

The Third Sunday of Advent  
(John the Baptist)

# ABIGAIL'S STORY

*The third candle on the Advent wreath is for John the Baptist. This story is about the annunciation of John's birth. The later story for the feast of the Naming and Circumcision of Jesus also focuses on Elizabeth and John the Baptist and could be read for Advent 3 instead.*

**M**Y NAME IS ABIGAIL. My husband, Eleazar is a priest. As I tell you this, I feel myself standing taller, full of pride. We've been married for five years now, but last month Eleazar turned twenty, so at last he can serve as a priest in the Temple. He's been there since he was a young boy, watching what was going on, learning what to do, studying the Torah and gaining all the knowledge he needed to be a priest. But he couldn't actually be a priest because he was too young.

This year, for the first time, he isn't too young. Now his time has come. He is in the division of Abijah and this week is their week of service in the Temple. Eleazar was happy and so am I. I was so excited that I came to Jerusalem with him from the hill country.

'You don't need to come,' he kept on saying. 'Wives don't usually come. Wait till one of the big festivals, then come.'

But I begged him, and in the end he gave in. I got the feeling that much as he wouldn't admit it – and much as he pretended embarrassment at having his wife trail after him – he would be pleased to have me there. He warned me that I shouldn't get too excited, though, as his duties wouldn't





be much this time. As the most junior priest, his would be the most menial jobs: fetching and carrying, cleaning down the blood from the altar so the stench didn't get too overpowering, getting the incense ready for burning in the Holy Place. That kind of thing.

'Only ...' he said.

'Only what?' I asked, sensing the hint of something in his tone.

'If God favours me.'

'Yes,' I said, 'If you God favours you, then ...?'

'The lot might fall on me to go into the Holy Place to offer the incense.'

I clapped my hands in delight.

'Inside the Holy Place? Will you be next to the Holy of Holies? Will you tell me what the Temple veil looks like? I've heard the cherubim on it are huge, and the pattern beautiful. Oh, if only God would show us favour, how great would that be? I've heard ...'

Eleazar placed his finger over his lips. 'Too much, dear one,' he said, gently. 'Too many questions. Let's just see what happens.'



WE TRAVELLED THE NEXT WEEK to Jerusalem. On the journey, I peppered Eleazar with questions. He would laugh and answer some of them and then, when my curiosity got too much he would place his finger softly on his lips to

indicate I should stop.

We quickly settled into a routine. We would rise early. He, so that he could begin his duties; I, so that I would be there for the drawing of the lots. They did it twice a day, every day, morning and night.

Eleazar would gather with the other priests in his division by the entrance to the Holy Place, and I would mount the step to the top of the wall that divided the court of the priests from the court of the women. Often, especially at the drawing of the morning lots, there were just the priests in the court of the priests. On the wall of the court of the women there were two of us: me and one other woman.

She seemed old to me, as much in her spirit as in her outward appearance – as though life had worn her down. I noticed that she gazed as ardently at the ceremony as I did, her lips moving as she prayed for its outcome.

The process was laborious. The priests in the division would be separated into two groups. Then the High Priest would delve into the breastplate on his Ephod and bring out either the Urim or the Thummim. Urim selected one group, Thummim the other. The winning group would be split into two again and the whole process would begin again. Over and over the lot was drawn until just two remained. The final draw identified which would go in and tend to the incense.

I felt quite expert by the last day of Eleazar's week of service. Thirteen times the groups had been split, and

thirteen times Eleazar had not been selected.

This final morning was his last chance this time around. The old woman arrived just after me, and we focused our gaze on the process as we had done thirteen times before. In the end, my curiosity got the better of me.

'Why do you want it to be him so much?' I asked, pointing at an elderly priest in the crowd below us. 'Surely he's tended the incense so many times before?'

The women turned her gaze on me.

