

Homily for Dec. 26, 2021 (Feast of the Holy Family)



A wife once said, “My husband would climb mountains, swim lakes, and crawl through deserts to show his love for me, but I divorced him...because he was never home!” I know that was a joke, but the first part of the joke paints a picture of a very committed, faithful, and dedicated husband who would go to any lengths for his wife. These Scripture readings given to us today, on the Feast of the Holy Family are also about

commitment, faithfulness, and dedication. They are stories about people who are “all in,” people who push all their poker chips to the center of the table and trust God, because they already know God is the faithful One. God is the one who first risked everything for us. (Remember, the most severely punished person in all of Jesus’ parables is the guy who did not gamble but buried his talents in the ground). Today’s first reading and gospel invite us to suspend our biases around gambling, around culture, and around child rearing as there are some deeper truths in the air.

The first reading recalls an event about 1000 years before the birth of Jesus and is centered around a woman named Hannah. She is married to Elkanah and is the apple of his eye. Hannah, unfortunately, was unable to bear children, so she is ridiculed, taunted and provoked by Elkanah’s second wife who, herself, was able to bear children for Elkanah. Elkanah didn’t have one wife then the other; he’s stinging the two of them along together. Apparently it was common in Biblical times and all over the world wherever you find rednecks. What was also common in Biblical times was the idea that having children was considered a blessing from God (which I hope is still true), while not having children was considered a deliberate curse from God. Bullied by wife #2 and with low self-esteem, Hannah goes to the Temple and prays that God might grant her a child. Eli, the snoopy priest in the Temple, overhears Hannah’s prayer to God and concludes that she’s drunk and should pick up her wine bottle and leave the Temple immediately. She tells the priest—compassionate soul that he is--she’s not drunk but that she is a troubled soul. In her prayer, she asks God for a child and in return and, if the favor is granted, she would place that child in Lord’s service (and she would give up drinking in church!). Eli, the holy and nosy priest, says her prayer will be answered. Sure enough, she has a child and names him Samuel. This is where we pick up the story in today’s first reading.

Hannah’s husband, Elkanah (the two-timer), and all his household (including wife #2, the bully) pack up the station wagon and go to the Temple to offer sacrifice and thanksgiving for this child. Hannah and baby Samuel stay at home leaving the other misfits to go to the Temple without a baby (no wonder the priest thinks they’re all drunk). Hannah has decided to present baby Samuel at the Temple much later, only after he is weaned. As a mother, she probably wants to hold on to her child as long as she can. After he is weaned, she goes to the Temple and brings

the child to the priest, Eli, who doesn't initially recognize her. So, she says, as we heard in that reading, ***"I am the woman who was standing here in your presence, praying to the Lord...the one you thought was drunk on wine. Remember me now?"*** After a while, one drunk parishioner pretty much looks like another, but eventually he does remember her. Fulfilling her promise to God, and with a heavy heart, Hannah leaves the baby off at the Temple to be raised by Eli. Eli, clueless as he was, teaches Samuel how to hear and how to respond to God's calling. Samuel grows in wisdom and become the last judge of Israel and one of Israel's greatest prophets, as well. Samuel, years later, goes on to anoint David, the rock-throwing-giant-slayer, as King.

Suspend your idea of why someone would have multiple wives, why not having children was considered a curse, why a mother would drop off a child to be raised by another person, and finally, why a mother would seemingly force a child into a vocation they were too young to choose on their own. Suspend all that and, instead, see Hannah as a person who was "all in." She kept her word, her promise to God, and gave up the very thing she always wanted, her own child. She held nothing back from God who held nothing back from her.

When we do as Jesus asked us to do, that is, ***"love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength,"*** we are not only fulfilling the commandments, par excellence, we are also responding to our vocation. People who are fulfilling their vocation, their call from God, are people who are "all in." There are doctors, and then there are doctors! There are teachers, and then there are teachers! There are bus drivers, and then there are bus drivers! Those responding to God's call, even though they may not know it at the time, cannot do otherwise, even if they wanted to.

In today's gospel account, Mary and Joseph are also "all in." They don't necessarily understand Jesus' words when he said, ***"Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?"*** And they don't necessarily understand God's will for this child of theirs. But the genius of Mary (and I suspect of Joseph as well) is that she isn't impulsive; she doesn't dismiss what she doesn't understand. Mary ponders while never dismissing. She knows God's will is unfolding in this child, but she has no need to control its destiny. She can remain knowing and not knowing at the same time. That's real wisdom. The story ends with ***"Jesus increased in wisdom..."*** He certainly did, and I think he got a lot of it from his pondering mother, Mary.

The Gospel continues, ***"After three days they found him (Jesus) in the Temple."*** It's deliberately said that way, that it was three days. It was after three days in the tomb that they found Jesus again, alive in his risen body. After his death, while the disciples could not find him anywhere because their grief was so intense, they walked the earth anxious as a mother who had lost her child for three days. It must be the worst feeling in the world. Perhaps in moments of deep loss, the only choices before us are to either give up completely or to push all our chips to the center of the table and gamble everything on the One who gambled his life on us.

Here's a story of a child who was "all in." Apparently, it's a true story, but some of the details may have gotten modified over the years. There was a little boy whose sister needed a blood transfusion. She had the same, rare disease the boy had recovered from two years earlier. Her only chance for recovery was a transfusion from someone who had previously conquered the disease. Since the two children had the same rare blood type, the boy was the ideal donor. The doctor who had been treating her sat the little boy down and explained the grave situation to him, asking kindly if he'd be willing to give blood to his sister. To the doctor's surprise, the boy seemed to hesitate. The boy looked down at the floor and his thoughts seemed very far away. It was some time before he snapped out of it, then he took a deep breath and said, *"Okay. I'll do it, if it'll save her."* After hearing this, the doctor and nurses wasted no time and immediately got the blood transfusion procedure going. As he laid next to all the machinery and watch the blood exiting his arm, he turned to the doctor with a question, "Doctor, will I start to die right away?" Only then did the doctor realize why the boy had hesitated, why his lip had trembled when he'd agreed to donate his blood. He thought giving his blood to his sister meant giving up his life. In that brief moment, he'd made his great decision. In that brief moment he was "all in."

Fr. Phil