***STILL A MYSTERY!***

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Texts: Luke 1:39-56 and Romans 16:25-27

As many of you know, I grew up in a small town in western PA called Slippery Rock, known to the locals as Slimy Pebble. It sits 50 miles north of Pittsburgh and today has a little over 3,000 people (excluding dogs, cows, and the 8,000 students at the University), but people remember the name! Slippery Rock University has a national following for its sports teams with its football scores announced in stadiums across the country to roars from the crowds. It is the name that put Slippery Rock on the map! But it is not alone.

Near Cambridge, England there is a village by the name of Ugley. It is somewhat of a mystery as to how the town got its name, but the name has endured. It is not a town noteworthy for any great accomplishments or people. It has never bothered its neighbors or tried to provoke a war. Yet it is the butt of jokes and the object of derision, simply because of its name. The pressure eventually got to the members of the Ugley Women’s Rural Institute (I am not making this up!) who decided that a name change was in order. So now the Ugley Women’s Rural Institute is officially known as The Women’s Rural Institute (Ugley branch).[[1]](#endnote-1)

Those towns came to mind as I read this familiar passage from Luke’s gospel and the story of Mary’s visit to her cousin Elizabeth. Mary came from humble roots and a humble town – not the holy city of Jerusalem, but the little town of Nazareth. We know it was Nazareth because the text tells us so, and we know the angel spoke to Zechariah, Elizabeth’s husband, in the Temple in Jerusalem, for the text tells us that too. Yet after being visited by the angel in Nazareth, Mary arose and went where? According to Luke, she *went with haste into the hill country to* ***a city of Judah*** *where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.*

The text is silent about the name of the city, and I can’t help wondering, “Why so?” Did it have an Ugley name? Did Luke not know where Elizabeth lived, where Mary went when she left Nazareth with the baby Jesus growing within her? Luke is so specific about identifying Jerusalem and Nazareth and locating Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem; why then is he silent about the name of the town in the hill country of Judah where these two pregnant women first met after their holy experiences? Why after two thousand years is the name of that town still a mystery, for there the son of Mary was first recognized as the Son of God, albeit in utero?

A group of young children were reenacting the Christmas story. Early in their play a little Mary arrived at the home of little Elizabeth and knocked at the door. “Come on in Mary,” said little Elizabeth, “We were just sitting here making some baby clothes.” And maybe that is how it really was – maybe Elizabeth was sitting there making baby clothes and baby plans when Mary arrived, doing those ordinary things that turn-of-the-era expectant moms did in anticipation of the arrival of their first babies. Too often the story gets romanticized, depicted through some mystical lens that places Elizabeth at home piously awaiting Mary’s arrival, and then has the two of them sitting around doing holy things for the next three months while each grows greater with child. It is the perspective that always speaks of Mary being “great with child,” never “pregnant”, because “pregnant” sounds too mundane and not holy enough for the mother of Christ. Yet being pregnant is precisely what this young virgin’s motherhood is all about – about being human, not divine – for while Jesus’ divinity is from God, his humanity is from a humble peasant girl named Mary.

Perhaps their shared pregnancies offer a clue to the nameless destination for Mary’s sudden trip. Teenage pregnancy has been a problem for a long time; it continues to be a challenge in our own community. Years ago when a teen was found to be with child, she would go “away” for a while and then return with a babe in arms. Rarely was it mentioned where the girl went; she simply went “away” like Mary going with haste into the hill country to a city of Judah. Is that what all this is about – a nameless city to hide the shame of a pregnant teen? Perhaps, but recall that Mary was there about three months and then returned to Nazareth. While the timeline is far from certain it seems likely that when she departed for Elizabeth’s house, she was not yet showing her pregnancy, but about the time she returned it would have begun to be an issue. So, if hiding the pregnancy – and thus hiding Mary from those who might consider stoning her for unfaithfulness – was the issue, then she would hardly have returned to Nazareth when she did.

