



by Mary M. McGlone

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December 30, 2018

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The fifth joyful mystery of the rosary meditates on the story of finding Jesus in the Temple. It could also be called the first of Mary's "mysteries of protest." Those mysteries come together in a litany where the repeated refrain is, "Dear God! The angel never warned me about this!"

Plaster statues aside, we assume that Mary did not pray the rosary. But as a Jewish woman schooled in the tradition of the prophets, she knew that searing complaints are prayers as genuine as praise and petition. Searching the Gospels, we can find a good number of the mysteries of protest she could have taken to prayer.

After the interchange in the Temple, "mystery No. 2" might be expressed as: "Will someone explain why he went alone into desert amid the wild animals?" No. 3: "I know he said his time had not come, but weddings need wine!"

No. 4: "He called them all his mother?" And so on. Undoubtedly there were more than five or 15 or even 20. These "mysteries" don't really surprise experienced parents; they just nod and say, "You never know what to expect." Those who reflect deeply on their experience might add, "The struggles of family life have brought me great growth."

The feast of the Holy Family offers the opportunity to reflect on the mystery of family life. In reality, every family and community share the perplexing, frustrating, demanding challenge Luke described. Put most simply, Mary and Joseph faced the difficult discovery that Jesus was not going along with them every step of the way. It is a real story of a family conflict and is symbolic of all kinds of relationships.

Every family and community have its share of the challenges summarized here. We know what it is like when family members do not go along with us on the journey. When Mary and Joseph confronted Jesus in the Temple, they confronted the fact that he would have to discover his own path in life. No matter what they might hope for him, he did not belong to them.

The story reminds us that love is rooted in profound reverence for the mystery of the other. Such reverence cultivates profound respect for the other's mysterious freedom. In that, we learn to desire that the other will become who they are meant to be rather than what we would have them be.

Hannah and her son Samuel offer an extreme example of this. The unexpected dimension of Hannah's longing for a child was that even as she prayed to become a mother, she promised to give her child to God. Strange as her example may seem to us today, Hannah saw her son as belonging to God and God's plan for the world rather than as her claim to fame or an old-age insurance policy.

When we take reflection time to celebrate this feast, we can enjoy contemplating the most important relationships in our lives. Obviously, the theme of the day is familial love. But the readings direct us to reflect specifically on how love nurtures each person's freedom to become ever more deeply who they are.

In today's Gospel, Luke tells us that Mary and Joseph were a day's journey out of Jerusalem when they discovered that Jesus was not with them. Luke describes their consternation as they looked among the people they journeyed with but did not find him. But according to Luke, they did not return to search all over Jerusalem, checking out the markets and recreation spots that might have interested a budding adolescent. They went to the Temple and found their curious child listening to the scholars who spoke of the things of God.

They knew their son and had a good idea where they might find him. They understood him; they were his first teachers. As they taught him what every child needs to learn, they had seen his fascination with the things of God — which for him

included everything.

That day in the Temple, it was Mary's turn to say "Your time has not yet come." But even as she said that, she had to know that his time would come. Like John the Baptist, she and Joseph had to accept that their roles would decrease as Jesus' captivation by the things of God increased.

The feast of the Holy Family invites us to celebrate our relationships with those we love most deeply. It reminds us that the greatest gift we can give others is to respect and nurture their freedom to become all God has created them to be. Whether it is with children, spouses, siblings or members of our communities, we know it will not be easy. But with Mary, we can pray, "Dear God! You never warned me!" and remember the only assurance she was ever given: "Nothing will be impossible for God."

1 SAMUEL 1:20-22, 24-28

We hear today's selection from 1 Samuel as if we were being introduced to a TV series starting with the third or fourth episode. We see the main characters, but we do not know what brought them to this point of the story. The plot started with Hannah, the beloved but barren wife of a priest, whose other wife gave him the children he needed. In spite of the fact that he loved Hannah more than the other, her desire for a child was so overpowering that when she was in the Temple praying for a son, the priest Eli saw her passion and assumed that she was drunk. In reality, she was promising God that if she were given a child, she would dedicate him to God's service. Our episode begins here.

It is curious that a woman who had so longed for a child would be willing to give him to the Temple as soon as he was weaned. (Note: The author does not tell us how long she prolonged that process.) If we had no other details, we might conclude that worse than drinking too much, Hannah only wanted the child for status or was willing to sacrifice him to her own religious convictions.

But as the story goes on, we hear that Eli's own sons had thoroughly corrupted Temple worship. They abused the people, took the best of sacrifices for themselves, and even consorted with prostitutes in the sacred precincts (1 Samuel 2). Those details suggest that Hannah wanted a son who would belong exclusively to God and bring the reforms the people needed. In that light, Hannah's prayer and consecration of her son expressed the tradition of longing for a messiah and being

willing to give anything it takes to allow God to bring salvation.

