

Aunt Elizabeth

[Luke 1:24-25, 39-45](#)

A Christmas Family Portrait

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Ten years ago the Klan burned a cross on someone's front lawn in Dubuque, Iowa. Dubuque is not known for its cross burnings, but when Tilly Woodward heard about it she decided that even one cross was one cross too many. So she mounted a one-woman campaign against racism. She collected the names of several hundred Dubuque residents who had reached out in some small way to help their neighbors. They were African-American, Caucasian, Hispanic, Asian, young and old, male and female. She mounted their faces on billboards all over the city, eight faces to a billboard. Below each face there was a short caption: "She listens well," "He offered to help," "She took food to a sick neighbor," and so on. In her crusade to erase hate in Dubuque Tilly Woodward featured caring people doing simple things to help ordinary neighbors. It was a powerful reminder of who we are at our best: nothing heroic, just everyday acts of kindness.

Imagine that Mary's Aunt Elizabeth is on one of those billboards. What can we see in her face, what can we hear in her words, that would erase hate and reinforce love?

The first thing I see is this: ELIZABETH WAS AN ORDINARY WOMAN. If she were doing her Christmas shopping at the local mall you would never notice her in the crowd. Some, of course, you can't help but notice, even in the thickest of crowds. There is something about their bearing, or their face, or the clothing they wear that sets them apart from the rest of us. When people like that walk through the mall heads turn and some of us feel a bit envious. But not, I think, Aunt Elizabeth. For she was an ordinary person and quite content to be so.

And I believe that it was because of her ordinariness that God chose her to give birth to an extraordinary baby, the one who would grow up to be John the Baptist. Do you imagine that people got their names in the Bible because they were the most renowned citizens of their day? Nothing could be further from the truth. Abraham was a migrant, moving from place to place; Moses and David were shepherds; Peter, James, and John were small-time commercial fishermen. God is not as impressed by celebrities as we are. There are ministers on television who regularly interview major league ball players, pop singers, and film stars. When I hear their testimonies, I'm happy to know that they belong to the Christian family, but the fact is that God doesn't need prominent people any more than plain folk like us. Never, never say to yourself, "Well, I'm just an average believer; God has nothing special for me to do." Elizabeth, ordinary Elizabeth, proves otherwise.

Again, ELIZABETH WAS A WOUNDED WOMAN. Wounded, not only by the knowledge of her infertility, but by the pain inflicted by others. Listen again to her response when she felt the first stirrings of life in her womb: "She said, 'This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.'" To be childless was to be disgraced because common wisdom had it that childlessness was the woman's fault. No one ever considered the possibility that the husband might be sterile. So Elizabeth had lived under a dark cloud for many years, and even if no one said anything to her face she could read the mockery and scorn in the frowning glances of people she passed on the street.

The Christian faith is not a wrinkle remover. If you have been led to believe that Christianity will make you popular in school, or heal your migraine headaches, or solve your cash flow problems, then you have been led down a primrose pathway. For while it is true that Elizabeth was eventually given her heart's desire, not every believer is so favored. Think of Stephen, whose powerful preaching led to his stoning and death. Think of Paul who, for all of his prayers, was never rid of his thorn in the flesh. And think of all the people you know who, in spite of their strong faith in Jesus Christ, sometimes suffer undeservedly. Faith in God is no hedge against hardship, as the creases on Elizabeth's forehead will amply testify.

Yet, for all those creases ELIZABETH WAS A SECURE WOMAN, so secure that she didn't have to broadcast her good fortune when she found herself with child. Wouldn't you think she would flaunt her pregnancy, that she would walk the village streets gloating in her good fortune, that she would burst into the neighborhood coffee shop and say, "See, I told you so!" But instead she went into seclusion for five months. She who deserved it most did not gloat over God's goodness, but kept the news to herself.

Silence is sometimes the most mature response to life's luxuries. Because the minute we start broadcasting our blessings we give the impression that we are responsible for them, that we created them, that we deserve them and can do whatever we wish with them, when in fact God is the giver of every good and perfect gift. Silence affords time to think about God's purpose for our bounty. So whether it be a new baby or a year-end bonus or a long-awaited promotion, try not to brag too quickly or crow too loudly. It's hard to hear God when we are busy toasting ourselves.

Here's something else I see in Aunt Elizabeth: SHE WAS A SELFLESS WOMAN. Mary had no sooner walked in the front door than Elizabeth launched into an outpouring of praise for her young niece: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb." She didn't brag about her own baby; she blessed Mary's. And that was just what Mary needed to hear. She had come in haste, Luke writes. And it doesn't take a Ph.D. in psychology to understand why. Mary was an unmarried pregnant teenager living in a rural village, and you can bet the Nazareth gossip mills were working overtime. Mary was the target of malicious gossip just as Elizabeth had been for so many years. Is it any wonder, then, that Mary turned to Elizabeth for support? Who better to understand what she was going through?

And Mary was not disappointed. Back home her neighbors cursed her for being pregnant; Elizabeth blessed her. Back home, people said her baby came from a Roman soldier bivouacked in a nearby outpost; Elizabeth confirmed that Mary's child had come from

God. Back home they said Mary was in league with the devil; Elizabeth said, "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord."

Some folks go through life looking for things to criticize. They enjoy making others feel as bad as they themselves feel. Not Elizabeth. And not you when you discover how rewarding it is to encourage another human being and then watch that person blossom under the mantle of your blessing.

The film "To Kill a Mockingbird" is one of my all-time favorites. There are a couple of scenes I can't get through without covertly wiping tears from my cheeks. The courtroom scene, for example. Atticus Finch is defending a black man, Tom Robinson, who has been unjustly accused of molesting a white woman. It's not a popular thing for a hometown lawyer to do in the Deep South during the thirties, but Atticus is a man of unimpeachable integrity whose commitment to justice is deep and unyielding. He knows Tom is innocent but in spite of his masterful defense the all-white jury brings in a verdict of guilty. The courtroom quickly empties, leaving Atticus Finch and his two children who are sitting with Tom Robinson's pastor, family, and neighbors up in the segregated balcony. The camera focuses on Atticus as he gathers his papers into a briefcase, and when he starts down the aisle toward the door, people in the balcony quietly stand to their feet. Unaware of what's happening, his little girl stays seated. Whereupon the pastor leans down and says, "Miss Jean Louise, stand up; your father's passing by."

I want to stand up when Mary's Aunt Elizabeth passes by. I want to stand up in the presence of an ordinary woman who carried her own grief so nobly, and who responded so gracefully to her troubled niece. Who knows? If you will walk in her footsteps and emulate her kindness, there may come a time when people will stand up when you are passing by.