

The Church of Saint John the Baptist, Ein Kerem



Saints Zechariah and Elizabeth
with the Infant Saint John the Baptists

⁵ In the days of Herod, King of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah of the priestly division of Abijah; his wife was from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. ⁶ Both were righteous in the eyes of God, observing all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blamelessly. ⁷ But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren and both were advanced in years. ⁸ Once when he was serving as priest in his division's turn before God, ⁹ according to the practice of the priestly service, he was chosen by lot to enter the sanctuary of the Lord to burn incense. ¹⁰ Then, when the whole assembly of the people was praying outside at the hour of the incense offering, ¹¹ the angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right of the altar of incense. ¹² Zechariah was troubled by what he saw, and fear came upon him. ¹³ But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, because your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall name him John. ¹⁴ And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great in the sight of [the] Lord. He will drink neither

wine nor strong drink. He will be filled with the holy Spirit even from his mother's womb, ¹⁶ and he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ He will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of fathers toward children and the disobedient to the understanding of the righteous, to prepare a people fit for the Lord." ¹⁸ Then Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years." ¹⁹ And the angel said to him in reply, "I am Gabriel, who stand before God. I was sent to speak to you and to announce to you this good news. ²⁰ But now you will be speechless and unable to talk until the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled at their proper time."

²¹ Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah and were amazed that he stayed so long in the sanctuary.

²² But when he came out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He was gesturing to them but remained mute. ²³ Then, when his days of ministry were completed, he went home. ²⁴ After this time his wife Elizabeth conceived, and she went into seclusion for five months, saying, ²⁵ "So has the Lord done for me at a time when he has seen fit to take away my disgrace before others." (Luke 1:5-25)

The Canticle of Zechariah

⁶⁷ Then Zechariah his father, filled with the holy Spirit, prophesied, saying:

⁶⁸ "Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel,
for he has visited and brought redemption to his people.

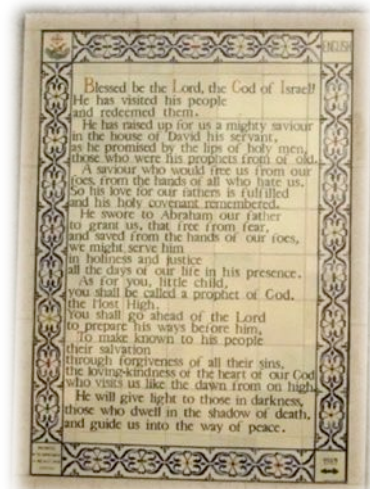
⁶⁹ He has raised up a horn for our salvation
within the house of David his servant,

⁷⁰ even as he promised through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old:

⁷¹ salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us,

⁷² to show mercy to our fathers

and to be mindful of his holy covenant⁷³ and of the oath he swore to Abraham our father, and to grant us that, ⁷⁴ rescued from the hand of enemies, without fear we might worship him ⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.



The Canticle of Zechariah
Church of St. John the Baptist, Ein Kerem

⁷⁶ And you, child, will be called prophet of the Most High,
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
⁷⁷ to give his people knowledge of salvation
through the forgiveness of their sins,
⁷⁸ because of the tender mercy of our God
by which the daybreak from on high will visit us
⁷⁹ to shine on those who sit in darkness and death's shadow,
to guide our feet into the path of peace.”

⁸⁰ The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the desert until the day of his manifestation to Israel.

Apocryphal Traditions

When Herod learned that the three Magi returned home by another way, he gave orders to kill all infant children in his kingdom three years old and younger. Elizabeth flees to the mountains with John to avoid Herod's soldiers who are in close pursuit. The angel Uriel leads Elizabeth to a shadowy cleft in the mountain. The soldiers are prevented to continue their pursuit by a deep chasm that separates them from Elizabeth and John. The angel Uriel makes water to appear out of the mountain and prepares bread for Elizabeth who is still nursing John.

Meanwhile, Herod's soldiers confront Zechariah who is performing his duties in the Temple. They demand that Zechariah reveal where Elizabeth and John are hiding. He refuses, say “I am God's martyr, if thou sheddest my blood; for the Lord will receive my spirit, because thou sheddest innocent blood at the vestibule of the temple of the Lord.” The soldiers killed Zechariah and left his body in the Temple. While Zechariah's body lay in the Temple, four angels, Michael, Gabriel, Uriel, and Raphael, entered the Temple during the night, consecrated Zechariah's body, and buried it under the altar.

When Zechariah did not appear outside the Temple, one of the priests ventured into the Temple and found clotted blood on the floor next to the altar. Then a voice was heard saying, “Zacharias has been murdered, and his blood shall not be wiped up until his avenger come.” The other priests then entered the Temple, but Zechariah's body was not found. The priests came out of the Temple and informed the people that Zechariah had been murdered and there was great mourning. The priest and prophet Simeon, who had been promised that he would see the Messiah before his death, was elected to take Zechariah's place.

