

Something New

Celia Wolf-Devine

After being told about her cousin Elizabeth's pregnancy, Mary set out at once to visit her—a wonderful example of how eager she was to serve, to give, to be of use to others. Right?

Well, yes and no. The story is rich with meaning at many levels and has a lot to teach us both about Mary and about our own lives as Christians. No doubt Mary did want to help and support her cousin, but Elizabeth already had a supportive community of friends and neighbors. If it were simply a matter of lending a helping hand, Mary's company would have been welcome but hardly indispensable. Much more is going on.

Look at it for a moment from Mary's point of view. She was young and in a very vulnerable position. She could have faced death by stoning when her pregnancy was discovered. Yes, she was without sin and had just received extraordinary news from an angel. We don't want to say she doubted what the angel said or that she didn't trust in God to care for her as she took on the responsibilities of motherhood. But, sinless though she was, she did not float above the trials of life, conversing constantly with angels; she was human. Her whole world had been radically shaken up in a moment. Mary needed someone to talk with—someone who would understand.

Elizabeth was the perfect person. The fact that the angel had informed Mary of her cousin's pregnancy was clearly an indication that their stories were in some way woven together. Indeed, it was the very same angel, Gabriel, who had appeared to Zechariah to tell him that Elizabeth would soon become pregnant. Both women were experiencing for the first time the stirring of new life within them—something only another woman can understand. Both were pious Jews longing for the coming of the Messiah. But, most important, they recognized that God was doing something new and wonderful in and through them—that God's promises to Abraham and his descendants were about to be fulfilled.

The feast of the Visitation is an especially feminine one; it is about two women rejoicing at being able to spend time together, deepening their friendship and sharing their hopes and fears. But their hope and joy are not just private, for the powerful action of the Holy Spirit has brought the whole community together in joyful expectation that something wonderful is about to happen.

When Mary's greeting sounds in Elizabeth's ears, John leaps for joy in her womb, thus fulfilling the prophecy to Zechariah that John would be filled with the Holy Spirit even from his mother's womb (Luke 1:15). The angel's words to Zechariah indicated that John would prepare the way of the Lord, going before him "in the spirit and power of Elijah" (Luke 1:17). To a devout Jew, this reference to Elijah indicated that the Messiah was indeed coming very soon, for tradition had it that Elijah (who had been taken up to Heaven in a chariot of fire) would come again to restore all things and prepare the way for the Messiah.

Elizabeth has doubtless learned of the angel's words to her husband, and so is immediately able to recognize in Mary "the mother of my Lord." Through the power of this same Spirit, Zechariah's tongue is loosened when his son is circumcised and he names the baby John (as directed by the angel). He breaks into the beautiful hymn of praise and thanksgiving known as the Canticle of Zechariah. This describes John as "the prophet of the Most High" who



will "go before the Lord to prepare his way, giving knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins." And so, indeed, John was to baptize with the baptism of repentance—and so prepare the way for the one who would baptize with the Holy Spirit. All the wonders surrounding John's birth were talked about throughout the hill country of Judea.

What can we learn from Mary's going immediately to visit Elizabeth after receiving the astonishing news from Gabriel? Our Christian lives are not lived in a vacuum. We need to both give and receive. We are entwined with others, and God works not just in our individual lives, but also in our families and communities. We might sometimes be better able to understand what God is doing in our lives through talking with a Christian friend who is also being guided by the Holy Spirit. Each of us sometimes needs an Elizabeth to go to. ■

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