

## | VISITATION: THE JOURNEY INTO COMMUNITY |

*In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."*

*And Mary said,*

*"My soul magnifies the Lord,  
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.  
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;  
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,  
and holy is his name.*

*His mercy is for those who fear him  
from generation to generation.*

*He has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.  
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;  
he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty.*

*He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,  
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,  
to Abraham and to his descendants forever."*

*And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home. (Luke 1:39-56)*

At the age of thirty-three, I'm fortunate to live near five of the women who were my closest friends in high school. The history we've shared has been varied, to say the least. As teenagers we shared hair spray and English notes and painfully extracted confessions about which boy we liked. Then came graduation, and we radiated out in all directions for college, study-abroad programs, jobs and graduate school. In our late teens and early twenties, we shared our diverse experiences through letters and phone calls and we made an effort to get together during vacations when we returned home. Now we're all settled back in the Bay Area, so we manage to meet once a month for dinner (in spite of our hectic schedules). At these meetings our conversations usually cover a range of topics: career crises and triumphs, dating and marriage, pregnancies both planned and unexpected, struggles with infertility and child-rearing, the challenge of navigating the real estate market. We've attended each other's weddings and housewarmings and baby showers, events that would have seemed incomprehensible to our high school selves. Over the years we've processed, shared and analyzed countless romantic relationships; we've tried gamely to put a positive spin on the ones that ended, and have celebrated the ones that were right after all. In other words, we've been community to each other through the good, the bad and everything in between.

It's thanks to friendships like these that I can understand the essence of the Visitation. In this Gospel story, two women come together, each with her own experience to share. Mary comes ready to discuss her miraculous visitor and the pregnancy that no doubt still astonishes her. Greeting her at the door, Elizabeth has her own story to tell—the shocking fact that she has conceived a child after having resigned herself to a life of infertility. What a relief each of them must have felt to be with another woman, one who could not only understand the physical experience of pregnancy, but who could marvel in the power that made it all possible. Two women, one too old to conceive, the other still a virgin, both expecting a child—that's the kind of experience that needs to be

processed, shared, analyzed, and, most of all, celebrated.

But before the celebration comes the journey: Mary's journey into community.

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The Bible says that Elizabeth lived in a "hill town" in Judea, and that it was to this place that Mary traveled "in haste." To me this landscape sounds appealing. I think of the hills that divide my city from the ocean twenty miles away. Driving through them is not only scenic but comfortable thanks to the paved roads and my car's plush seats. Because of this, it's a stretch for me to understand what Mary's journey would have been like.

In his book *A New Testament Guide to the Holy Land*, John J. Kilgallen, S.J., identifies Mary's destination as the town of Ein Karem, a town eighty miles south of Nazareth.<sup>1</sup> Eighty miles of hilly terrain, most likely traveled either by foot or on a donkey: This was hardly a pleasant afternoon outing, but a trek that took significant stamina. Pictures of this region show a bleak, desolate land, with scrubby or nonexistent vegetation. It looks far from inviting for any traveler, particularly a woman in the early stages of pregnancy.

For Karen, a thirty-six-year-old attorney, the fact that Mary willingly took on such a formidable landscape is more than just an interesting aspect of the Visitation story. In fact, Mary's journey has played a critical role in helping Karen connect with Mary as a woman and a role model. It's a bond that Karen never felt in her younger years, a time when her understanding of the Mother of God was limited at best. "My childhood thoughts of Mary were rather superficial," she recalls. "Of course, she was supposed to be incredibly beautiful, and that was certainly appealing to a young girl. But beyond that, I never thought much about her."

This indifference changed when Karen was a teenager and became friends with several born-again Christians. Though she continued to attend Mass with her family, she felt herself questioning the traditions and beliefs of her childhood faith. "I saw the Catholic faith as obsessively focused on religion, ritual and superstition, rather than faith in Jesus.

Mary became a lightning rod in my mind for all that I considered to be wrong with the church.” In fact, Karen explains, she became “particularly incensed by what I saw as the ‘hocus-pocus’ factor—the belief that God would listen if you said particular prayers to Mary or wore a particular medal. I didn’t understand why people would pray to Mary if they could just go directly to Jesus.”