'No,' she said, her gentle eyes creasing as she smiled sadly. 'The lot has not fallen on Zechariah yet. Thirty years a priest and never chosen.' She sighed. 'I used to think we were God's favoured couple. How wrong I was. Him never chosen in the Temple – and me never chosen for a child.'

She patted her stomach wistfully. 'I asked him, when he was chosen, if he would pray for me ... for us ... for a child. I thought that if he prayed right next to the Holy of Holies, he could maybe whisper it right into God's ear. But he was never chosen ... and neither was I. Now it's too late. I don't know why I keep on coming to the drawing of the lots. It's habit, I suppose.'

We turned back to the scene below us. Our conversation had absorbed us both so much that we hadn't noticed that the drawing of lots had reached the final two – Eleazar on one side and Zechariah on the other. I reached out and gripped Elizabeth's hand. All of a sudden, I was no longer as sure that I wanted the lot to fall on Eleazar.

We watched from our vantage point as the High Priest

dipped his hand one last time into the holy breastplate and pulled out a stone. He looked at it for a moment and then tipped his head towards Zechariah. Elizabeth exhaled loudly beside me.

'At last,' I heard her whisper. 'But it is too late.'

Zechariah glanced up at her, the wry look on his face indicating that he was thinking the same thing. Eleazar disappeared round the side of the Holy Place and reappeared a few moments later with an elaborate box, which he handed to Zechariah, the box contained the coals and incense for the Holy Place. Zechariah took it, gave one last, lingeringly thoughtful glance in the direction of Elizabeth, and entered the Holy Place.



USUALLY AFTER THE DRAWING OF LOTS I would descend once more into the court of the women and work my way slowly back to our temporary lodgings. But today I found I couldn't move. Today I felt I had to stay. So Elizabeth and I stood there, our hands clasped together ... waiting. I had no idea what we were waiting for, but I did know that it was important to wait.

To begin with, everything seemed normal. The rituals associated with tending the incense were precise but brief. After the first while, when Zechariah didn't emerge again from the Holy Place, Elizabeth and I smiled at each other. He was making the most of it. Perhaps he was whispering



their hearts' desire at the Temple veil after all, even though there was no point now.

The time ticked on but there was still no sign of him. At one point, I thought there was a faint glimmer around the Temple as though a bright light were shining inside but I shook my head: the excitement had made me fanciful.

The whole assembly gathered around the door, as was the custom, were getting restless. What should they do? It wasn't permitted to enter the Holy Place unless it was by lot to tend the space. I saw the High Priest step forward and turn in conversation to other senior-looking priests around him. Although I couldn't hear the words, their conversation was animated and involved much gesticulating. The High Priest threw up his hands in frustration but did nothing more. There was nothing they could do but wait.

What if he'd died in there?

I opened my mouth to ask but, glancing at Elizabeth's drawn face, promptly closed it again. She was the last person to ask. My thoughts gathered speed. Priests couldn't touch dead bodies. What would they do? What would happen to the Holy Place? Would death that close to the Holy of Holies render it unclean?

My thoughts spun onwards.



EVENTUALLY, THOUGH, WHEN WE'D all begun to give up hope, the door opened again, and Zechariah emerged. He

looked as though he had aged about ten years in the time he had been inside, but strangely his face shone.

A hubbub broke out below me. Fragments of questions could be heard hanging in the air.

*'What were you doing?'*

*'Why did it take so long?'*

*'What happened in there?'*

Eventually the sounds died down and I saw the High Priest turn to Zechariah and say, 'Well?'

Silence fell on the gathering. A silence that stretched on and on. I saw Zechariah open his mouth, but no sound came out. He tried again but still there was nothing.

'He's spoken with God,' I heard Elizabeth whisper beside me. She turned to me, her eyes shining.

'At last, God has shown us favour.'

I watched her begin her descent back to the court of the women, but couldn't shake the feeling that God's favour wasn't quite what I used to think it was. It looked to me as though God's favour – when it came – turned your life inside out and upside down.