More likely perhaps is that Mary’s visit to that unnamed village was inspired by the angel Gabriel, for it was Gabriel who told Mary not only of what was to happen to her, but also of Elizabeth’s surprising pregnancy. In so doing the angel gave Mary someone to whom to turn, someone who would dare to believe the unbelievable thing that Mary had experienced. Who else was young Mary to tell? It is hard to imagine that her parents would find it credible:

*Mom, Dad, you are probably wondering how I got pregnant? Well, it is not what you think. You see, I was just sitting there alone, minding my own business, when an angel of the Lord came to me and told me that I would bear a child who will be the Son of God, and he will reign forever and ever. Oh, and his name will be Jesus.*

Who would believe her? Elizabeth might, for she knew of miracles firsthand – her pregnancy and the inability of her husband to speak after meeting the angel in the Temple were living proof that God could work such wonders. In Elizabeth, Mary had someone who might understand her, someone who might believe her, someone who might support her through this awesome, fearful time.

God asked a lot of Mary, but God did not ask her to bear this holy responsibility alone. An angel appeared to Joseph in a dream to garner his support for this holy project. And God gave to Mary a companion on this maternal journey, Elizabeth, someone in whom she could confide and commiserate and wonder aloud. O to be a mouse in the corner of the room when those two expectant moms first came together and to see Elizabeth’s eyes grow wide as the child within her leapt for joy at the sound of Mary’s voice – a prenatal prophecy of the coming of the Lord! O to hear their accounts of the events that had brought them together in such extraordinary ways, and to see the glow on their faces and the light in their eyes as each anticipated her firstborn child who was no ordinary child! O to hear the joy, awe, trepidation, and faith at the miracles growing within them – two women at the opposite ends of life – one a young virgin, the other an old woman beyond child-bearing years – both chosen by God! For, as the angel said, “*Nothing is impossible with God*.” For the old, for the young, for the in-between, nothing is impossible!

While all that may be true it tells us nothing about why Luke tells us nothing about the town in which this encounter took place. It is still a mystery. Perhaps that is as Luke intended it – to be a mystery, the subject of speculation and guesswork. For, at its heart, incarnation itself is a mystery – that God should become human and live among us and die for us and rise again is a mystery beyond any easy explanation. So, while there are enough details to let us know that it happened in a certain way at a certain time in a certain area, the town where those women met is not precisely known, nor can the true location of the stable in Bethlehem be identified, or the country of origin of the wise men, or the names of the shepherds, or the precise date when the child was born, or what animals were present in the stable – if it truly was a stable!

We who dare to believe that the mystery is true, bear witness that it is still a mystery, a mystery worth believing. And while we would love more of the details, we have enough to know and to believe. The little town in the hill country of Judah is not the only town to be unnamed in the Christmas story. That place in Egypt to which Joseph and Mary fled with great haste after the visit of the wise men is never disclosed by Matthew. Perhaps then the reason for not naming these two towns is that they are simply places of waiting – a place to wait for the child to grow and God’s plan for salvation to begin, a place in Egypt for the holy family to wait for Herod to die so that they could return home safely. Perhaps the unnamed town is simply a place to wait and to ponder things in our hearts and to provide support for one another as those who dare to believe that the miracle is true and the mystery is to be believed.

Advent is a time of waiting, and for these last few weeks we have waited together, as did Mary and Elizabeth, one family

waiting side by side, hand in hand for God’s plan for salvation to take shape, waiting for the coming of the Christ,

waiting with others who dare to believe the mystery of Bethlehem, the mystery of incarnation, the mystery of faith.

We wait in nameless towns in the hill country and in well-known towns in the Valley and in towns with Ugley names the world over. But we do wait – together – because we do believe – together. We believe that great mystery of faith that has been passed on to us from generations past, and that great mystery is this: in a babe born to a peasant girl in Bethlehem God came ***to*** us and ***amon***g us and ***for*** us! To the author of that mystery, the only true God, be the glory forever! Amen

1. Ron Ferguson, “Nomenclature”, *Life and Work*, March 2009, p.11 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)