

A woman went to the emergency room, where she was seen by a brand-new young doctor. After about 3 minutes in the examination room, the doctor told her she was pregnant. She burst out of the room and ran down the corridor screaming. An older doctor stopped her and asked what the problem was. After listening to her story, he calmed her down and sat her in another room. Then, the doctor marched down the hallway to the first doctor's room. "What in the world is wrong with you?" he demanded. "This woman is 68 years old, she has 2 grown children and several grandchildren, and you told her she was pregnant?!!" The new doctor continued to write on his clipboard and without looking up said," Does she still have the hiccups?"

First, a few details about the gospel. Elizabeth addresses Mary as "the Mother of my Lord." In doing so, Elizabeth hails Mary as the mother of the King. In the Old Testament 'my Lord' was a court expression used to honor the king (cf. Sam 24:21; Ps 110:1). Thus, Elizabeth is referring to Mary as the mother of the King.

For Mary, Elizabeth's words are a confirmation of what the angel told her in Nazareth. She is the mother of the Davidic king. That is why the detail about Joseph being of the house and family of David is given. Jesus is a 'son of David.' But Elizabeth's words also confer quite a significant honor on Mary herself, for in the biblical world, as mother of the King, Mary would have been understood to be the queen in her son's kingdom.

In ancient Israel the queenship in the Davidic kingdom was bestowed not on the king's wife but on the king's mother (see Jer 13:18, 20 1 Kings 15:13; 2 Kings 24:15, 1 Kings 2:19-20). Most kings had large harems with many wives, but each king had only one mother, and the queenship was given to her. Therefore, when Elizabeth calls Mary 'Mother of my Lord,' she is honoring Mary as the mother of the King, the queen mother.

This background sheds a lot of biblical light on Mary's intercessory role today, for the queen mother in ancient Israel served as an advocate for the people. Members of the kingdom would bring petitions to the queen mother and she would present those requests to the king (see 1 Kings 2:13-20). If Mary is the mother of King Jesus, the queen mother in Christ's Kingdom, then it would make sense that she serves as an advocate for the citizens of the kingdom, bringing our petitions to her royal Son. There is an old Catholic saying that "Every time Jesus closes a door, Mary opens a window." It's very bad theology – but it DOES get the part of Mary being an intercessor for us right.

Finally, Elizabeth praises Mary for her great faith: "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord." (Lk 1:45) Notice the difference in this third acclamation. In the first 2 accolades, Elizabeth honors Mary for her unique maternity, recognizing Mary is blessed because of the fruit of her womb and because she is the 'mother of my Lord.' But in this third statement Elizabeth exalts Mary for something even greater: her faith: "Blessed is she who believed."

St. Augustine explained that although being the mother of the Savior bestows on Mary a great privilege, her faithfulness is something even more noteworthy. Even more than the physical relationship she has with her son, Mary's spiritual walk with the Lord as a disciple is what makes her most blessed. Augustine wrote, "We must not think that blessedness lay in bodily relationship;" Instead, he concluded, "Mary is blessed because she 'heard the word of God and kept it.' (Lk 11:28)" It is a greater thing that Mary was Christ's disciple than that she was His mother. (adapted from Edward Sri, WALKING WITH MARY, p. 74-76)

But what could this encounter between 2 women 2000 years ago possibly say to us? A lot, as it turns out. Any of you who have visited the Holy Land know that it's a strangely different place. Nobody doubts that. Virtually every inch of its soil has been soaked in blood, including the blood of Christ Himself, and history leaps out from every rock.

Ancient things from beyond our time seem to come to surface there and mix with the things of today. When we stand in its sacred spots, we begin to understand why Moses was told to take his shoes off and why, through the centuries, so many wars have been fought over this small strip of desert.

It is aptly named the Holy Land. I have had the privilege of walking its ground, barefoot in soul, several times. But of all the things I saw there, including the tomb of Christ itself, none touched me as deeply as did the Church of the Visitation in Ein Karem, near Jerusalem. That church stands in sharp contrast to many of the other churches there which mark the key events in Christ's life.

Unlike those other churches, the Church of the Visitation is a very modest building and is basically unadorned. There's no gold or marble. Its wooden walls and oak ceiling are plain and mostly bare. However, on the front wall, behind the altar, there is a painting that depicts the scene of the Visitation. It was this painting of Elizabeth and Mary that struck me so deeply.

It's a picture of two peasant women, both pregnant, greeting each other. Everything about it suggests smallness, littleness, obscurity, dust, small-town, insignificance. What you see is 2 rather plain-looking women, standing in the dust of an unknown village; it's not even named in the biblical account. It is probably not certain that Ein Karem, the site of the Church of the Nativity, is the actual place where this encounter occurred.

Nothing suggests that either of them, or anything they are doing or carrying, is out of the ordinary or of much significance. Yet, and this is the genius of the painting, all that littleness, obscurity, seeming barrenness, and small-town insignificance makes us automatically ask the question: "Who would have thought? Who could ever have imagined that these 2 women, in this little town, in this obscure place, in this obscure time, were carrying inside of themselves something that would radically and forever change the world?"

Who would have thought it? But it's true. What these obscure peasant women were gestating and carrying inside of themselves would one day change history more than any army, any philosopher, any artist, any King or Queen, or any entertainment or sports star ever would.

Inside of themselves, they were gestating the Christ and the Prophet. These births changed the world radically. Today, we even measure time by the event of those births. We live in the year 2018 AD, that is ANNO DOMINI, in the year of the Lord, after Christ's and John's births, after the event captured in that simple painting.

There is a great lesson in this: Never underrate, in terms of world importance, someone living in obscurity who is pregnant with promise. Never overlook a person simply because they are not famous or rich or powerful. Never underestimate the impact in history of silent, hidden gestation.

This is a great image for meditation. Insofar as we have real significance all of us live in obscurity, pregnant with promise, silently, in a way hidden to the world, gestating that which will change time and history.

If we understood this, there would be more peace in our lives, one of the raging fires inside of us would torment us much less. There is a deep restlessness in all of us that can only be stilled by understanding this -- for all of us live that martyrdom of obscurity, the martyrdom of a life within which we do not have fully adequate self-expression.

There is a relentless pressure inside each of us that pushes us to be known, to make a difference, to make our lives count in terms of the big picture. Thus, we yearn to do great things, big things, things that affect beyond the boundaries of the small towns we all live in. Invariably then we sit inside of our own lives and feel unknown, small-time, undistinguished and frustrated because almost all of our riches are still unknown to others. We have so much to give to the world, but the world doesn't know about us.

What we need to bring us some peace is what is expressed in that painting in the Church of the Visitation, namely, that what changes the world is what we give birth to when, in the obscurity and dust of our small towns and within the frustration of lives that will always seem too small for us, we become pregnant with hope and, after a long, humble gestation process, a process which is not advertised or known to the world, we bring that hope to full term.

What the Visitation of Mary and Elizabeth teaches us is the value of small, little, unknown, obscure -- where most of us spend most of our lives. And blessed are we when we believe that what is spoken to us by the Lord will be fulfilled. Amen. (adapted from Rolheiser, posting of 12/16/15)