

Church of the Visitation, Ein Kerem



³⁹ In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a city of Judah, ⁴⁰ and she entered the house of Zechari'ah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴² and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! ⁴³ And why is this granted me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴ For behold, when the voice of your greeting came to my ears, the babe in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord."

Mosaic above the entrance of
The Church of the Visitation, Ein Kerem

"In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a city of Judah," (LUKE 1:39)

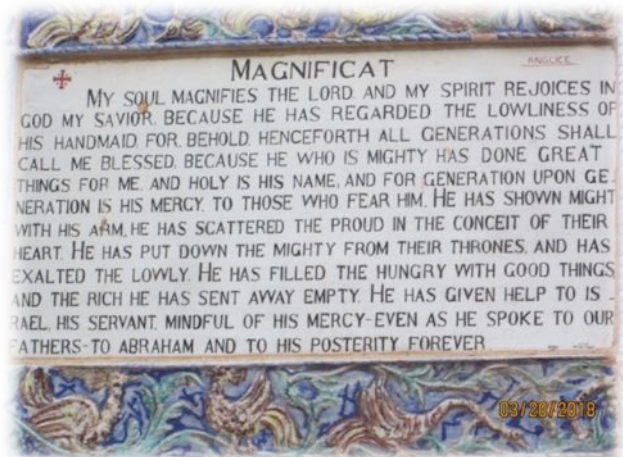
⁴⁶ And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord,
⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
⁴⁸ for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden.

For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed;

⁴⁹ for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

⁵⁰ And his mercy is on those who fear him from generation to generation.

⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm, he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts,



The Magnificat of Mary
Located on the wall across The Church of the Visitation

⁵² he has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree;

⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away.

⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, ⁵⁵ as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his posterity for ever." ⁵⁶ And Mary remained with her about three months, and returned to her home. (Luke 1:36-56)

Statue of the Visitation
The Church of the Visitation





Tradition tells us that the sites for both the Church of John the Baptist and the Church of the Visitation were identified by Saint Helena, the mother of Emperor Constantine I, in the fourth century. Byzantine churches were built at these sites, however the fell into disrepair especially during those eras in which the land was controlled by the Muslim. When the Crusaders conquered Palestine in the twelfth century, new churches were built at these sites. Unfortunately, these churches were either destroyed or left to fall into ruin when the Ottomans retook the territory from the Crusader.

In 1679, the Franciscans purchased the land on which on which stood the ruins of the Crusader Church of the Visitation stood. In 1937 archeologists began excavating the site and found both Byzantine and Crusader era ruins. The remains of these churches were preserved and incorporated into the new Church of the Visitation, which began construction in 1955.

Front exterior of The Church of the Visitation,
Ein Kerem



View of St. John the Baptist from
the Church of the Visitation.



Walking from St. John the Baptist to the Church of the Visitation
with beautiful *Ein Kerem* in the background.



Courtyard of the Church of The Visitation



Altar and apse of the Church of the Visitation



The meeting of Mary and Elizabeth
The Church of the Visitation



Zechariah serving in the Temple
The Church of the Visitation



Mary and John escape the soldiers of Herod with the aid of the angel Uriel
The Church of the Visitation



A great sign appeared in the sky, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. (Rev 12:1)
The Church of the Visitation



First century cistern from which Elizabeth drew water. The Church of the Visitation

Kevin's Reflection:



Walking from Mary's home in Nazareth to the home of Elizabeth & Zechariah in Judea.
Courtesy of Google Maps

Holy Gathering

The Visitation—I'm familiar with the story: Mary visits Elizabeth. But before that can even happen Mary has to travel some 90 to 95 miles to get from her home in Nazareth to Elizabeth's home in Judea, modern day *Ein Kerem*. No roads, or highways, no buses or cars. How'd she get there? She either traveled by foot or maybe by riding a donkey. The Scripture doesn't tell us how she did it, only that she did. To be sure the journey would be both difficult and hazardous. Did she, a young, pregnant woman travel alone? If she did then surely God had a company of angels protecting her as the mosaic above the entrance to the Church of the Visitation suggests. It is possible that Joseph accompanied her and then returned home, and then returned to Elizabeth and Zechariah's home at a prescribed time to bring Mary back. Perhaps Mary joined a caravan of travelers from Nazareth to Jerusalem. Again, we simply do not know. What is certain it that Mary was very motivated to visit Elizabeth after the news of her miraculous pregnancy. Elizabeth was already six months pregnant so Mary didn't waste any time to start her travels for as the scripture says, "*Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a city of Judah.*" (Luke 1:39)



Elizabeth Greeting Mary.
I remember looking at this picture often in my Saint Joseph Daily Missal as a child. Happy memories.

