

Homily – December 29th, 2024 – Feast of the Holy Family

A little caution as we celebrate the Feast of the Holy Family: Don't dismiss Jesus, Mary and Joseph, too quickly, as the "model family" because you are convinced they look nothing like your family. All families are holy, no matter what they look like. There are a lot of families out there, like my own, that put the *fun* back into



dysfunctional. If you read the first chapter of Matthew's Gospel, and shake Jesus' family tree that you find there, more

than a few horse thieves and nutbars would fall out. For the same reason, nobody in my family is in any big rush to explore the family tree on my mother's side, given the fact that her maiden name was "Lawless." What do you think we would find there? Jailbirds! In view of the fact that there is no such thing as a "normal family," the Scriptures, nevertheless, invite us to strive to be the best version of ourselves. That's what make us holy; that's what makes us a family.

There is some food for thought in each of today's readings. In that first reading, we are presented with a woman named Hannah. Hannah is unable to bear children, which was considered a terrible stigma in Biblical times. She is married to a man named Elkanah. Elkanah, while married to Hannah, is simultaneously married to wife #2. Wife #2 bore Elkanah many children and never lost an

opportunity to belittle Hannah, wife #1, for not being able to have children. So, Hannah goes to the Temple and prays to God, from her heart, that God would grant her a child and, secondarily, that God would drop a grand piano on wife #2's head.

Prayers in the Temple were normally spoken out loud, but Hannah prays silently. Eli, the priest in the Temple, sees Hannah's lips moving, but he can't hear any words, so naturally he concludes that she is drunk. (Drunk women at church, apparently, is not a new thing. It's been going on for at least 3,000 years!). She tells him that she is not drunk but brokenhearted and grieves over the fact that she cannot have a child. Before God and Eli, the priest, Hannah promises that if she could give birth to a son, she would give that son to God, entirely. Eli, after warning her about drinking too much wine, tells Hannah that her prayer will be answered. Sure enough, nine months later she has a child and names him Samuel. Once he is weaned, Hannah returns to the Temple, and this is where we picked up the story in that first reading. Hannah sees Eli—the priest who thought she was drunk—and says, "I'm back! Remember me? Here is the child God granted me. I wasn't drunk then, and I'm not drunk now. I am here to fulfil my promise to God. Here is the child. I give him to you, and I give him to God. Raise him in God's ways." The child, Samuel, grows to become one of the greatest prophets of all time.

We might look at a story like this and say, "There's lots of dysfunctional things going on here that we wouldn't buy into in today's society and today's Church. Fair enough. But at its heart is a mystery of God unfolding, as it should, in less

than ideal circumstances. God's plan will not be derailed by nasty wife #2, by a priest who draws conclusions way too quickly, or by a disheartened woman who seems to be forcing her son into a vocation not of his own choosing. There is something bigger going on here. God's will is unfolding in this mess.

Let's look at the second reading. The writer, St. John, says that we are all children of God. What we will become beyond that is a wonderful mystery that we will have to wait for when we finally see God face to face. He goes on to say that if we, as children of God, are rejected, it's because people have never known or loved God, so how could they know or love God's children? Don't get discouraged. Instead, do two things: 1) believe in the name of God's Son, Jesus Christ, and 2) love one another just as he commanded us to do. That's your job in life as a Christian. If you do those two things, in time, the world will have no doubt who you are and whose you are. There is no one way, one "normal" way, to believe in Jesus, and there is no one way of loving as Jesus commanded us to do. It's all messy. It's all good. And, it's all holy.

Lastly, we get to the gospel, the story of 12-year-old Jesus debating with the elders in the Temple and worrying his parents to death. It's not primarily a story about how precocious or wise this 12-year-old Jesus was. It's also a story about the wisdom of Mary, in particular, and Joseph, as parents. Moreover, it's a story of how God's plan is unfolding in an abnormal and unusual way.

Mary's wisdom is demonstrated in that she has a hint that God's vocation is unfolding in her child's life even though she doesn't fully understand it. She didn't

dismiss the Angel Gabriel's unbelievable message about her becoming the mother of the Messiah, and she won't dismiss a 12-year-old child who seems to be acting out of sorts, even disrespectful. Mary will not dismiss what she doesn't understand, but, with great patience, she will allow the Mystery to unfold and reveal itself over her lifetime. It reminds me of one of my favorite Christmas songs, that has become a classic, "Mary, Did You Know?"

Mary realized that Jesus, from an early age, had a special relationship with the one he would intimately call, "Abba." Mary also realized that Jesus had to be faithful to that relationship even if she, and the rest of the world, didn't understand the depth of it. Jesus' obedience to God was so strong that it came across as disobedience to his parents and even blasphemy to the religious leaders. The veil would not be lifted on this special and powerful relationship Jesus had with his Father until after people experienced his death and resurrection. Until then, Mary probably said, "I don't get it, I don't get it, I don't get it, but I'll let it unfold in my heart; I'll ponder it in my heart." After the death and resurrection, Mary probably said, "Now, I get it." Being obedient to the Father's will was something Jesus just had to do. "The Son of Man has to go to Jerusalem and suffer these things..." That primary obedience, of loving God even more than mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters—as Jesus told us—is what finally brought Jesus to the Cross and became our redemption.

On the *third* day of relentless and worry-filled searching, Mary and Joseph find Jesus. It prefigures Jesus' own resurrection from the dead on the *third* day. Both were part of God's greater plan unfolding in the world, in God's time.

Perhaps that's the role of any good parent—to allow the unfolding of God's plan in their children's lives. Perhaps that's the role of each of us, as Church, to help one another discern the action of God in our lives. It will always be a Mystery that we can't control, but, more importantly it will always be a Mystery that's shaping the world for some ultimate good. When we give that Mystery free reign, as Mary in her wisdom did, then, we too become the Holy Family.

~Fr. Phil