

Advent 4 – Letters from Mary to Elizabeth and Zachariah

To Mary of Nazareth, cousin of my wife, Elizabeth

Dear Cousin Mary

Elizabeth and I have had an amazing and wonderful thing happen to us. For all our years together, Elizabeth has longed to bear a child, but it had never come to pass. Now, in what seems to be a miraculous blessing of the Almighty, Elizabeth is expecting to give birth to a baby! It is hard to explain, but we even felt the presence of a heavenly messenger insisting that the child will be a son, that we are to name him John, and that eventually, he will have special importance to our people as a sort of prophet of the Lord. I am a man of faith but I found that just about impossible to believe! My unbelief and shock has left me speechless. I am worried about the future, and how I can help Elizabeth during this difficult time, especially since I can't even speak.

We cannot explain why, cousin Mary, but Elizabeth has a strong feeling that she and you may be of help to each other at this time. If you feel you could come to us, we would be glad to have your company.

I leave this in your hands and heart and await your reply.

Give our love to your mother and father, and the rest of the family.

Your cousin

Zachariah

My Dear Cousins

Greetings in the name of the Holy One of Israel. Your most welcome letter arrived yesterday by way of your friends, Reuben and Sarah.

Upon reading it, I could hardly believe my eyes – it was as though something inside me moved with the thrill of it all! As though another piece of this giant, troubling yet awesome puzzle were being provided

You see, my cousins, I too have had an amazing and wonderful thing happen to me, and I know well what you mean when you say you felt the presence of a heavenly messenger. Because a messenger visited me as well, carrying the news that I am with child – a child whose birth and life will change the whole world.

I'm still in a daze, and now comes your news of Elizabeth's pregnancy. What can this all mean???

Your invitation seems like a gift from God. I believe it is just what I need. I hardly need tell you how difficult it has been, explaining it all to my parents, and to our rabbi, and the townsfolk can be so cruel. The decision has yet to be made about whether the law will be enforced in my case, and if the answer is yes, then you know that I will die.

But somehow, I've always believed that this is the hand of God at work, and that belief is strengthened by your strange and wonderful news.

What is happening to us, Zachariah? Can the will of God be revealed in all this mystery?

I echo Elizabeth's feeling that all of this will somehow become more clear when we are together. I long to talk with you, and I will be as much help to you as I am able to be, while I stay.

I must leave quickly, because things in Nazareth are becoming most unpleasant, and my life is in danger.

I will arrive as soon as the travel arrangements can be made. I send this reply, with my deep gratitude, by way of your friends.

Your cousin, Mary

Dear cousin Mary

The first letter I wrote to you was sent by messenger; this written message I will deliver by hand, since you are now a guest in our home.

It has been a true blessing that you have come to us. I can see it has given Elizabeth great encouragement, to have you to walk with. Although even before you came to our home, Elizabeth had a strange feeling there was an urgent need for you two to get together, little did we realize that like her, you are carrying a child. Both of you with child; children acknowledged by the angel Gabriel to be of great promise for our people; the people of Israel.

I am sorry I cannot join in the conversations you and Elizabeth have been sharing. I can listen, but cannot speak, as you know. And that is very frustrating. There are so many times I have wanted to be a part of the discussions as you have pondered the meaning of these events and what the future would be for you and your children. Indeed, they will come into this world, a world so hostile to the ways of God it makes me wonder what will become of them.

*As a priest of our people, I have had the opportunity to read the writings; the sacred scriptures, and to discuss the wise teachings of the great rabbis – and even the teachings of some of those radical teachers who look to change our covenant ways. I know that there are many who yearn for the Day of the Lord....a time when the world as it now is, will come to an end - and when God will change everything by sending Messiah. Some believe Messiah will lead our people into anew world of righteousness, obedience to God, and victory over our enemies. And among our priests and rabbis there is great debate over what Messiah will do – and especially, **how**. Some of the expectations are wanting God to crush our enemies and give us, and only us, prosperity. Many seek a Messiah to crush these dreaded Romans who make life so hard for us. The ones that appeal to me, though, are the writings of the prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah, who seem to picture us as a people called to serve others, to show the way of willing obedience, to follow the law because we love God who gives life.*

I have a feeling that stirs my spirit; that our sons are meant to lead us in the way – how it could even happen I fail to understand. Most people live for power, for wealth, or concentrate on simply getting enough food to sustain them one more day. I trust that our sons may be true followers of the One God, the Lord Almighty, but I worry about what that could mean and the dangers they may face. But – God's will be done. I wish I could explain my feelings better, but there they are.

Both Elizabeth and I are grateful to you for being with us in these times, and will surely miss you now that the time has come for you to return to Nazareth. We'll be

*concerned for you in these difficult days you will face there. I do hope that your fiancé Joseph will have the courage and honour to accept you and be a father to your child.
Shalom, Mary. Shalom indeed. – Zachariah.*

My Dear Cousin Zachariah –

I arrived home to Nazareth safely last night, although travelling is becoming difficult as the child within me grows. I do hope there will be no more journeying until this is all over.

What a joy it was to be with you – and I thank you more than I can say for your hospitality, and for so much more.

My talks with Elizabeth nourished my soul. She is a wonderful woman, and so wise, and in spite of the fact that I am young and she is old, we seemed to understand one another at some level too deep to explain. I have often experienced that when women are together – a sisterhood that feeds and sustains and bring all kinds of things to birth.

