

The Mysteries of Elizabeth

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On September 5th the Church commemorates Saint Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptizer or Forerunner.

The first chapter of Luke tells us that she is "of the daughters of Aaron" and is the wife of the priest Zachariah. The two are praised with these words: "And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless" (1:6).

But the next verse describes one of the mysteries in Elizabeth's life: she is barren. Why would such a praiseworthy couple, now advanced in years, be deprived of the blessing of children? This mystery does not have a "solution" we can discover. God chooses to give this couple a child, in fact an extraordinary child. But the timing is His, not ours. Elizabeth and Zachariah will become parents very late in life, but they will not remain childless until they die.

Another mystery is the way the newborn child's name is announced. Elizabeth says, much to the surprise of the gathered relatives and friends, that his name is to be John.

Not only would most people expect that this announcement would be made by the man of the family, but "John" is not a name that had been used in the families of either Elizabeth or Zachariah.

Why is she given this privilege? Perhaps because she, unlike her husband, was willing to believe the angel Gabriel's message from God. Zachariah doubted what the angel said—that such an old couple would have a child, whose name was to be John. But Elizabeth, just as she had accepted years of barrenness, accepted this wonderful news and shared it with the people around her. Zachariah could only mutely confirm her words. He had been temporarily rendered unable to speak because, as Gabriel says, "you did not believe my words which will be fulfilled in their own time" (1: 20).

When Mary the Theotokos visits her relative Elizabeth with the news of her own pregnancy, there is still another mystery, which Elizabeth herself questions. She asks, "And why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" Elizabeth also is the first human being to repeat Gabriel's words to Mary: "Blessed are you among women." This simple, elderly woman is chosen by God to utter the first human affirmation of the marvel of the Incarnation.

In one of the readings for this day, Saint Paul describes the greatest of mysteries, the saving work of God: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that by His poverty you might become rich" (2 Corinthians 8: 9).

Kontakion - Tone 4

As the full moon brightly reflects the light of the sun,
you reflected the glory of the Messiah, the Light of wisdom!
With Zachariah you walked in all of the Lord's commandments, Elizabeth, beloved by God.
So as we bless you with fitting songs,
we praise the Lord, the bountiful Light, Who enlightens all.

Some are willing to accept God's mysteries, as Elizabeth did. Others doubt and challenge the messengers He sends to tell us about His mysteries, as Zachariah did. It is up to us to decide which example to follow, and to decide which one will enable us to "know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ."