Date: December 19th, 2021 (Advent 4)
Rev. Sharon Smith
Text: Luke 1:39-56
Title: Shalom - Elizabeth births a new vision

Introduction:

We are birthing new things here at St Catherine's during the chaos of a seemingly never-ending pandemic. And it is scary, exciting, tiring, energising, discouraging, and hope filled.

So much of the birthing process is in the dark of a womb. That which we cannot see, yet trust is growing.

In the gospel today, we read of Elizabeth readying to give birth - for the first time as a senior - afraid and insecure, never having done this before. It's scary doing things that are new when as we get older. We have more doubt, more cynicism, less energy.

And there is Mary, also pregnant, with youthful optimism and energy – she is pregnant with the sacred, holds inspired ideas, yet has little experience to measure her decisions and little experience of the hard work of bringing new vision into reality.

We see in these women the gift of the generations working together.

So, let us listen to this story, narrated by Elizabeth, wife of Zechariah and mother of John the Baptist.
And may it give us inspiration for our moment in the story of God's redemption, amid seeming impossibility.

It is an elaborated story, with imaginative poetic licence.

Zechariah and I had dreams back then. When we were young. We were both born into a family of priests. We just got each other.

I remember our honeymoon, intimacy was awkward but sweet.

After our marriage, our relatives and friends were so excited to see us together, married at last – it was a match made in heaven. And they would say with a twinkle in their eye – soon you will be raising the next generation of priests! Shalom!

At first, we waited with expectation. Monitoring my cycle carefully. Our morning and evening prayers were filled with hope, peace and delight in Yahweh.

And then things became difficult. My waiting was fraught with panic and impatience. Later frustration and then self-pity and faithless cries to a deaf God. Anxiety replaced my inner peace. Sex turned into obligation and duty. And going out in public was strained – as I had to face the constant questions: Any sign of a baby Elizabeth? Have you tried this herb, that cocktail, this prayer…

My sense of shame grew. Zechariah still had his vocation. He would walk to the synagogue each day and travel to the temple for holy days. He carried people in his heart.
I carried an empty womb. Infertile. Barren. (Luke 1: 25).

In those early years, when it was still possible to conceive, I would turn to the *Nevim* (the Prophets), to the scroll of Samuel, the prophet. And everything in me would resonate with Hannah in her infertility.
I would shudder at the words written of Hannah – 'the Lord had closed her womb'.

I wept like Hannah, inconsolably. Zechariah could say nothing helpful. Like Hannah's husband Elkanah, he would say to me: "Elizabeth, why do you weep? Why do you not eat? Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?" (1 Samual 1)

But I would read on, for barrenness was not the end of Hannah's story. And I believed the same for me.

Years turned to decades. And in my waiting, I found other ways to give to the community.
I taught young girls to weave prayer shawls. I gathered widows in to my home to pray the psalms and breathe words of peace.
I learnt the art of weaving vestments for the temple priests – repairing the blue, purple and scarlet yarn of ephods and weaving the blue cloth for robes and carefully stitching the pomegranate design around the hem. (Exodus 39)

I was surprised by how much joy I found in these activities. And equally amazed by how many women shared the pain I bore. Infertility was more common than I thought. We formed a secret support group. Finding other ways to be women.
The hardest time was at mid-life. When the possibility slipped by. I wept again like the first years. The grief was raw, like the scab had been ripped wide open. I hid for these months. Out of the eye of the public. Companioned only by the elders in my community who had passed through their menopause childless.

The waves of grief calmed and I settled back into my role in the community – teaching and mothering, children of other women. And being in friendship with my nieces and my younger cousin Mary. Because of my story, I encouraged these young women to see the injustice in the world, the places where they could bring shalom.

"People lock onto motherhood as a key to feminine identity in part from the belief that children are the best way to fulfill [our] capacity to love... But there are so many things to love besides one's own offspring, so many things that need love, so much other work love has to do in the world"

Rebecca Solnit "The Mother of all questions"

Zechariah left early in the morning to journey to the temple. He was excited, it was his turn to go into the Holy of Holies. We had always imagined that this might be the day, that he would experience the shekinah glory of God in a new way.

I settled into my rhythm of house preparation for Shabbat.

I prepared Zechariah's favorite baked bread. And soaked my feet in salts waiting for his return. Knowing that he loved to talk and talk. I cherished the silence before my husband returned with all his stories.

Usually, I could hear the slow shuffle of his shoes and the huff and puff of his breathing as he made his way up the hill.
But that day, that memorable day, there was a trot – was he on a donkey?
I got up, dried my feet and went to the door to look.

Zechariah, this old man, my husband of so many years, was running toward the door.
He hugged me and he was weeping with joy. He ran straight to his desk pulled out a piece of paper and wrote me a note: "We are going to have a baby. An angel appeared to me in the Holy of Holies and said we are going to have a baby".

I was floored. Finding it hard to take it in. Except for this. Zechariah couldn't make a single sound. If I were an angel, I would have muted Zechariah too. That was a sure sign!

I ran to my chair and reached out for the Nevim.
I chanted the words of Hannah:

"My heart exults in the Lord;
my strength is exalted in my God.[a]
"There is no Holy One like the Lord,
no one besides you;
there is no Rock like our God.
The Lord makes poor and makes rich;
he brings low, he also exalts.
He raises up the poor from the dust;
he lifts the needy from the ash heap,
to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor. (1 Samuel 2).

Zechariah, got the step ladder, he positioned it below the attic, carefully climbing the stairs, he opened the trap door and passed me down the old leather trunk.

I placed it on the living room table, tears streamed down my face, as I unpacked the tiny woven baby clothes that I had saved for this moment.
A moment I didn't think would ever arrive.

I was 6 months along. This old body was taking strain and my anxiety of birthing was growing. Zechariah sent word to my cousin Mary asking her to companion me through my labour pains. She was a special young woman. She had learnt to love well. She was attentive to those she sat with, offering the presence of Shalom.

We had gotten word back from her to say she would make the journey to be with me.
And…

> That she too had been visited by an angel and was expecting. Mary? I had wondered if she had gotten into the wrong crowd. I couldn't imagine her pregnant before marrying. At such a young age. What was going on?

Perhaps it was this:
All that I thought our lives would be – was shifting once again.
And now two unlikely women, one just starting out and the other older and more afraid, were entrusted to birth something new.

Together, finding our way into an unknown future.

When Mary arrived, we marveled at each other's journey, we sang together, we wept, we laughed, we experienced the inner movement of the Spirit of God, and we held each other's hands through the pain. The Shalom of God was near.

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May it be so, may it be so for us, here.
Together – birthing this new thing.

Come Holy Spirit, Come.

Amen.