And even though we talk a great deal when we're together, - I mean REALLY talk – and REALLY listen, both of which are rare, and are signs of the sisterhood of which I speak, still there are times when we are silent too, and in the silence there is understanding and strength. You said in your letter that you wish you could explain better what you mean.

But that's the thing, cousin Zachariah – you don't have to. I understand. At least I think I do. And even though you weren't able to speak the whole time I visited without, I felt your support. In the way you listened, and watched; the warmth of your eyes and the steadiness of your touch.

Perhaps this time of silence is meant to be a gift to you – a drawing closer to yourself and to the Holy One within you. I have often experienced silence as a gift that way myself, and I feel that somehow our two children yet to be born will make its meaning clear. What kind of Messiah do we expect? You ask good questions, Zachariah. I think Messiah will lead us to a place we already know – when we are silent, alone or with one another. . I too wish I could express myself more clearly, and I have tried to explain my feelings about silence in this song, which I have enclosed.

COME AND FIND THE QUIET CENTRE

This mystery we are caught up in is working its quiet way toward revealing. Thank you my cousin, for your silence, and from the goodness that has come to me from it. Give my love and a big hug to Elizabeth.

Your cousin and friend

Mary

Our Dear Cousin Mary In Nazareth

What a marvelous day this is! Alleluia, we have a son! He is a big strapping fellow, as hairy as a bear, and a voice that could scare off a desert beast! And yet, he has a countenance of one who I'm sure will think deep thought and a look in his eye that tells me he is a brave little one. We have named him John. He has all the makings of a prophet – even the ancient prophet Elijah would have been proud of him, as you may be sure that

Elizabeth and I are. And at last, with the arrival of my son, God has released my tongue to speak again. My silence has ended, and God has given me a great message to celebrate John's birth. I share it with you now:

"Praise to the God, the God of Israel, who has turned to the people and set them free. Who has raised for us a strong deliverer from the house of God's servant David. So God promised and age after age proclaimed. By the lips of the holy prophets to deliver us from our enemies, out of the hand of all who hate us, that calling to mind God's solemn covenant, pledged to deal mercifully with our ancestors. This was the oath God swore to our parents Abraham and Sarah, to rescue us from enemy hands and set us free from fear so that we might worship in God's presence in holiness and righteousness our whole life long. And you my child will be called Prophet of the most High for you will be a forerunner of the Lord to prepare the way and lead the people to a knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins. For in the tender compassion of our God, the dawn from heaven will break upon us to shine on those who live in darkness under the shadow of death and to guide our feet into the way of peace."

Yet, what will become of you Mary?

We talk about you and pray for you daily. Your time of giving birth draws near. If Joseph has indeed accepted you, what of this obnoxious order of the Emperor which says all of us must return to our homeland to be counted for the census? It is of no benefit for us; only another way for these vile Romans to conscript our people for military service and exact still more taxes. But what can we poor powerless people do? We worry that this census means you will have to travel all the way to Bethlehem. I hope you can avoid such a journey – but when Rome gives an order, there is no concern for the trouble or suffering it gives people like us. May God go with you –

Zachariah and Elizabeth – and John

My Cousins Zachariah, and Elizabeth – and my newest cousin John!

Praise God for the safe arrival of your baby! Elizabeth – you must be exhausted – pregnancy and childbirth are hard even on the youngest and strongest of bodies. Yet you must be overjoyed to have a child. And Zachariah – able to speak! I would love to hear your voice singing that wonderful song, and telling me the stories of our people, and singing young John to sleep.

Your description of your son made me laugh with delight! When will I be able to see and hold him? It seems as though the mystery now has a face, and makes me yearn all the more for the birth of my own. There is so much to tell.

Joseph, shortly after my return from your home, decided to marry me in spite of his questions and the advice of his friends. I had met him once before, but the day he came to tell my father he'd marry me, we talked – and you'll never guess what – Joseph

has had the mysterious heavenly visitor too! He was embarrassed to tell me at first, and as awkward as WE are at explaining just what it was like – but it is so.

My parents are so relieved that we are to be married. But first things first – this trip to Bethlehem looms before us.

I dread the trip. I'm so uncomfortable these days – I'm told the birth could be any time now, and I'd so love for you to be there with me, Elizabeth, or my mother...yet I know you *will* be with me wherever I am, and that gives me courage. Still, I'm afraid. I don't know quite what to expect, and Joseph is kind, but also inexperienced at these things.

Zachariah, I have been thinking so much of the things you've written to me – and your song at John's birth as well – you've helped me see more clearly what I felt deep inside me from the start: that however confusing and unexplainable the events of the last several months may be, the winds of God blow through them
And it feels as though somehow the whole universe and God's very own self – is as swollen with new life as I am, and that God is about to do a brand new thing.

And that we are all part of it.

Does it seem so to you?

And so, as I start to Bethlehem, (we set out at daybreak tomorrow) I know that even though I don't understand it all

God will reveal to us in time what it is all about.

In the meantime my friends, the love, friendship, silence and singing that we've come to share seem signs of the beginning of this newness, and whatever the future holds, I thank God for you both, and for what we share.

I will write again when I return from Bethlehem. I wonder what I'll have to tell you then?

Your cousin and friend

Mary