buys it for five dollars, goes home, hangs it up, invites a friend to come over, throw some darts, have some cold ones, and the friend looks at it and goes, "I think you've got a Jackson Pollock on your hand." And Terry goes, "What's a Jackson Pollock?" Well, a Jackson Pollock is a master abstract expressionist. What does that mean? It means someone who throws paint on a canvas and charges a lot of money. What Terry had in her possession that she paid five dollars for was worth 50 million dollars.

Here she is complaining to God, "God, when are you going to show up? When are you going to reveal yourself?" And everything she needed, she already had. God was at work for her. God is at work for you. Whether you perceive him or not, God's always got a plan. God's always working for you and if you can't understand what God is doing for you, it often means that God's

plan is bigger than your perception. That is what we're going to see today as we tune in with Pastor Mark Jeske and learn more on Elizabeth right here.

Pastor Mark Jeske

This is the second in my set that I'm bringing you called "Advent Heroes." Last week we talked a little bit about her husband, Zach, Zechariah. Today, I want to talk about his trophy wife, Elizabeth. A post-menopausal woman who thought that pregnancy was now no longer biologically possible. And yet, God asked her to believe the unbelievable and to believe possible the impossible. And she did! She's one of my heroes because she's closer to my age; the age at which people don't have young children anymore. And you know, that's not such a bad idea. I understood and appreciated all over again why God gives young babies only to younger people. There's a reason for that, isn't there? I don't think I have the energy for it anymore. But Elizabeth somehow had to find the energy. She had a squirmy toddler and her little baby, John the Baptist, was just a squirmy little boy like every other squirmy little boy who was a pistol and full of energy and full of spunk and full of inquisitiveness and she had to ride herd on him as an older gal. That just makes me love her right out of the gate.

I also love this woman because I so resonate with the burden she had to drag around her whole life. You know, infertility is just really, really hard. It's such a painful subject; nobody even wants to talk about it. Even people for whom that is their life, it's so painful they don't bring it up to their friends. Their friends usually have the good taste not to ask. But this woman – and we know for sure because of the words we're going to hear in just a minute – this woman had to drag around this sadness in her heart her whole life and it influenced everything she did and was as an adult. Everything she did, there was always, "Yeah, but I don't have any children."

So why is that such a big deal? For one, her arms are empty. She ached to love her own flesh and blood; wanted to hold not somebody else's baby, she wanted to hold hers. And I know we still have that urge going on in our hearts, don't we? She had empty arms and God let those empty arms go on year after year, decade after decade, until menopause hit and she thought, "Now I can't. Now it's over." So that sadness was there. It made her feel like I'm maybe not fully a woman. Like, back in the day, everybody blamed the woman like, "You're sterile," or "You're infertile," or something, even though it's at least 50 percent as likely that the male equipment is where the breakdown is. The woman felt it most keenly. It hurt her sense in society of being viewed as a fully competent woman because she had no kid. It made her frustrated that she felt like a failure as a wife because she couldn't give a baby, an heir, a son to her husband, Zechariah. And that dear man, of course, had his own sorrow, but I think it hit her worse and that makes me love her and appreciate her all the more. And it makes me understand all the more that God sometimes waits and waits and waits and waits and waits and he allows us to struggle and the pain and the struggle from God's viewpoint are not necessarily disasters or bad. Same as in your life – he has not fixed every owie that you have, has he? No, he hasn't. You are dragging around your own bag of rocks, are you not? And you've prayed about it. How many prayers do you think Elizabeth sent up to God for a child? A hundred, do you think? Nah, more than that. A thousand? At least. And it seemed to her, maybe, that her God that she was praying to was deaf. Same as you have feared: "Why isn't anything happening in my life? I prayed and prayed and I still got my shadows on my soul. I've still got my bag of rocks."

