**The child carrier’s tale**

*This is a monologue by Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, set in her home when she is pregnant shortly before and after Mary comes to visit her. The songs in the middle and end could be sung by Elizabeth or by someone else or a group in the background. The two parts could be performed separately, together, or with a short gap between. It could also be performed in conjunction with “Uncle Zac’s special day” and “Who’d be a mother?”*

It’s not like me to get so uptight, but I’ve been all of a tizzy since Zac came back from work last night with a message delivered through the religious post: “Mary coming to visit you. She will explain. Do what you can to help. Anne.” What could it mean? Why does she need help?

I didn’t get much sleep last night thinking about it, and John must have picked up on my anxiety – he’s been playing football inside me all night. I tell you, it’s no joke being pregnant at sixty with no family nearby to support. Zac’s worse than useless in the kitchen, and he’s not much company these days. He never was a great talker, but now he just sits there, beaming and dreaming, nodding at what I say and occasionally scribbling something on a blackboard to show me. Men! I long to hear another voice!

I remember the day vividly. He came back from work early, looking completely out of it, with a trainee priest in tow. I couldn’t get a word out of him – it was like he’d seen a ghost. The young priest told me what he could – how Zac had gone behind the curtain to offer the sacrifice and been there for ages before coming out white as a sheet and unable to speak; eventually they realised he had seen a vision. I think the young man was relieved to get away, to leave us to ourselves.

It was a week before Zac was ready to communicate. I’d got a blackboard by then and gradually, over days and weeks, the story emerged. The angel, the fear, the promise, the disbelief, the commission, the sentence of silence. Then the bewilderment and the shame. Could it be true? Or had he lost his marbles?

Two months later, my morning sickness started and I knew it was true. A dream come true! But weeks of illness and tiredness. And now I’m tired – tired of being old, tired of silence, tired of lumbering about, tired of being kicked inside. God help me to remember this is what I wished for and to be thankful, and give me strength to cope.

*(Sung)* O come, o come Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel,

Who lives in lonely exile here until the Son God appear.

Rejoice, rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, o Israel.

Mary arrived a couple of days ago, and she’s been an answer to prayer. She’s gone out shopping so that I can get some rest, and she’s offered to stay and look after me until John is born, which would be wonderful. She’s a breath of fresh air, and I’m loving being able to chat openly about the deep things of God with someone who can speak. I sent Zac off this morning with a message for her mother: “Mary arrived safely, staying for some months. All is well. God is good. Elizabeth.”

She got here after lunch, tired from her journey and looking tense and drawn. I could tell immediately that something had happened – something with Joseph perhaps? And Anne’s message had warned me anyway. So I gave her a big hug. I hadn’t seen her for a year, and I’d always had a soft spot for her. She was a bit shocked when she saw me out here (*indicates belly*) at my age. She’d heard our news and written to congratulate us, but I don’t think it had sunk in. So then she wanted to know all about it.

She knew about the angel and the promise of a son, but Zac and I hadn’t told anyone about the rest of the message – it was too dangerous. But I knew I could trust her. Her eyes widened with each revelation – the impact John would have, being filled with God’s spirit from his birth, his task to bring the people of Israel back to God, and to prepare them for the coming of the Lord. “Elizabeth,” she said, “how blessed you are to be entrusted with this special child. I came here unsure if you would believe the story I’m about to tell you, and now I find that God has gone ahead of me.”

Then it was my turn to listen in amazement as she spoke of her own encounter with the angel, the promise of a son, and the titles he would bear – Saviour, Son of the Most High, Son of David, King of Israel. “Messiah!” I whispered. “How wonderful!” All of a sudden, John jumped inside me. I winced in pain, and Mary saw it. “What is it?” she asked. “My baby John heard your news and jumped for joy. O Mary, how blessed you are, the mother of the Lord! How blessed the child you are carrying! I’m overwhelmed that you have come to visit me when you have so much else in your life. How wonderful that, unlike Zac, you believed the angel’s message!

We hugged, the spirit of God in John and me embracing the spirit of God in her and her Jesus. Two women, old and young, miraculously carrying babies who would bring the promises of God to fulfilment. Mary’s face was radiant, and she burst into praise: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.” On and on she went, like the psalms of our ancestor David and the prophecies of Isaiah.

Her joy was infectious, and washed away all my tiredness. I thought back to my prayer of a few days ago, uttered more in hope than expectation, that God would give me the strength to cope, and I realised that she was the answer God had given me. Over the next few months, she will help me around the house, and I will teach her all I know, and try to prepare her for tough times ahead. And we can rejoice together in the goodness of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

*(Sung)* Bless the Lord, o my soul, o my soul; worship his holy name.

Bless the Lord, o my soul, o my soul, and worship his holy name.