In college Karen happened upon a Catholic church that had a vibrant young adults’ community. It was a turning point in her faith journey. “People I met there encouraged me to ask questions about all aspects of the Catholic faith,” she explains. “I gradually came to understand the Catholic church’s teachings about Mary (which I had never really learned before), and I began to appreciate Mary’s role in the faith.” In spite of this renewed Catholic identity, Karen still lacked a personal relationship with the Mother of God.

All that changed in 1998 when Karen made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. There, she traveled over the route Mary would have taken to visit Elizabeth. “As I looked at that long and difficult path, I realized what a strong and courageous woman Mary must have been,” Karen explains. “While Mary is often portrayed as meek and submissive, I suspect that she was actually very brave, active and even a little gritty. Here she was, a young woman who understood what it would mean to be an unwed mother in a highly restrictive society, but nonetheless bravely said ‘yes’ when asked to be the Mother of God—not the conduct of a meek wallflower. Then, rather than sit around worrying about what she will do, she picks up and walks on a long journey to be with her cousin Elizabeth.” To Karen this plucky, active Mary is far more compelling than the traditional portrayal of “a beautiful, porcelain-faced woman with downcast eyes. That’s never been a role model for me. But I am much more taken with the image I gained in Israel of a strong-willed, courageous woman, who defied convention and bravely did the will of God. I would love to see women reclaim Mary in this light.”

For Karen the pilgrimage was more than just a journey to the Holy

Land—it was a journey into a more intimate connection with the woman who gave birth to the son of God. “I now find myself occasionally praying to Mary, particularly since I became a mother,” she explains. “It is the image of Mary setting out on her journey to see Elizabeth that I usually think of—not the image in all the paintings, but an image of a real, normal woman (OK, not completely normal, but able to relate to normal women) who can relate to my life. My prayers to her are generally for strength and peace during trying times. I figure she knows a lot about that.” Ultimately, Karen finds resonance in the image of a woman who walked a difficult path in order to fulfill her destiny, and in the meantime, helped a beloved cousin fulfill hers.

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Many artistic depictions of the Visitation focus on the same moment: Mary and Elizabeth standing at the threshold of the house, greeting each other with an embrace. Familial bonds, mutual affection, a shared past, present and future—all are expressed through these two women and their open arms. It’s a rare glimpse into the network of Mary’s extended family, revealing the depth of her love for her cousin. On a larger level, this embrace symbolizes more than just a blood relationship. It represents an openness to community and a willingness to be present to those in need.

It’s the symbolism of this meeting that resonates with Sister Kristin, a Dominican sister of San Rafael. “The Mary and Elizabeth Visitation, in which they reach out and support one another, is what we are all called to do—to reach out and support one another, and, I would add, particularly those who are poor and the homeless,” says the sixty-eight-year-old clinical psychologist and former prioress. In her own life she has learned firsthand what it means to be on both the giving and receiving end of such generosity. It was the spirit of the Visitation that guided her and her fellow sisters through two painful losses, ultimately reinvigorating their community.

In 1989, Saint Rose Academy, the San Francisco school that was run by the sisters, was destroyed in the Loma Prieta earthquake. The sisters

were still recovering from that loss when, one year later, their century-old motherhouse in nearby San Rafael was destroyed by fire. Though no one was hurt, the sisters lost the uninhabitable building as well as many possessions. The sisters were, in a word, *homeless*.

In the wake of this tragedy came an outpouring of goodwill. Other sisters came from all over Northern California with as many cars as they could to take back the women who had been displaced. “People came down with every intention of doing whatever needed doing so that the sisters could have a roof over their heads,” recalls Sister Kristin. “It was a very powerful experience, in all honesty.” Years later, she still marvels at the emotional impact of seeing so many women come together. “It was sort of like we had been through this terrible thing—actually, two terrible things, we lost Saint Rose, then the motherhouse—but people didn’t get wiggled out about it. People took care of one another. And I think that’s what tuned me into Mary going to visit Elizabeth...in the embrace of one another, we knew we were cared for.”

Even beyond the outpouring of hospitality, the tragedy of the fire pulled the sisters together in a new way. Following the devastation, the community had a decision to make: Should they rebuild the old motherhouse or should they tear it down and start over? They held a meeting to decide the issue and “almost every sister who was able to walk came to it,” recalls Sister Kristin. When the vote was finally taken, the community was of one accord: out of 175 sisters, 173 of them wanted to start over, with two abstaining from the vote. Not a single sister voted to rebuild.

