

This season is full of stories. When I was a seminarian, for the Christmas breaks I used to stay with the family that I had been very close to through the years. They were very kind and I enjoyed being with them, but it also meant that almost every night there would be a new hallmark movie. Probably like you, I've seen enough of these to know that not all the stories of this season truly capture the essence of what the coming season really means. On the other hand, the stories of our faith that we hear and celebrate in Advent are great, not just because they have been with us all our lives, but also because they are stories of real people in real life.

In the verses that precede today's Gospel, the angel had appeared to young Mary of Nazareth and told of God's great plan and how it included her. *"Let it be done unto me according to thy word"*, she said, and suddenly life within her began. As a man, I can only imagine what a woman experiences over the months of pregnancy, as their bodies change and their stomachs swell with life.

Mary left her familiar surroundings of Nazareth and with haste, headed toward the hill country of Judah, a place called Ein Karem, just southwest of the city of Jerusalem, to assist her relative who was six months into her pregnancy.

We should understand, that in her culture, women never did anything alone, and so Mary would have traveled with a caravan, at least under the watchful eye of a father. She likely traveled on the back of a donkey, through areas that were not necessarily safe.

As she made this roughly 90-mile journey over the course of several days, I wonder what all must have been going through her mind. She must have thought, over and over again, about her strange encounter with the angel and all that she had been told: that she was chosen above all women to be the mother of the Savior. "Why me?" she surely thought as she journeyed, *"And how exactly did this happen?"* But somehow I imagine that she didn't dwell on these questions too much, as I suspect she was content to leave the mystery to God.

But the days of traveling gave her time to ponder and consider all that this would mean and what the future might hold. I can imagine that on the journey, when they would stop to rest for the night, she would lie on her back, gazing heavenward, trying to imagine what motherhood would hold for her, placing her hand on her stomach, feeling for signs of the new life within her: excited, scared, overjoyed, but content. Just as Advent calls us to wait and to ponder God's promise, Mary also had time to wait and ponder God's promise of what would come.

In this season, and in our lives, in which we are so over-stimulated, always looking ahead to what comes next, and how it leads to our lack of patience and peace...But also as we experience so many anxieties about all that we have to do and perhaps are overwhelmed by things that are out of our control, Mary becomes someone we look to for much needed peace and contemplation, calling us to trust and to be open. With her, in these last remaining days of Advent, let us wait and slow down a little. Like Mary, let us trust in the mystery of God's plan.

What we hear in today's Gospel is the 2nd Joyful Mystery of the Rosary, the Visitation. It's worth noting that Elizabeth was older than Mary. Respect was always shown to one who was older. But also, Elizabeth was the wife of a priest, which gave her every certain status in society. On the other hand, Mary was not married but betrothed to an otherwise unknown man, whose trade was carpentry.

Despite this distinction and status, Elizabeth greeted Mary as though she were receiving a queen into her home: *"Blessed are you among women...How does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?"*

She says Lord, in reference to the child in Mary's womb. Yes, he is Lord, but consider the words the angel had said to Mary: *"you will conceive in your womb and bear a son...and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father...and of his Kingdom there will be no end."*

The child in her womb was a king. In ancient Israel, second to the king in power, was not the King's wife, but instead the king's mother. The Hebrew word for it is gebirah. We see this power and influence in the example of King Solomon, who stood from his throne as his mother entered into his presence, and paid her homage. Next to

his throne was placed another for the king's mother, who said: *There is a favor I would ask of you. 'Ask it, my mother, for I will not refuse you'* (1 King 2:19-20).

Mary is the *gebirah*, not of merely one of Israel's kings, but instead the King of kings. We appeal to her in our prayers, knowing that she has the ear of her son, the King. At this time, what would you ask her to echo to her Son.

*Hail Mary...*