

Feast of the Holy Family

December 31, 2023

On this last Sunday of the year, we celebrate the Feast of the Holy Family. We are therefore here today to offer all the members of our own families on the altar for God's blessing.

From our first reading taken from the book of Genesis, we hear about God's promise of numerous descendants to Abraham whom Judaism, Christianity, and Islam consider their father, and its fulfillment when Abraham's wife, Sarah, gave birth to Isaac.

The Gospel reading from St. Luke presents the head of the Holy Family, Joseph, faithfully obeying God's law given through Moses concerning the purification of the mother and the redeeming of the child by presenting Mary and the Baby Jesus in the Temple. The events recounted here are also found on February 2nd, the Feast of the Presentation of Jesus.

Today, we gather in faith to celebrate the feast of the Holy Family, a family of loving relationships between a mother, a father, and a son. And not just any mother, father, and son. No, this was a mother who was "full of grace" and open to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. This was a father who trusted when many other men in a similar situation would not have, a father who could have made a different choice, but didn't. And this was a Son who was and is The SON, our God who came in the flesh to Mary, Joseph and to you and me. The fortunes of this family could have gone differently had Joseph and Mary not been ready to accept whatever God was asking of them. I believe it's for this reason that we call them holy. And for this reason, we owe them our profound gratitude.

You might not realize it, but we don't read the same Gospel passage on this Sunday each year. Last year we heard the story of the Flight to Egypt. Next year we will hear the story of the Finding of Jesus in the Temple. And this year we heard the story of Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus traveling to the Temple for two things - Mary's "purification" after giving birth in accordance with Jewish law, and Jesus, a firstborn son being "presented" in the Temple (also in accordance with Jewish Law), a kind of offering to God of the very best Mary and Joseph have to offer.

And at the center of the story are two individuals we don't hear about very much - Simeon and Anna. Simeon had come to believe that he would not die before seeing

the Messiah. And when he sees the Holy Family he takes Jesus in his arms and utters a beautiful prayer (one prayed every night before bed by all priests, deacons, and religious), a prayer in which he declares that, in this moment, in this baby - he has seen salvation. And Anna (called a “prophetess” in this text) upon seeing the infant Jesus, gives thanks to God and speaks about the child and the redemption of Jerusalem.

I wonder what Mary and Joseph thought about this. Were they worried at hearing people talk so openly and controversially about their son? Did they do their best to try to slip away and disappear into the crowd? Did they say, “Oh, you are mistaken,” (not unlike what Peter would say decades later after the arrest of Jesus)? My guess is that they probably felt a little of all those things, probably weren’t exactly sure how to react in a situation for which they were little prepared.

But I also feel that they probably felt a certain amount of relief. After all, Jesus was still an infant. And that means that it hadn’t really been that long since an angel had visited Mary and Joseph in a dream and told them some incredible things. And while, what the angel told them had come true, there still might have been a part of them that wondered about it all, wondered if they understood correctly, wondered if it was all real, and not simply their minds playing tricks on them. And they probably needed as much affirmation as they could get, first from the Magi, and now from these two strangers.

In other words, Mary and Joseph were asked to see God in some extraordinary events, to see God in a pregnancy that, on the surface, made absolutely no sense, to see God in their tiny baby boy. And yet, that’s what they did. That’s what they said yes to. And that shows a level of trust that is hard to come by, a kind of trusting that led them to accept something that no one else had ever been told or ever experienced in all of humankind. Something extraordinary happened to each of them, and they chose not to discard it or ignore it, but to find God in the midst of it. What an example to all of us as we’re about to begin a New Year.

But that’s only part of it. You see, Simeon and Anna show us the other side of the coin, a kind of opposite experience from that of Mary and Joseph. Here they were milling around near the Temple, watching all sorts of things taking place, some of which involved parents making pilgrimages there with their new born children in tow. And no doubt, Anna and Simeon had seen this take place hundreds (maybe thousands) of times before. These religious practices might seem remarkable to us, but in the time of Jesus they were commonplace - ordinary things that faithful Jews did.

Yet, the astonishing thing is that these two people somehow saw something and someone no one else was seeing. In a certain sense, they must have been “spiritually ready” for such an encounter, ready to meet the God in their midst, ready to experience a holy moment in something completely ordinary.

If only we could do the same. My dear friends, today’s Gospel passage shows us that God comes to us on his own terms, as he sees fit. And that means we have opportunities to experience God in all sorts of circumstances - in the joys and the sorrows, in the successes and the failures, in the ordinary and in the extraordinary.

And while we don’t believe for a second that God is hiding from us, we would be wise to be the best “finders” we can be, seeking God in all sorts of places and all sorts of people and all sorts of experiences, in the “I can’t believe it” moments (as Mary and Joseph did) and in the hum-drum routine of everyday life (as Simeon and Anna did).

So let’s do our best to think both “inside the box” and “outside the box”, trusting that both will result in countless encounters with the living God, holy encounters which have the potential to change us forever.

Mary and Joseph, pray for us.

