



ENCOUNTERS

WITH

JESUS

Number One:

MIRACLE BABY

ENCOUNTERS WITH JESUS: MIRACLE BABY

Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, struggled to get pregnant. This is an account of how things miraculously changed for her.

MIRACLE BABY

I thought mine was the miracle baby, which he is; but after what I've just encountered it's clear that God can do even more! We seem to be standing on the verge of a great undertaking—and I have no idea how it will end.

It's hard now, in the midst of this joy and wonder, to look back and remember all those barren years. It had started so well: when our parents introduced us there was an instant bond. 'This will be alright.' I said to myself. He was gentle, wise even, though young, and deeply religious. He was a priest, of course; of the line of Aaron, just like me. But not all priests are deeply religious. With some—many—it's all on the surface. But Zechariah really meant it. He loved God as much as I did and our marriage seemed truly blessed.

Some of my friends had talked about the physical thing as something horrible, painful, disgusting. It wasn't like that for us. It was beautiful, tender, loving—and very pleasurable. I enjoyed it so much; we both did. It seemed like a confirmation of God's blessing on our union.

Those early days were like an endless honeymoon. I missed him, of course, when he was away on Temple duty but I was proud too, to think of him serving the LORD in His holy place—my man! And when he got back our reunions would be so special, so passionate. Life was very good. We ate together, laughed together, loved together and prayed together. We loved the LORD with all our body, heart, mind and soul—and each other too.

But gradually a little cloud began to overshadow us. One by one my friends became pregnant but for us, nothing happened. We knew it wasn't for want of trying! But no, each waxing and waning of the moon brought the evidence that we'd failed again—that *I'd* failed again.

My friends, who had so delightedly brought round their babies to see me, now started to be embarrassed, less keen to come. I knew it was out of kindness because they didn't want to upset me or make me feel bad when I saw them nursing or smiling down at their own little ones.

Not everyone was so caring of course. Dinah, who seemed to drop babies for fun, was especially cruel. "Come and say hello to little Benjamin," she said one day, "Isn't he beautiful? I just love having

ENCOUNTERS WITH JESUS: MIRACLE BABY

babies, don't you? Oh sorry, I forgot—you can't can you? What a shame. You want to watch out that your husband doesn't start looking elsewhere."

That hurt, really hurt. But what hurt most was that Zechariah never complained and never looked elsewhere. I knew his pain and humiliation—the man with the barren wife—but he never blamed me or reproached me, not once.

But I did. 'Why, oh LORD?' I would pray over and over. 'What have I done that is so wrong? I truly do not know what it is but I am truly sorry for it anyway. Please forgive me. Please show me your favour again. LORD, I love you, please love me again.'

So the years rolled on. Life was still good; the LORD was still good. Zech and I still loved each other deeply, much more than any of our married friends seemed to. In so many ways we were so blessed and my barrenness became accepted. There were compensations: no sleepless nights; more time for ourselves and for the LORD; no troubles with difficult children as they grew up... And there *were* babies and children—nephews and nieces and cousins. Some I became very close to, like a second mother (but never the first mother, never the real mother).

Young Mary was one of those. I'd known her since she was a baby; I had been with her mother when she was born. A bond grew up between us. She would come and visit whenever she could and I loved her perhaps more than any of the others.

So, really, there was nothing to complain about—and I tried not to. Yet every night as I lay in bed, every morning as I got up, I found myself praying the same prayer, 'Please, LORD, please...' No need for any more words than that. I knew what I meant. He knew what I meant. And always I prayed with that sickening dull ache welling up within me; and as the years went on a growing sense of certainty that this—the most fervent and heartfelt of all my prayers—was the one prayer that would never be answered.

The love and affection between Zech and me deepened and grew. We were just as close after forty years of marriage as we'd been in those hopeful days of our beginning. Not in the same way, of course—more mature, more measured in some ways. We were the closest of friends;

ENCOUNTERS WITH JESUS: MIRACLE BABY

something very rare and precious compared to the other couples we knew.

One thing did change though. They say that physical desire subsides as you grow older, and perhaps it does; but there was more to it for us. I suppose that as we came to accept the situation, there seemed little point in physical intimacy. We still were from time to time but purely for the closeness of being together, not with any hopes of a miracle.

Eventually the day came when the moon ceased to be the mistress of my body and any lingering hope was gone. Any sensible woman would have stopped praying the daily prayer then. No point in praying, 'Oh LORD, please...' any more. But I didn't. Instead, I prayed it all the more: 'Oh LORD, please! I know that you can still do this. Remember Sarah, LORD. She was like me—but much older than me. Please, LORD, please LORD, please...'