As Samuel's story goes on, we see him as Eli's faithful servant, groomed to replace Eli in his old age. Then one night, Samuel hears his name being called, and thinking Eli needs him, he wakes up the old man twice to find out what he wants. Finally, Eli realizes that God is calling the boy and tells him to listen and respond. That is the beginning of Samuel's prophetic vocation (1 Samuel 3).

Although Hannah's story is rather drastic, both she and Eli exemplify the humble stance of people who understand that everything they have, even their own children, are gifts of God. Hannah wanted her son to become the person God had in mind for him to be. She continued to love him, visiting and bringing him all he needed, but she did not try to control his life. Like her, Eli instructed Samuel to listen to God's call rather than focus solely on serving him. Samuel would grow up to follow the example of his mother and surrogate father. Eventually, Samuel would anoint Saul, the man who would become the first king of Israel. Although it was very much against his wishes, he did so. Later, he anointed David as Saul's replacement. None of it was his idea, but rather the will of God revealed to him.

The history of Hannah and Samuel brims over with the scriptural themes of the season. Hannah who prayed in desperation, hoping against hope, symbolizes God's people through the ages. The barrenness of our lives, our inability to engender new life, will never be obstacles to God.

Hannah and Eli are the models of parents and mentors who realize that their role is to nurture and free the children given into their temporary care. Samuel is the example of the prophet, who from childhood on, learned to listen for God's voice and to respond, "Here I am."

PSALM 84:2-3, 5-6, 9-10

We might think of Samuel's adventures with Eli when we first repeat the refrain, "Blessed are they who dwell in your house, O Lord." But as Samuel learned, the idea behind the psalm offers much more than a life of contemplation in the sanctuary.

Without a doubt, the temple — or the church where we spend time in adoration or the community that gathers to celebrate the Eucharist — all are lovely dwelling places of God. But the psalm urges us not to content ourselves with the smells and bells that induce dreams of sanctity. Those are but beginners' enticements, hints of

what is possible when we allow ourselves to feel what the psalmist calls our yearning and pining for God.

As the psalm develops, we see where the enticement is leading. Our second verse begins with the same affirmation as the first, “Happy they who dwell in your house,” but it goes on. The next verse, “Happy [those] whose strength you are,” indicates that there is more to life than the joy of what we immediately understand and feel. Participation in the worshipping community gives strength for what will follow. In that sense, the second key line of the psalm is “Their hearts are set upon the pilgrimage.”

Singing this psalm reminds us that the rhythm of our lives as Christians takes us into prayer and community for the sake of mission. Our joy in feeling the presence of God is the gift that we have to offer a hungry world. Until the day of our death, the temple is but a place of respite, a place to pause for the nourishment we need for the journey. Our goal is to help create the world described by the Book of Revelation where there is no need of a temple because everyone has learned to perceive God’s presence (Revelation 21).

COLOSSIANS 3:12-17

We might approach this selection from the Letter to the Colossians as a call to live the vocation we sang about in our psalm. This selection tells us how to be the sort of community that is the dwelling place of God.

The opening line begins with a description of who we are. The author reminds us that we are God’s beloved and chosen people. We are familiar with how the Hebrew Scriptures describe Israel’s sense of their unique identity as God’s chosen people. This reading invites us into the same self-awareness.

When we think about that, this reading becomes a serious invitation to look around at our family and our worshipping community with awe and holy curiosity. The ordinary people around us, the ones who sniffle and whose shoes are scuffed as well as the well-groomed and athletic, all of us are called together to be God’s holy people in this moment. Each of us is beloved and created to be a gift to the rest. The more we come to believe and understand that, the more we will be the holy people God has called us together to become. The rest of the reading simply gives us instructions about the particular behaviors and attitudes we can develop in the process of living this vocation.

LUKE 2:41-52

This selection is the end of Luke's Gospel prologue or what we call the "infancy narratives." This story jumps 12 years and introduces Jesus on the brink of manhood. When the angel spoke to Mary about the child she would bear, she heard that he would be great and holy and would be called the Son of God. That prediction is brought full circle as Jesus refers here to God as his father.

Luke must have picked up a traditional story and told it to fit the purposes of his Gospel. The strict historicity of the story is questionable, but many scholars think it could be based in fact because it does not miraculously fulfill any prophecies or offer a truly new interpretation of who Jesus is. Rather, it underlines what the reader has already heard.

The first thing the story tells us is that Mary and Joseph were among the pious people of their day. Travel to Jerusalem for the Passover was a requirement for adult Jewish men; the women who made the trip were considered extraordinarily observant. Mary and Joseph were in the habit of making this trip, something pilgrims usually did in larger groups from the same town so that they could travel in safety and good company. Because that was their practice, there is no reason to think that this was Jesus' first trip to Jerusalem.