Why did Mary make such an arduous journey? Although there is, I am sure, more than one answer to this question, I believe the overarching reason is simply this: Mary wanted to be where the "action was" so that she could participate with Elizabeth in the unfolding mystery of the lives of their children. Mary followed the prompting of the Holy Spirit and "arose and went with haste."

Is this not the same reason that pilgrims throughout the centuries have traveled to the Holy Land? This is why Jan and I went on this pilgrimage with Father Joel. To us it was an arduous journey, but then we are spoiled 21st century Christians of the West not made of the tougher and more resilient stuff of the first century believers, especially Mary. Nevertheless, we too wanted to be where the "action is." In the previous reflection I spoke of "Holy Ground" sanctified by Holy presence and action which draws the believer into the Mystery of Salvation through participation.

What we are witnessing in the Visitation is not the nexus of the believer with Holy Ground, as with Moses and Sinai, but the synergy of faith that occurs when two or more believers gather in His Name (Matt 18:20). Mary and Elizabeth were the first two believers to fulfill these words spoken by Jesus. And in this nexus of faith there was an immediate explosion of the Spirit starting with John leaping in Elizabeth's womb, followed by his mother crying out,

"Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!"

And then Mary responding with a song of joy magnifying the Lord,

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden. For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed...."

These words continue to reverberate through time and space every time the "Hail Mary" is prayed, or the Liturgy of the Hours is recited, and through them we can participate in the Mystery of the Annunciation and the Visitation.

And what of us? Do we recognize this “Holy Nexus” when “two or three gathered in My name?” Do we believe and expect an explosion of the Spirit when we come together at Mass? We should. And this need not only occur at Mass, for whenever and wherever we gather we should do so recognizing the potential of His presence among us:

“Therefore, encourage one another and build one another up, as indeed you do.” (1Thess 5:11)

Whatever happened during those three months that Elizabeth and Mary spent together in Judea one thing I know for certain, that it was transformative; preparing them to accomplish God’s will in their lives. And God has a plan for each of us also. It may not be to raise the “Forerunner” of the Messiah or to prepare the Son of God to save the world, but in the eyes of the Father it is just as important. What is that? It is to be transformed into the image of His Son (Rom 8:29), and for this to happen we need these Holy Nexi of Holy Ground and Holy Gatherings. Let us greet each other like Elizabeth and Mary with joy, expectation, and most of all filled with the Holy Spirit.

Jan’s Reflection:

After the Annunciation, the Scripture says Mary makes haste to go see her cousin Elizabeth who lives ninety miles away. Elizabeth is already in her sixth month of pregnancy. As soon as Mary arrives, Elizabeth hears Mary’s voice and she is filled with the Holy Spirit. John leaps for joy in her womb because he recognizes the Christ even though He is not fully formed, the Son of God incarnate. The Good News has come to the house of Zechariah, Elizabeth and John. “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you.” (Jer 1:1)

Elizabeth proclaims to Mary, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb.” Then Mary responds with the Magnificat; she magnifies God saying, “Henceforth, all generations will call me blessed.” Mary stays another three months with Elizabeth. I believe she ministers to her cousin while Jesus in here womb ministers to John who will become his forerunner: to preach a baptism of repentance. “Behold I send my messenger before your face who will prepare your way before you.” Later on after John’s ministry and arrest Jesus goes to Galilee proclaiming the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the Gospel.

As I reflected on the Visitation of Mary and Elizabeth I thought of this also as the Visitation of Jesus and John. This is a hidden mystery and prolife message from their mothers’ womb.

A Visitation Prayer

*O Virgin of the Visitation,
compelled by the Holy Spirit,
and with Jesus hidden beneath your Heart,
you arose in those days and, with haste,
went to your kinswoman Elizabeth,
to serve her in her time of need.
Elizabeth acknowledged your faith,
and a new song came to flower on your lips;
thus did you magnify the Father
whose mercy is from generation to generation.
Visit us now, O Mother of Our Lord,
and obtain for us a quickening of prophetic grace,
that we may serve our brethren in faithfully loving the Church,
and love the Church in humbly serving our brethren,
and so, under your gracious protection,
again and again repeat your words:
“Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord;
be it done unto me according to your word.”
O clement, O loving, O sweet Virgin Mary!*

(modified from: <http://www.apostolicvisitation.org/en/materials/VisitationPrayer.pdf>)