Part of me felt I should stop my praying. God's will was clear. Who was I to keep questioning it? Sarah was the mother of our nation. Who was I to compare myself to her? It felt wrong—but it was honest and I couldn't help it. Surely God won't mind a prayer from the depths of the heart? Surely He will understand...

Life continued; a happy life, full of blessing, full of the presence of the LORD. We learned to live with the chasm in our lives, never speaking of it any more. We both felt the lack but it rarely surfaced to trouble us. Sometimes it was still hard, especially when our friends started having their grandchildren. Then all the regrets and recriminations came flooding back into my mind. But mostly I learned to live with it—though I never stopped my hopeless pathetic praying to the LORD for the one thing I still wanted more than any other.

There was no hint that anything was to be different when Zech went off to the Temple as usual. I look back on it and try to persuade myself that somehow I knew, but the truth is I had no idea at all. Zech went off when his division's turn came and for me it was a time like any other: I missed him and I was proud of him; not as fiercely as all those years ago when we were young, but the feelings were still there.

So when Jacob comes back from Jerusalem with tales of wonder I am shocked and scared. It appears that my Zechariah was chosen by lot to go into the holy place and burn incense before the LORD. What a joy this should have been. He's waited so long for this—so have I—but

ENCOUNTERS WITH JESUS: MIRACLE BABY

somehow the lot has never fallen on him before. I suspect that secretly this bothered him almost as much as the other thing but he never said a word. So when Jacob comes and tells me Zech had been chosen I am thrilled. But my joy soon turns to bewilderment. Something has gone wrong in there. Zech seems to have had a vision or something and now he's unable to speak. Has he done something to offend God? Have I? I just don't know and Jacob can't tell me any more. My mind is racing. What would God want with us? Why would He choose Zech and then reject him like this? Is it because of my stupid prayers and longings? 'O LORD, please forgive me. I promise that I will try to be obedient and accept your will. I won't pray any more for what I can't have. Just please bring Zech home to me safe and restore him to health.'

The first part of my prayer is answered. Zech returns but he is still unable to speak. But that is not the major change in him. He is different. There is a glow about him, an aura of peace and contentment. He walks differently, more upright, more relaxed; everything is just a little more calm and purposeful. He smiles as my million questions probe him for answers. He just shakes his head gently and finds a scrap of papyrus. With the stylus he writes just four words: 'Have patience, my darling.'

He hasn't called me that for many a long year. Later that evening he takes me to bed. And he is a young man again! He is the man I knew when we were first married and I am the young woman who married him. It has been years since we have tasted such joy. Later, as we lie there close together in the darkness, I thank the LORD with all my heart. I hadn't realised how much we'd drifted apart and in one night we'd been joined together as one flesh again. The LORD is indeed good!

In the days that follow, Zech remains the same. He still can't speak but he smiles a lot and his inner glow seems only to grow more every day. And the closeness between us also remains. We are tender and loving again, giving each other little hugs and even holding hands as we walk to synagogue together. That raises some eyebrows, I can tell you!

For myself, I am happier than I can remember; happier than I've been for years. I realise what a burden my longing for the impossible was, what a shadow it cast over our lives. And now, having finally been able

ENCOUNTERS WITH JESUS: MIRACLE BABY

to give up that insane desire and accept my life as God has ordained it, I am released from the burden of longing. I don't need a baby; I have Zechariah, I have my family and friends, I have the LORD. That is more than enough for me. I would like my husband to be able to speak again, that is true. But, as I tell my friends, there are compensations! No more lectures on the law, no more complaining if dinner isn't ready on time—and we've known each other long enough for words to be unnecessary most of the time.

I am happier that I have been for years—we are happier than we've been for years. There is a lightness in my soul, an acceptance of God's purposes for me—and it is good.

The days turn into weeks and still Zech cannot speak. The initial euphoria has turned into gentle routine. Things are still good between us and everything is as it should be; except that I am becoming aware of changes in my own body. I start to be sick in the mornings. That passes after a while but I realise that my body is changing shape. I am becoming—not fatter exactly, but fuller, more rounded. I am certainly putting on weight and I start to have hungers for foods I never really liked before. None of this is very dramatic but taken all together I know what this would mean in another woman—but not me, that's not possible! Just when I have finally given up my hopes of—no, I will not say it. It cannot be true!

