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“He took the child into his arms and blessed God...” (Luke 2:28).

Sir 3:2-6, 12-14; Ps 128:1-5; Col 3:12-21; Luke 2:22-40

I vividly recall the autumn day we brought our newborn son home from the hospital. As I carried him up the front steps of our house, I was just beginning to realize how much our lives had changed. Instead of casually observing the world from a distance, I knew that this child would hold me hostage to a future I was determined to make more welcoming, just and loving.

When Joseph and Mary came to the temple to present their child with the prescribed offering of the poor, they were filled with their own concerns, already tested by the circumstances of his birth. There, amid the crowds in the people’s courtyard, they encountered two elderly figures whose lifetimes of prayer enabled them to see the momentous significance of this child. One of them, Simeon, took Jesus in his arms and proclaimed the final, short canticle in Luke to thank God for keeping a promise that he would live long enough to see the Messiah.

Though Luke does not have Matthew’s story of Herod’s massacre in Bethlehem and the flight to Egypt, he does not spare Mary when he predicts that her child will provoke division and that sorrow will pierce her heart like a sword to expose the hidden thoughts of many. No holiday card presents this prophecy, but every parent, even in the joy of birth, knows that life will hold suffering for them and their child as part of the human experience.

Simeon and Anna have lived long enough to know this, but they also celebrate the triumph of God's purpose even in suffering and loss. No wonder that at every step of Luke's narrative, angels say, "Don't be afraid." This story is larger than you, so go forward, say yes, trust in God's favor already assured.

So, Joseph and Mary take Jesus home to Nazareth, the hidden years during which he is formed by them and the Holy Spirit and, it goes without saying, by a village of fractious relatives, nosey neighbors and every kind of ordinary human experience. It is here that they become the "holy family."

Pope Francis, who believes that families are where we learn to be human, has been invited to take part in a film about the wisdom of elders. One incalculable loss in the pandemic has been the disproportionate number of deaths among our elders, those for whom life itself is a pre-existing condition for wisdom. The hand-off of hope between them and children was often thwarted by the virus. Holding a child is a blessing both ways, and grace and good parenting will need to make up for what was lost. The whole human family has suffered this past year, and every family should be celebrated in today's prayer for the wisdom the world will need to make us whole and human again.

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