And God had in mind to utilize her platform of struggle and pain to do something later in life. I also – speaking of later in life – that’s another reason why this woman’s my hero is God had great stuff for her but in the last third of her life, not in the first two-thirds. He didn’t use her in her prime when she was at her physical peak; charming and beautiful and 21 and had the world at her fingertips. No, he waited until she feared, “I’m growing old and my husband and I will have no one to take care of us in our old age.” That’s another component of this disappointment and shadow, isn’t it? There was no social security back then; there were no nursing homes. There was no assisted living facility in 4 B.C. You counted on your kids to take care of you when you became frail. Where is that? With no child, that wasn’t going to happen so the woman just had a lot of sadness in her heart.

And then one day, her husband – who’s a priest – comes back from one of his shifts at the temple where he was a prayer and sacrifice leader, and her husband comes back mute and deaf. And somehow, through sign language or writing down a story, an amazing story for her, found something to write on and told her that you are going to have a baby after all. And God waited until it was a physical impossibility for either of them to think it’s a coincidence or we did this. He waited just as he waited with Abraham and Sarah; so long that they had to say it is all God’s doing. He was using them and built off of the platform of their hurt to do a demonstration of pure grace; where God is working a miracle to do something of incredible impact.

And another little piece of her sadness is that when you have a kid when you’re in your late 50s or older – who knows how old; maybe she’s like in her 60s for crying out loud – you’re not, she would not have been alive to see her baby, John the Baptist, do his ministry. How old was John, John the Baptist, when he did his extraordinarily important work of heralding the coming of the Son of God in human flesh? How old would he have been? Thirty! His relative, Jesus, was 30 when he began his ministry, when his tempting in the wilderness experience launched his ministry when his anointing in the Jordan River – he was age thirty. And if John the Baptist started just before Jesus, that would have meant he was 30, too; 30 also. So Elizabeth was probably dead and never got to see her boy do his thing. She died in hope; not really seeing what God was up to. That’s another reason she’s my hero because so much of our lives involves believing in things we cannot see, trusting that God has a plan, though we cannot detect it; trusting that it’s going to have a good outcome, even when all I’m seeing around me is some bad outcomes. And trusting that he’s really in charge and has a plan overall and in the end, everything’s going to work out because all I can see is short-term; I can’t see the long-term. All I can see is the physical universe; I cannot perceive the spiritual universe. All I see are fragments and glimmers when I so really want to see the fullness. But I have to wait. Waiting is hard. That’s what Advent is, isn’t it? It’s the waiting time. So I appreciate and love this woman for her attitude in Advent; her Advent attitude.

I’d like to have you hear a few of her words in this Advent time. If you would take a Bible near you – I hope you have one near you or look it up on your mobile device; go to Bible Gateway or one of those wonderful websites – and look for Luke 1 and we’re going to hear a few things that Elizabeth had to say.

When Zechariah, her now deaf and mute husband, come home, silent for his timeout, his nine month timeout. And give me just a quick comment on that – that sounds really punitive, doesn't it? Like, wouldn't a one-day timeout have done it? Wouldn't you have learned your lesson if you had only had to be deaf and mute for one day? Why nine whole months?

I'll tell you what – even though Zechariah and Elizabeth may never have lived to see John the Baptist's actual ministry, his spiritual formation was extremely important. They had to prepare him for years and years and years for the spiritual ministry he was going to have. So it was critically important that they have their heads screwed on straight and God thought a nine month timeout where this man will be in the quiet and in the dark is just about right.

Elizabeth caught on quicker. She did not have Zechariah's doubts. Even though this promise was crazy, she believed it. And she went into her own seclusion; maybe because she knew Zechariah would need a lot of help. Verse 25 shows that she realizes that this pregnancy did not result from Zechariah and her. "The Lord has done this for me," she said. She could connect the dots of cause and effect. "In these days he's show his favor and taken away my," what? "Taken away my disgrace." And you want to say, "Liz! Woman, dear woman, it's not a shame to be infertile. Ten percent of couples are infertile; it's everywhere. It's not a disgrace; don't say that. You know, you could come up with all the logic you want, all the carefully laid out rationale you want, and that's still how she's going to feel, isn't it? Cause this is not a rationale conclusion; this is an emotional feeling that lay on her heart like a soggy, gray, wet blanket all the time. She felt embarrassed. It's a disgrace. "Worse, maybe I'm getting punished!" No, Liz, you are not getting punished! You are a believer. All of your sins have been forgiven through the shedding of the blood of the sacrifices that connect you with your coming Savior; the great Lamb of God, Jesus. You are washed and cleansed. What's happening to you is not a punishment. Don't call it a disgrace.

Well, that's what you would have said. I'm just telling you – how can you not love this woman for keeping her spirits up when that's how she felt? I'm a disgraced woman. I'm a loser. I'm being judged. I'm being punished. I'm ashamed. Not anymore though, she said. I can hold my head up now. Finally, I have what my heart has been desiring.

Her younger relative, Mary, living up north in Nazareth in Galilee also finds out she is going to have a miracle baby; even more miraculous for it will be a virgin birth. There will be no human father connected with Mary's baby and Mary, being a little younger and more mobile, also not as far along in the pregnancy, she got herself together with this amazing news and she traveled south to the hill country of Judah; kind of a dry run for the pregnancy run she's going to make nine months later.

"She entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed in the child you will bear! Why am I so favored that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy.'" Isn't that kind of a cool thing? I've known a fair number of women now and talked to them in the last trimester when the babies within their wombs are really starting to move around and isn't it kind of fun when you're with a

very largely pregnant woman and she goes, “Ooh!” And you know, it hurts and it’s really uncomfortable, but I think they kind of like it and we do, too, because it shows that kid’s an active one and still kicking. So it’s just – and by the way, that’s just among the first of many hurts. You’ll be kicked many, many times and many, many ways, moms. And here, John the Baptist did a little dance right in his womb because somehow, he was aware that the Savior of the world was in the same room as he was.

“Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!” And that’s the main reason why Elizabeth is my hero; because she believed the unbelievable. She believed the invisible, the invisible promises of God. All she could see was a low income Jewish woman, unfortunately not even married yet. To all the world, she looked like yet another unwed mother going to have a baby without a marriage. So Mary was going to have to carry that embarrassment around. All you could see was this young woman with a smile but Elizabeth believed everything: That your baby is God in flesh. The mother of my Lord – think – put those words in your mouth: The mother of my Lord. God has a mother? What? Seriously? God is becoming incarnate in human flesh? Mary said, “Yes, he is. My soul rejoices in God my Savior” because he saw how lowly we were and he came down, all the way down here, to lift us up.

Here’s why I so love and admire Elizabeth. She saw through the outward disguises and the outward props and through God’s promises, she tied into the reality, which is that God has become incarnate to save me. That, my friends – here’s the grand finale; here’s the so what – if you have that in your Advent, then no matter what happens, you are going to have an awesome Christmas; regardless of the amount of financial transactions moving back and forth between the present-givers and the present-getters. You will have a very merry Christmas regardless of how many people are guests in your home or how many different gatherings you are invited to. It doesn’t matter whether we’ve got splendid Christmas weather or whether it’s dreary and horrible, you will have a great Christmas. If you have got that, you have got everything.

On the other hand, if you don’t have that, if your Christmas is not organized around the central, astounding miracle of the universe that God took on human flesh to save you and me, if you have not got that, I don’t care how fancy the presents are that you get, I don’t care how many parties you go to or how much – how many lights you string outside your house – none of it’s going to matter a hill of beans and there will be no lasting joy to make this Christmas truly merry. Just as Elizabeth dragged around unnecessarily a feeling of being a disgrace, without Christ as the center and his carnation, you don’t have Christmas; you just have winter parties.

So here is the absolute summation of why this woman is so dear to my heart and I want to be just like her: I want to believe that God can still do amazing things through older people. It’s not just the young ones in the prime of life; the mighty strong warriors and the beautiful princesses that God touches and says, “I’ve got a job for you.” Sometimes it’s the older ones.