Three months have passed since Zech returned. Part of me is now convinced that I am pregnant. The rest of me knows that it cannot be true. Then one night Zech looks at me and my gently rounding belly and he reaches out and tenderly caresses it. Then he kneels in front of me, put his arms around me and kisses me. He looks up to me and tears are in his eyes, tears of joy and wonder. He smiles up at me and he nods. And my eyes flood with tears too as I know—know for certain, know in my body, know in my mind, my soul, that I am with child and that the LORD has granted our deepest desire, our most fervent prayer. Finally, I realise that the burden of shame I have been carrying all these years has been taken away and I give a great shout of joy from the depths of my being as I cry out through my sobbing and my laughing, "We're going to have a baby! Praise the LORD!"

I am six months pregnant! I could tell you exactly if you want, to the very day, for I know when it happened: when my silent Zechariah

ENCOUNTERS WITH JESUS: MIRACLE BABY

returned from the Temple; that night when we were both young again and the years rolled away.

I am six months pregnant! Oh how I love saying that word: pregnant with child; pregnant with meaning; pregnant with joy and hope and love. I have been touched by the finger of God and my world has been transformed. And now an even greater wonder is here...

I see Mary alone on the road, coming in haste towards me. She is the favourite among my cousins and it is always good to see her. But this time is different. It is a very long journey from Nazareth for a young woman to undertake by herself. What can be wrong?

Suddenly it all makes sense. I know—absolutely know, with a deep and inner certainty—that she too is pregnant. And suddenly the gloss is taken off that beautiful word.

Pregnant! How can she be?

Pregnant! How dare she be? Why could they not wait until they were married? I could have given her lessons in waiting.

Pregnant! She has brought shame on this family and I do not want her in this house.

Pregnant! She is family, her life is ruined and she has come to me for comfort. I must go to her.

So I come down from the roof, she comes up the road and we meet at the porch of the house. I look at her, so young, so pretty, her eyes full of fear and wonder and I suddenly realise that this is not just the same old story. As Mary greets me, my baby boy leaps in my womb and I am winded! I fall to my knees and find myself looking up at her knowing that this is where I should be.

I am suddenly filled with a marvellous sense of the presence of the LORD. His Spirit grips my soul and washes me in the most wonderful light. I am in the presence of something greater than I have ever known and I am certain that Mary's tiny baby, still so very new, is the focus of this.

"Oh Mary, you are blessed among women and the child you are carrying is more than blessed. The LORD has touched your womb and you will bring forth a wonder." I stand up and hug her for she is still just a young girl really, bewildered by the words which came pouring

ENCOUNTERS WITH JESUS: MIRACLE BABY

from my lips. “When you greeted me, my own baby, my miracle baby, recognised something even greater within you. These are indeed strange and beautiful times. The LORD is working a great mystery through us and our sons—it is a boy, isn’t it?—and our sons will have a great part to play in it. Their lives will be intertwined with each other. Now come in and relax and tell me all about it.”

So I wonder: if I have been touched by the finger of God, has she been embraced by the arms of God? If my babe is a miracle, what is hers? More than a miracle: a divine mystery. The world is about to change and things will never be the same again.

§§§§§§§§

ENCOUNTERS WITH JESUS: MIRACLE BABY

NOTES

This story is based on the account in Luke's gospel (1:5-25; 39-45). Elizabeth, the narrator, was the mother of John the Baptist. Her young relative, Mary, was the mother of Jesus.

Zechariah, Elizabeth's husband was a priest of the order of Abijah. According to 1Chronicles 24, King David divided the priesthood into twenty-four divisions, of which Abijah was the eight. There were too many priests for them all to serve at once in the Temple in Jerusalem so they took turns by casting lots to discover who should take their turn in the Temple.

According to Luke, Zechariah and Elizabeth lived 'in the hill country of Judea' (Luke 1:39). He does not tell us the name of the place where they lived. Tradition suggests that the birth place of John the Baptist was *Ein Kerem*, now a south-western suburb of Jerusalem, although the first suggestion that this was the location does not seem to have occurred until the sixth century.

Mary lived in Nazareth, a village in Galilee a long way north from Jerusalem. Google maps indicates that the distance by modern roads between Nazareth and Ein Kerem is 144 kilometres. She was a relative of Elizabeth, but we do not know what the exact relationship was.

Jews are reluctant to speak the holy name of God. Instead they would say something like 'The LORD' where the capitals imply that the actual name of God (YHWH) is meant, though not spoken.

www.encounterswithjesus.net
encounterswithjesus1@gmail.com