The family stayed in Jerusalem for all the days of the feast, another sign of their religious commitment. A day into their journey home, they discovered that Jesus was not with them. This was not child neglect, nor evidence of a runaway. People traveling in a caravan of neighbors would have easily assumed that everybody was on the road together. Some scholars point out that we can see the story as foreshadowing things to come when we combine the facts that Jesus had gone to Jerusalem and then disappeared to the great consternation of those who loved him most, only to be found on the third day speaking of the things of his father. Whether Luke intended to bring those events to mind, he certainly narrated this incident as a first sign of Jesus' sense of himself and the challenges he gives to those who love him.

The centerpiece of the story is just what we call it in the joyful mysteries of the rosary: the finding of the child Jesus in the Temple. But the mystery was not where Jesus had gone. The real mystery was the process of beginning to find him, to understand who he was. The mystery in this Gospel incident centers on the question

of Jesus' identity.

From all the indications we have, Mary and Joseph established what can honestly be called a holy family. Not only did they participate in the communal rituals of their faith, but the child they raised had learned to pray in the style of his mother. The first prayer we hear from her is, "May it be done to me according to your word." As he faced the greatest test of his life, he prayed, "Not my will but yours be done."

Jesus' response to his worried parents is one of those Gospel verses that nobody seems to be able to translate to everyone's satisfaction. He told them something like, "I must be about my father..." But what did he mean? His father's work? His father's house? His longing love for God as his father? The mystery of his answer was far larger than the mystery of where he had been.

Mystery might be our watchword as we celebrate the feast of the Holy Family. Of course, we are invited, as always, into the mystery of knowing Christ. But as we remember how his parents and family faced that challenge, their example invites us to remember that every person is a mystery and beloved of God.

Planning: Holy Family

By Lawrence Mick

The feast of the Holy Family follows closely on the heels of Christmas Day. It also suffers from a similar problem. It is so easy to domesticate the feast. See how wonderful the Holy Family is, how perfectly they live together. Don't we wish all our families were like theirs?

But this feast does not occur within Christmas because we love perfect families. It is a reminder that Christ came to experience our human life in its fullness, not springing fully formed into the world, but needing to grow and learn and develop, just as we all do.

If we recognize that Christ was born in human flesh in order to draw all people into unity with God and with one another, then this feast takes on a much broader scope. It celebrates the whole human family, not just the "nuclear family" we love to idealize. If celebrating the Holy Family merely reinforces our natural instinct to love those closest to us, then it hardly deserves to be a major feast.

There are multiple options for the readings. You can use the first two readings from Cycle A (with a long or short form of the second reading) or from Cycle C, with the corresponding psalm in each case. Be sure that lectors and musicians are informed well before Christmas. The Gospel, however, comes from Cycle C, the passage from Luke about Jesus being separated from his parents at the Temple.

That Gospel should remind us that family life for Joseph, Mary and Jesus wasn't always peaceful and wonderful. It can also remind us that Jesus came to create a much larger family than the holy trio. He was about his Father's business; he was sent to reconcile all people to God and to one another.

Any healthy family finds its love spilling beyond the household to many others, and the more a family grows in love, the wider that circle of love becomes. That is a message we need to share with the assembly. We are gifted with our natural families, but we are called to expand our hearts to include all our brothers and sisters who share this planet. As with Christmas itself, try to help people see the deeper and more global scope of the Christmas event, through preaching, prayers and songs.

It is still Christmas, too, of course, so keep that spirit evident with Christmas music and décor. But look for the songs that remind us of the universal scope of God's plan in sending Jesus to live among us.

January 1 is the Solemnity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, another holy day of obligation. Talk with parishioners as well as staff to determine the best times for Masses on the New Year's Eve and New Year's Day. Don't forget that it is also the World Day of Prayer for Peace.

Prayers: Holy Family

By Joan DeMerchant_

Introduction

Today's readings speak to us about living as a family and a community. They confirm that both require work, generosity, patience and openness to the unexpected. We look to the Holy Family as a model for ourselves, and we learn —

with some relief — that Jesus' parents were as challenged and confounded as we often are. We can be like them because they were like us in so many ways.

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you were raised, like us, in the circle of your family: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, early on you spread your wings and responded to your calling: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, your family shows us how to live lovingly with one another: Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider We pray now for all families and for all who attempt to live lovingly together.

Minister For the church that we may respect, honor and provide models of support for all families, in every culture throughout the world, we pray:

- For families of every configuration struggling to love and support one another; and for organizations, professions and ministries dedicated to helping them, we pray:
- For families torn apart by violence, illness, drugs, poverty or politics and for the patience and forbearance to deal with and accept our families as they are, we pray:
- For families who have given their children to the greater good through the military, law enforcement or other dangerous professions, we pray:
- For those working to strengthen neighborhoods or communities fraught with division, may they demonstrate wisdom, compassion and kindness, we pray:
- For those among us who have lost their families for whatever reason; for those who feel their families are not accepted by others; and for those who judge others' families, we pray:

Presider God of love, we are grateful that your Son, Jesus, was born into a simple, humble family. Your love of families inspires us to forgive and care for our own and to extend ourselves to others that need our support. For this, we seek the guidance of the Holy Family and we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

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