You and I have no idea whom we’re touching in our lives; who’s listening to us and who’s watching. And you and I can have powerful impacts no matter what age we may be. I want to encourage you not to think that you’re washed up or nearing the end. You have no idea. You have no idea how useful God finds you or what it is that God needs for you to do. Just keep your

eyes open, keep your ears tuned to the word. And even if you have a husband who comes home from work suddenly and he is deaf and mute and he says, “We’re going to have a baby who’s going to become the advance man for the Savior of the world,” be ready to say, “Awesome! Isn’t God amazing,” and praise God for your life. For who you are, for your platform, for being so valuable to your God that your God in person was willing to squish himself so tiny to get into the womb of a poor Jewish woman, just to come to this world to be able to take you to his world. Isn’t that cool?

Thank you, Elizabeth. Amen.

Pastor Jon Enter

When I was in grade school, I got my hands on every single sports practice, sports team, I could possibly get connected with. The problem is those sports teams practice after school, the bus would go home, and there was about an hour, or maybe two hour gap, between when practices got done and my parents could finally pick me up after they were done working. So I went over to Great Uncle Martin's house and Great Aunt Myrtle's house. They lived literally right across the road from the church, the school, that I attended and I had an amazing time at their house. They helped me do my homework, played games with me, always had sweet treats for me to enjoy. And I didn't realize this until much later, but Great Uncle Martin and Great Aunt Myrtle both saw me as a guy who maybe could be a pastor someday and they were secretly encouraging me and guiding me along that pathway. They had so much love, so much joy, and were so involved inside of our church.

It wasn't until recently that I found out that they didn't have any children. That wasn't a blessing, a gift, that God had given to them. But rather than getting bitter about that, they got better. They had their focus turn and more love and time could be poured into their relationship with one another, their relationships with other people at church, they served and served and were pillars in the community at our church and took a lot of time and a lot of love into someone who truly, truly appreciates all that they did for me. They're on my short list of people that when I get to heaven, I can't wait to hug and go see again and thank them for the blessings that they were to me in my life; a blessing I still feel to this day.

Pastor Mark Jeske just encouraged you to find your purpose; to find the way that God could use you in your station of life no matter where you are to be a blessing to others. Uncle Martin and Aunt Myrtle, great as they were to me, they were a blessing. They found a purpose and poured love into me. Find love and pour love into other people. Find the joy that Jesus has waiting for you because in him, in Christ, there's always peace. There's always blessing no matter what is going on in your life.

Let us pray.

Christ Jesus, please help us. Help us with whatever peril or problem is on us in our lives. God, it is hard to wait on you. We know you've got power. We know that you've got great might. We've seen it so many times in our pasts when we were stuck in an impossible situation. And God, you did the miraculous for us!

Lord, if we're stuck right now, if there's someone who's hearing this message that is hurting because they're waiting on you and they're wandering and wavering in trust of you, may this message touch their heart. May this prayer give them encouragement that, Lord God, you will never leave us. You will never forsake us. That if we don't feel your presence, it's not that you've abandoned us; it's that our focus is turned a bit from you because God, you are always there; sheltering us and guiding us and loving us. Thank you for that grace. Thank you for that incredible favor that's always in your hearts and lives.

God, I ask that you make yourself obvious; that you show your grace and power and favor to those who are hurting. You do it in simple, subtle ways. As we open up Scripture and a verse speaks to our heart and guides us into encouragement and trust in you. You send loved ones and friends to us to be gospel encouragers, to show us what love is as they're there to hug us with your hug of love. And God, there's other miraculous ways that you show yourself. And so we thank you. Send those into our hearts. Send those into our lives to help us to grow in you, to know your power is almighty. Your power is for us. And we thank you for that grace. Thank you, Jesus. In your name we pray, Amen.

For Time of Grace, I'm Pastor Jon Enter. It all starts now!