

Elizabeth (*midrash for Advent worship 12.1.2016*)
based on Luke 1:5-25

It was a day like any other holy day.
Zechariah went to the temple.
It was in his blood, just like his grandfathers before him.
Lighting the lights, kindling the incense,
being chosen by drawing straws
to see who would take on the awe-inspiring task of stepping into the Holy of Holies.
I was at home baking bread, hauling water. Just like any other day.

And then, as the sun reached midday, I realized that he was later than usual.
A group of women came running to the house and my heart leapt into my throat.
They had been a part of the crowd outside the temple that day.
“Your husband is speechless!”
“A curse has come upon him!”
“Woe to you, Elizabeth!”
I had been used to this kind of alarmist chatter.
Any time something unexpected happened,
people were too quick to imagine that the sky was falling.
I had also been used to being called names.
I was barren, unable to bear children.
Many people thought it a curse,
a punishment for some unknown wrong I had done,
or maybe something my family had done.
That’s what I was brought up to believe, too.

But honestly, as I searched my own past, my family’s past, I came up with nothing.
As far as I could tell, we had been blameless in the sight of the Lord,
seeking to live good and righteous lives.
We made sure to follow the rules;
and if we slipped up a little,
we made the required offerings for our trespasses (and often even a little more).

It haunted me, this sense of curse.
It was how people understood that the world worked, but somehow I couldn’t believe it fully.
I couldn’t imagine what God was upset about.
And even if I had done something wrong,
it was certainly unintentional and this burden of not being able to have a family,
to not give Zechariah the son he so yearned for, seemed pretty harsh.

But when Zechariah came home, I understood slightly better the strangeness of God.
And as the women had said, I found out he couldn’t speak.
Through some writing on a tablet, through his hand motions,
through a physical language he developed on the spot,
I learned that I was pregnant. At my age! That was a shock!
Just like our ancestor Sarah. Oh, my!

I hate to admit it, but I rather enjoyed his silence.
Not that he was a talkative man,
but there was no longer any need for me to move to another room
if I had a disagreeable thought.
There was less reason for me to bite my tongue.
Now the silence was equally shared, now we both held our tongues.
After a few weeks, I gave up trying to guess his thoughts.
Now the many years of our marriage needed no speech
and we fell into a sort of regular unspoken dance of our everyday lives.

And we looked at each other more often.
I mean really looked: I saw parts of his eyes, parts of his irises, that I never noticed before;
I saw a deeper sweetness in his soul, given the vulnerable way that being mute had left him.
In some ways, he was once again the young boy I had fallen in love with,
somehow more tender ~ and occasionally more frustrated ~ at turns shy and uncertain,
yet still determined to be the best he could be,
to make a difference in the world in all the small, yet important ways he could.

There was, of course, the awful way that some people treated me in the market,
bearing a child as I was, at such an advanced age.
Many people still thought me cursed,
saying unspeakable things about what the baby would be like,
but I did my best to ignore them.
How could they know the ways of God?
I was married to a priest, and I knew that secret of handling sacred things
was in keeping alive the humility that even he didn't fully understand it all.

As the days and weeks passed,
I was afraid that my back would give out, not to mention the sleepless nights, the morning sickness.
(Although in fairness, at my age, indigestion is not all that surprising.)
Bearing a child is a struggle at any age, but somehow I didn't mind.
Where our lives had in the past few years settled into a routine of acquiescent aging,
now I felt more alive, more present,
more aware with this rambunctious new life growing inside of me,
leaping and turning at all hours of the day and night.

And I looked at the world in a new way.
What would be safe for him?
Where would he find challenges?
How long would we live and be able to take care of him?
Would we see him grow to manhood?
Up to now, I had been resigned to getting older and the end of life.
Now, I wanted to live.