

THE OTHER MIRACULOUS PREGNANCY OF ADVENT

BY [LARA FREIDENFELDS](#)



Visitation of the Virgin Mary, altarpiece in the Basilica of Saint Frediano, Lucca, Italy. Photo by Zvonimir Atletic / Shutterstock.com

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As a historian who has spent a career studying pregnancy and birth, I always look forward to Advent. During the weeks leading up to Christmas, the scripture passages read aloud in Christian churches feature not just one, but two stories of miraculous pregnancies that end in safe and happy births. The more famous, of course, is the story of Mary's pregnancy with Jesus.

After having spent 15 years writing a [book about miscarriage](#), though, it is Elizabeth's story I find most poignant.

As told in the [Gospel of Luke](#), Elizabeth was an older relative of Mary's who had always wished for a child but had not been able to conceive. She and her husband were rewarded for their faith and good works by a late-in-life pregnancy, past the age when either thought it was possible, of a child who the angel Gabriel promised would be a great holy leader.

Like all Bible stories, the telling of Elizabeth's pregnancy is embedded in the patriarchal assumptions of its time, and told through a male lens. Luke assumed that their childlessness was due specifically to Elizabeth's bodily deficiency, her "barrenness." He presumed that her husband, Zechariah, prayed for a son rather than a daughter. And he described Elizabeth as grateful to God for the pregnancy because it removed the disgrace of barrenness. Until quite recently, these assumptions of Luke's would have been generally shared by those who heard the passages in church or read them in the Bible.

But even within a patriarchal culture, I suspect that if we had Elizabeth's version of the tale, there would be more to it. I imagine that while Elizabeth was indeed grateful to have the social stigma of infertility lifted, she also wanted a child to love. Countless women over the millennia have surely imagined the same when they heard this story and empathized with her situation. Fully appreciating Elizabeth's story requires layering human empathy and historical understanding.

When Elizabeth found herself pregnant, Luke says, she went into seclusion. She must have been shocked, wildly hopeful, yet doubtful that this could really be a viable pregnancy. In Luke's telling, Gabriel had struck Zechariah speechless after announcing the coming conception as punishment for Zechariah's lack of faith that Elizabeth really could have a child. Elizabeth had no way to know of the angel's reassurances.

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Elizabeth had entered the sixth month of her pregnancy when her young relative, Mary, who had just received her own bewildering visit from the angel Gabriel foretelling her pregnancy with Jesus, came to visit her. The moment Mary greeted her, Elizabeth's baby "leaped in the womb."

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Quickening.

It is easy to rush past this crucial moment in Elizabeth's story, hurrying to Elizabeth's most famous words, when, filled with the holy Spirit, she proclaimed to Mary, "Most blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb."

But what sparked that intruding of the Spirit?

Quickening. The first felt movements of her child in the womb, the baby who would become John the Baptist. The biblical passage specifies that Elizabeth had already entered the sixth month of her pregnancy, perhaps 23 or 24 weeks pregnant, and as any woman who has been pregnant knows, quickening ought to have happened by then. While today women are often blasé about quickening, counting on ultrasound for a more reliable account of what is happening in their wombs, until the late 20th century, women and doctors alike treated quickening as a meaningful marker of the health of a pregnancy. Women and doctors in earlier times knew that the womb sometimes grew objects that were not babies – tumors, or "molar" pregnancies. Sometimes women experienced swelling of the belly from illness rather than pregnancy. Elizabeth must surely have been anxious for confirmation that her pregnancy was genuine.

But quickening held even more profound significance: In Elizabeth's time, and indeed for many centuries after, people regarded quickening not just as confirmation of pregnancy, but they also believed that the soul entered the body at quickening. Before quickening, a fetus might be growing, but to them it was not, in any meaningful sense, alive. Elizabeth's quickening, then, was understood to be the moment that she became pregnant with a living, ensouled child.

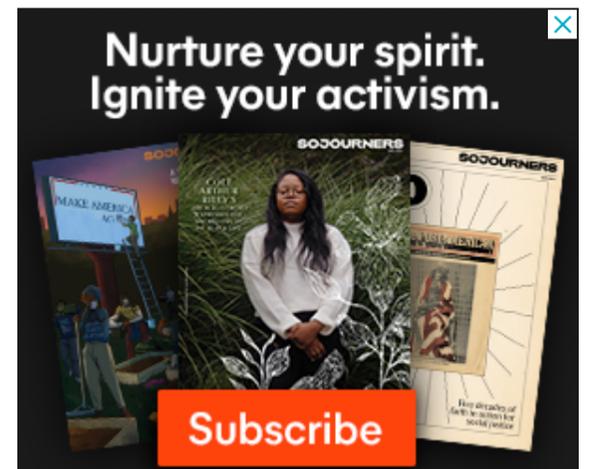
Until nearly the 20th century, those who encountered this scripture would have understood the quickening of John the Baptist in Elizabeth's womb to be the first miracle Jesus performed, bringing to life a child who appeared as if he might never gain life. A profoundly grateful Elizabeth, filled with the Spirit, burst out with joyful blessings of Mary, who had brought the Lord to quicken Elizabeth's child into life.

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Today, this aspect of Elizabeth's story in the Gospel of Luke is obscured because we understand pregnancy differently. In the 18th century scientists began serious study of embryology, and by the middle of the 19th century many physicians were convinced that human development was continuous from conception to birth and that therefore quickening was medically meaningless. By the late-19th century the Catholic Church had discarded quickening as a theologically significant marker. Every time I hear the story of Elizabeth in church readings, I hope that the priest will discuss the meaning of quickening in the story, and so far, every time I have been disappointed.

We need to bring back our understanding of quickening. For one thing, it clarifies the original depth and meaning in Elizabeth's story, levels of meaning that were shared among scripture readers and listeners until the past century or so. When Luke said that John the Baptist "leaped for joy," he was not signifying simple happiness. He intended to signify the joy of life itself. The Catholic Church eventually **decided** that the significance of John's leaping was that John was cleansed of original sin. But the miracle described in the text as understood in its original context goes even deeper: It was the first indication that Jesus could raise up the dead, and would offer the gift of eternal life.

Another reason to bring back our understanding of quickening is that it reminds modern readers of an important insight that was a truism in earlier times: Pregnancies are precarious in their early months. Before the modern understanding of embryology, people appreciated quickening as a medically significant indication of a successful pregnancy, and as a spiritually significant indication that it was time to experience oneself as pregnant with a baby and to expect the birth of a child. Today, we have the technology to detect conceptions less than two weeks after they take place. But of those conceptions, about 30 percent miscarry, mostly in the early months of pregnancy. From the point of modern embryology,



quickening may be arbitrary, but from the perspective of a person experiencing pregnancy, it can make sense to look to quickening, rather than a positive home pregnancy test, for reassurance that a baby is on the way. And then, at quickening, we can remember Elizabeth, and joyfully appreciate the miracle that is new life.



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