When John was two years old, an angel comes to Elizabeth and tells her that it is safe to go to Nazareth, as Herod is now dead. So Elizabeth and John journey to Nazareth for a family reunion with Mary, Jesus, and Joseph. (from *The Infancy Gospel of Saint James*, and *The Martyrdom of Zechariah*)



Mary And Elizabeth With Jesus And John the Baptist— Johann Fredrich Overbeck, 1825



Church of Saint John the Baptist
nestled in the hills of *Ein Kerem*

It is believed that Zechariah and Elizabeth lived in Hebron, a city of priest, in the hill country of Judea. Today, this region is called *Ein Kerem*, bucolic village on the western outskirts of Jerusalem. The current church, The Church of Saint John the Baptist, was built over the ruins of two earlier churches, which were also dedicated to “Forerunner of Jesus.” The first Church built by the Byzantines on the site which was believed to have been the home of Zechariah, his wife, Elizabeth, and their son,

John.

The church was built sometime during the fourth and sixth centuries. Israelite Samaritans eventually destroyed the church during an uprising against the Byzantine Empire. When the Crusader armies defeated the Muslims they built a new Church over the site of the previous Byzantine Church during the twelfth century, but it too was destroyed when the Ottomans reconquered the region.



Church of Saint John the Baptist

In the seventeenth century, French King Louis XIV. gained permission from the Ottoman rulers for Franciscan priests and monks to begin purchasing property in the region of *Ein Kerem*; this included the ruins of both the Byzantine and Crusader churches of Saint John the Baptists. The Church's restoration began in 1674, but was not completed until 1920. The restoration of the Church of Saint John the Baptist was financed by the Royal Family of Spain as evidenced by the use of Spanish decorative tiles on the floors and walls, and artwork including what is believed to be a painting by the Spanish artist, El Greco.



Plaque on the Church of St. John the Baptist
Note the Jerusalem Cross & the arms of Christ and St. Francis



Nave and Sanctuary of the Church of St. John the Baptist
Note the Spanish blue tiles on the walls and columns.



Cave and Birthplace of John the Baptist
Church of John the Baptist



HIC PRECURSOR DOMINI NATUS EST
Here Was Born the Forerunner of the Lord



Jan and Vallerie touching the place where John the Baptist was born.



Elizabeth presenting their son, John, to Zechariah

Kevin's Reflection:

It takes a Holy Family

To be honest I never saw this in the Scriptures not until now, not until we visited the Basilica of Saint Anne's, the Basilica of the Annunciation, the Church of Saint Joseph's, and the Church of Saint John the Baptist. What I did not see was the beautiful work that the Father performed through the Holy Spirit to prepare a holy environment for His Son to enter this world. I knew that the Father promised, as early as the third chapter of Genesis, that the "seed of the woman" would "crush the head of the serpent." I knew that this promised seed passed through the generations from Eve to Abraham and Sara, to the patriarchs of the Chosen People, to David and from generation to generation until we arrive at the culmination of the Law and the Prophets, Mary, the Mother of our Lord. In each of the Churches I mentioned above, and the Scripture and Traditions that these holy sites embody, I began to appreciate the miracle that God performed in the lives of the persons whose stories are told there and their importance in the life of Jesus and for our salvation.

We have looked at the barrenness of Joachim and Anne, and how God answered their fervent prayer by giving them a daughter "whom all the world will ever called blessed." We heard the Virgin's "be it done unto me according to Thy word," the nine most important words ever spoken by a human being. In Joseph we saw at times a reluctant saint, who struggled with the challenges of being a father to the Son of God, but always in the end, saying "yes" to his vocation as the father of Jesus. And in Zechariah, Elizabeth, and John we see a family that parallels the holy family of Joachim, Anne, and Mary; they would be an extended family to the Holy Family. The Father prepared the perfect environment to receive, nourish, protect, teach, and yes, even discipline His Son. And because of His Son we know that the Father loves us with the same love He has for His Son (John 15:9). Can I look at my own life and see the hand of Providence in every relationship that He provided for me—my parents, my siblings, friends, teachers, priests, nuns, teachers and most of all my wife and children? Do I recognize that the Father's love has brought me through good times, and bad times, success and failure, heartache and joy? And for what? What does God want from us, from me?

Malachi, the prophet, tells us what God wants from us, and has always wanted:

"And what does the one God seek? Godly offspring." (Mal 2:15)

Jesus, the Godly Offspring of Mary, is the first born of many brethren. (Rom 8:29) This means that I too, am called to be a Godly offspring; we all are. There is no higher calling for the Christian parent than this, that we raise "Godly offspring." It may seem like a daunting task, but let us remember that the Father has prepared us for just this purpose, as He prepared Mary through her life with Joachim and Anne, and her life in the Temple. And we do not raise "godly offspring" alone, just as Mary did not raise Jesus alone, but had Joseph and her extended family of Elizabeth and John. Like Mary, we need a Holy Family to raise a godly child, an extended holy family—the Church.

