

FASHIONING A HOLY FAMILY

Christmas 1 – Cycle C: 1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26; Colossians 3:12-17; Luke 2:41-52

When I read this morning's account in Luke of Jesus going missing in Jerusalem at the end of the feast of Passover; of how his parents, Mary and Joseph, heartsick and fearing the worst, spend three days looking for him in what, even then, was a vast city; and then, when they finally find him, having to suffer his impudent remark, "Did you not know that I must be about my Father's interests?" I am reminded of my friend Nixon McMillan's comment to me when I told him Paula and I were going to have our first child. "Children," Nixon pronounced with a twinkle in his eye, "are the final discipline!" I have quoted him many times over the past 30 years, both to parishioners whose children are individuating, and to myself as a parent when my patience and longsuffering are being tested by an unforeseen circumstance or event involving one or other of our two sons.

Luke feels compelled to give the story of the missing boy Jesus a happy ending, of course, telling us that this was, presumably, the last instance of teenage rebellion Mary and Joseph had to endure. "[Jesus] went down with them and came to Nazareth" we read, "and was obedient to them." And then, Luke goes on to say that the value of the incident was transformed from negative to positive for Mary. Luke writes, "His mother treasured all these things in her heart." (He neglects to add, "after she cooled down".)

And finally, if there were any unresolved strands of concern among his readers, Luke concludes the passage with the epilogue, "Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favour." In other words, it was smooth sailing from here on in; nothing of real interest happened to Jesus between the ages 12 and 31 when he is baptized by John at the River Jordan, calls his disciples, and begins his ministry. Needless to say, some writers whose stories did not make it into the Bible were more than happy to fill in the blanks.

What today's incident in Jerusalem does reveal for us, however, is that Jesus had a pious family and a good family. They observed the pilgrimage feasts as outlined in Deuteronomy: Jesus' faith and his understanding of religious tradition was nurtured by Mary and Joseph. And they show their grace in parenting when they are able to cut Jesus some slack in their response to this rather alarming event that happened in Jerusalem. They didn't overreact, and yet it is clear by Luke's comment about Jesus' subsequent obedience that they clarified the boundaries for their precocious son. Interestingly, Jesus' birth narrative, which emphasizes his divine origins is wonderfully balanced by this story: Jesus, whose birth was heralded by angels, was quite ordinary, we learn; quite human, even to exhibiting a little attitude when confronted about his thoughtlessness. It is a behind-the-scenes peek at how normal things were in the Holy Family.

In our First Reading today, there is a parallel story of sorts. Samuel, as you may recall from our First Reading on November 15, was dedicated by his mother as a servant of God, living as an acolyte of sorts in the temple of Shiloh in which Eli was the priest. As an adult Samuel will have tremendous influence over the formation of the Hebrew people into a nation, anointing both Saul, Israel's first king, and then David, Israel's greatest king. The account we read this morning, however, takes place during Samuel's boyhood years. His mother has made him a new robe to wear at the temple; between the lines, we can read that he was a growing boy and always needed something in a larger size. His parents, Hannah and Elkanah, presented the little robe to Samuel at the same time as they came to make their yearly sacrifice at Shiloh. On this particular occasion, Eli the priest blesses Samuel's parents asking God for many more children which, incidentally, they did have – three more sons and two daughters. The parallel with Jesus' story from today's Gospel is in the parents' righteousness and in the epilogue in 1 Samuel: "Now the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favour with the Lord and with the people." It may be that Luke intentionally made this connection for his readers so that they would understand Jesus as someone with the significance of Samuel; a holy man of great influence through whom God could bring abundant blessing.

Two holy families; but now there is a third!

The letter to the Colossians suggests that God creates a third holy family, a large holy family, through baptism, and then specifically through people being called by Jesus' life, ministry, suffering, death, and resurrection. And the mark of this family of disciples is not merely a white baptismal garment, but rather

the metaphorical clothing disciples receive in following Jesus: compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, and love – the very things Jesus himself taught and embodied. Those who follow Jesus, we read, become part of a holy family fashioned by God through the transformational power of the indwelling of God's living word.

We are this third holy family; and in this quiet season of joy and thanksgiving, not only for Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, but for our own families, our family of friends, and our church family, it is good to pause and reflect on how these families are holy families for us; how we have been formed spiritually in our family of origin, and by our extended family of friends in Christ. My favourite part of our baptismal rite is that moment when we all covenant with the newly baptized that we will participate as family, really, in his or her spiritual formation. And what is heartening to me is that it is more than just words: we actually walk the talk by taking a special interest in not only our children and youth, but also our adults who are baptized. We come to know them by name, and we become friends in Christ with one another. Some of us become their teachers; all are examples and role models of life in the faith. We worship together, eat together at parish meals; play, laugh, and cry together. We don't say it in our present baptismal liturgy, but in the script we used from 1978 to 2006, we incorporated the newly baptized by saying, "We welcome you into the Lord's family." It was a powerful ritual moment because it signalled a successful adoption and the beginning of a new relationship of family for all present. Through the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, but more practically through becoming part of the holy families God has created, we become the children of God.

I love Luke's description of Jesus' time apart in the temple at Jerusalem. I love it because it suggests our job description as members of a holy family. Luke tells us that Jesus sat "among the teachers, listened to them, and asked them questions." Jesus, himself, we read, was a learner, a disciple. And that is our call as well: to do more than just hang out with our friends in Christ, as beneficial as that can be. We are called to encounter the Word of God, allow it to find home in our hearts, and then brace ourselves for its transforming power in our lives and in our families.

Families at their best are holy families, fashioned by the living Word of God. In Christ, God calls us to be nothing less.