It took five long years to build the new motherhouse, but in 1995, it was time to move in. At the opening of the sisters’ new home, Sister Kristin gave a talk in which she reflected upon the lessons learned from the fire. “If our encounters clarify for us what God is calling us to be and do,” she told her community, “then truly our encounters are holy, and we will become holier in the struggle to clarify our shared vision and common values.” Those words have clearly had a lasting impact on her community, for when Sister Kristin finished her final term as prioress, her fellow sisters

had the lines printed on a large framed copy of one of her favorite paintings, which is a portrait of the Visitation by Fra Angelico. The picture now hangs in a place of honor in her room.

The holiness of encountering others has always guided Kristin's education and ministry. She holds a PH.D. in psychology, and for fourteen years she worked in a hospital psychiatric ward, a job to which she felt a great calling. As she explains, she has always been drawn to "work with people who are poor at the level of human existence—and no one is more poor at the level of human existence than a psychotic individual." In an echo of Mary's Magnificat, she reflects, "I wouldn't want to work in a position where I was with people of power and prestige, and treated well, because those aren't the people who are even seeking help. What I knew was I did want to work with people who are poor at the level of existence, and for whom there weren't a lot of people helping them." This desire has led to her current position: counseling women who are drug-addicted and involved in prostitution. Most of her work involves one-on-one therapy, in which she meets with the women and does what she calls the "Mary and Elizabeth thing." "I think there's a magic in women coming together, in which they can really touch one another at a deeply meaningful core, and bring out the best in one another," she reflects. "I see that sometimes in the women I work with—when they sense they're cared about, they'll open up; they'll talk, and they'll cry. I think they can hear your message of, 'You're going to have to figure out how to get off of drugs.'" Such personal support, she explains, is crucial to helping others transform their lives. "In the depths of your heart, you can achieve what you want to get, but we can't do it by ourselves—it's not solitary. We can be Mary to Elizabeth, or we can be Elizabeth embracing Mary, either one—but it's in that moment that we enable one another to stay the course, to do the hard thing, to do what we know needs doing." She acknowledges that it's not always easy; sometimes these encounters involve reaching beyond our own comfort zones. "Human beings can touch the heart of one another, but they have to give up something of themselves to do that. They have to take

a risk sometimes to challenge the other, or to disappoint the other in some way. It's in those moments that I think God is within us."

If there's one thing that Sister Kristin has learned, both through her work and her community, it's that unexpected challenges can be a catalyst for growth. Nowhere was this more evident than in the fire and its aftermath, which "brought the sisters together in a way that nothing else could have done." She suspects that the experience helped many of her fellow sisters reconnect with the spirit of the Visitation, sensing that "maybe it deepened their own sense of commitment to their vows, to serving the people of God." In the end, she reflects, the tragic loss of the motherhouse became a priceless gift: a vivid reminder of what it means to be a community. "I think that happens in life sometimes," she muses. "The thing that seems so devastating ends up being the gift—the opening of a new vision."

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In my own life, too, devastation has led to an intimate understanding of the Visitation. In the fall of 2004, I became pregnant with my first child. My husband, Scott, and I were thrilled—overwhelmed by the enormity of our new vocation, but thrilled all the same. Children had always been a part of the life we'd envisioned for ourselves, and those two bold lines on the pregnancy test were proof that we were on our way.

Within a week, though, troubling signs began to appear. I was bleeding lightly, and even more worrisome were the waves of pain I felt on my right side, pain that would begin steadily, then crest to such a level that I'd have to brace myself until it subsided. I called the doctor, who ordered blood tests and ultrasounds. One week later, we learned that it was an ectopic pregnancy, which occurs when the embryo implants itself outside of the uterus where it has no chance of survival.

The next few days passed in a daze of doctor's visits and unfamiliar medical terminology. My joy had turned so quickly to sorrow that I felt utterly disoriented. It was all wrong, as if a rug had been whisked out from under my feet; I'd lost my emotional footing. I mourned the death of that little life inside me, one which had had to end before it had barely begun.