The Church has the same mission as that of the Holy Family, that is, to produce godly offspring:

¹¹And he gave some as apostles, others as prophets, others as evangelists, others as pastors and teachers, ¹²to equip the holy ones for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³until we all attain to the unity of faith and knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the extent of the full stature of Christ, ¹⁴so that we may no longer be infants, tossed by waves and swept along by every wind of teaching arising from human trickery, from their cunning in the interests of deceitful scheming. ¹⁵Rather, living the truth in love, we should grow in every way into him who is the head, Christ." (Eph 4:11-15)

While it may take a village to raise a child, it takes a Holy Family, and the Church to raise a godly child.

Holy Ground

⁴When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to look, God called out to him from the bush: Moses! Moses! He answered, "Here I am." ⁵God said: Do not come near! Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground. (Exo 3:4-5)

Catholics and Orthodox continue the belief and tradition of sacred spaces from our Jewish heritage of faith. We believe that space and time are sacramentalized (made sacred) when the Divine, or agents of the divine (angels and holy persons) intersect with temporal reality through presence, actions, and word. To enter a sacred space, as Jan and I had the privilege to do in our visit to the Holy Land, is to enter an altered space and time where the temporal has been touched by the infinite, and the arrow of time (*chronos*) forever reverberates with the “eternal moment” (*kairos*). The believer can sense that she has entered something far more than a memorial or a museum; she can participate through faith in that which occurred there many centuries previously. For the Christian, it is not just remembering what happened at this holy site, it is *anamnesis*, a participation in the mystery that is genuinely present and available to those who believe. And in their participation and transformation at these holy places the faithful amplify their sacredness. One can sense the unity and continuity of the Faith, like an unbroken chain of belief, with all of those who have wondered, worshipped, and prayed in these holy places through the centuries.



Observation and Participation in the Holy Site of
The Church of the Nativity, Bethlehem.

Jan’s Reflection:

John the Baptist was born in *Ein Kerem*. John’s parents were descended from the priestly family of Aaron. His name was revealed to Zechariah by an angel who made him mute when he disbelieved the angel. When John’s mother, Elizabeth, was greeted by Mary in the Visitation, John leapt for joy in Elizabeth and they were filled with the Holy Spirit. What a prolife message; filled with the Holy Spirit and ministering from the womb!

After John’s birth, Zechariah was able to speak again. He sang the *Benedictus*, revealing his revelation of his son’s ministry. Zechariah prophesied that John would be called the “Prophet of the Most High” and he will go before the Lord to prepare His way and give knowledge and salvation to His people.

There is little said of John’s life growing up. Prior to his formal ministry he went out to the desert and grew strong in the Spirit. His ministry was a call to repentance. Jesus said of John in Matthew 11:11, “of those born of women there has never been one greater than John.”

The city of *Ein Kerem* is one of the most beautiful in Israel. Its views and lush trees are spectacular and it is wrapped in an atmosphere of peace. I was able to touch the birthplace of the Baptist with my scarf that I carried to the Holy sites. I made sure I rubbed my scarf on this site in memory of his birthplace.

Prayers to Saints Zechariah and Elizabeth

“A Prayer to Saints Elizabeth and Zechariah” by Marci Alborghetti

Dear Saints Elizabeth and Zechariah,

How I would love to hear God’s words and instructions the way you did! How I would love for God to tell me what he wants from me, to instruct me clearly and precisely through an angel! I wonder what it must have felt like for you to know God’s will directly!

And then, I wonder: Could I handle it? Could I handle it if God were to speak to me or through me directly? Could I willingly pay the price you paid for such direct communication? Could I give up all worldly concerns, stop worrying about what people might think of me, trust myself completely to God’s will and do nothing to protect myself against scorn, curiosity, and the sanctions of others? Could I give up my child to do God’s will if it meant losing her or him?

When I think about both of you and how you gave yourselves and your son to God’s word and will, I pray not only that I come to understand God’s will for me, but that I have the faith and courage to follow and fulfill it.

Amen



*The memory of Your prophets Zachariah and Elizabeth
We celebrate today, O Lord.
By their prayers, we beseech You,
O Christ God, save our souls!
Today the prophet, priest of the Most High and
parent of the Forerunner,
Has prepared a banquet to his memory to nourish
the faithful,
Mixing the drink of righteousness.
Therefore we praise him as a divine initiate of the
grace of God.*

*The memory of Your prophets Zachariah
and Elizabeth
We celebrate today, O Lord.
By their prayers, we beseech You,
O Christ God, save our souls!
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.*