

DECEMBER 30, 2012: HOLY FAMILY

Sirach 3:2-7,12-14 Colossians 3:12-21 Luke 2:41-52

It's ironic that every third year, the gospel on the feast of the Holy Family is one of those rare infancy narrative passages which presumes neither Joseph or Mary was privy to a special annunciation, explaining just who their son really was. As the late Raymond Brown mentions in his classic book *Birth of the Messiah*, though today's pericope is included in a gospel which has an annunciation, the community which originally passed on this story about the lost Jesus seems to have known nothing about it. Luke simply included this source in his overall narrative to emphasize Jesus' gospel focus on Jerusalem.

Even as a child, I had difficulty taking this passage on face value. If Joseph and Mary know their son is God, why are they uptight about "losing" him? How exactly does one lose God? And besides, I couldn't imagine, after three days of being lost, asking my father, "Why were you looking for me?" I can only suspect what kind of sharp response he would have given me.

Brown always reminded his students that biblical annunciations are for us, the readers, not the actual participants. An annunciation is a literary device employed to inform readers about the real or deeper meaning of specific events; a meaning we usually don't uncover in our own lives until long after those original events have taken place. Historically, it's very possible that Jesus' parents didn't understand what their annunciations conveyed until after Jesus' death and resurrection. It was only then that the pieces of the Jesus puzzle finally came together.

That means that they, like us, only discover the real personality of those around us - even our children - by constantly relating to them. There are no annunciation shortcuts.

That's why it's important to listen carefully to our Sirach and Colossians readings. Both authors are very concerned with how we actually relate to others. Each provides us with some "helpful hints" on how to bring this about.

Sirach especially zeroes in on how a child relates to his or her parents - especially when those parents become dependent on that child. "Take care of your father when he is old, grieve him not as long as he lives. Even if his mind fail, be considerate of him; revile him not all the days of his life." The literal Hebrew reads, "Do not confront him in the fullness of your strength." In other words, though you're now more powerful than he is, still relate to him in a gentle way. Constantly reminding your parents about their weaknesses will accomplish little. It's interesting what we can still learn from and about our parents, even after dementia sets in. But patience is a prerequisite for such proper relating.

The disciple of Paul who wrote Colossians couldn't agree more, though he adds a lot of other important relationship characteristics: "heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness ... bearing with one another and forgiving one another ... and over all these put on love, that is, the bond of perfection." As any parent, or married couple can testify, relating is hard work.

Perhaps we should do more than just honor Joseph, Mary and Jesus today. There are ways we can imitate them. Modern biblical scholarship has provided us with tools which better help us understand their historical situation. They succeeded as a family not because they were favored with special privileges, but because, amid all the normal uncertainties of life, they worked at being the people God expected them to be. Something we can also do, even if our mother isn't a virgin and our son, God.

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JANUARY 6, 2013: EPIPHANY Isaiah 60:1-6

Ephesians 3:2-3a, 5-6 Matthew 2:1-12

Our ancestors in the faith celebrated the feast of Epiphany long before they celebrated Christmas. Originally it was a three part celebration, each segment having something to do with "discovering" Jesus. The first revolved around the magi, the second, Jesus' baptism, and the third, the wedding feast at Cana. In each instance, Jesus is revealed as being someone out of the ordinary.

Those who today put statues of the "three kings" in front of a Bethlehem stable crib set haven't read Matthew's narrative of the event. There's no stable in his infancy passages, no angels, no shepherds. We're to presume Bethlehem is Joseph and Mary's hometown. They didn't travel there from Nazareth because of a Roman census. And the magi didn't arrive within 12 days of his birth. According to Matthew's account, their encounter with Jesus could have happened when he was a couple of years old.

But more to the theological point, without knowing it, many of us through the years have bought into St. Bonaventure's theological principle of "potuit, decuit, ergo fecit." In the vernacular, "he could do it, it would make sense if he did it, therefore he did it." The "he" is God. I remember as a child hearing that kind of argument used to prove the Blessed Virgin Mary was the most physically beautiful woman who ever lived. Isn't God able to create such a woman? Doesn't it make sense that he'd give that exceptional beauty to his son's mother? Therefore Mary was the world's most beautiful woman.

One of the reasons the bible is so thick is that its writers never followed that type of theologizing. Our sacred authors' reasoning went, "He could do it, it would make sense if he did it, but he almost never does it that way." Nowhere is this more evident than in today's magi pericope.

It would certainly make sense that Jesus would be initially "discovered" by a group of holy, pious, bible-savvy Jews. But that's not the way Yahweh engineered Jesus' "coming out." Not only aren't the magi Jewish, they're practicing a type of pagan religion which, according to Exodus, should get them stoned the instant they cross into the Holy Land. They're astrologers: people who look to the stars and planets to determine God's will in their lives. Jews were absolutely forbidden (under the same pain of death) to engage in such endeavors. (I presume had ancient Jews been members of the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences in 1940, Pinocchio's When You Wish Upon a Star would never have won that year's Best Song award.)

We also see that same pattern of unpredictable God-ordered events in our first two readings.

Though one of Third-Isaiah's prophetic goals is to get his fellow Jews to return to Israel after the Babylonian Exile, he's convinced that, even if they don't come back, non-Jews will still make Jerusalem a place of pilgrimage. "The wealth of nations shall be brought to you. Caravans of camels shall fill you, dromedaries from Midian and Ephah; all from Sheba shall come bearing gold and frankincense, and proclaiming the praises of Yahweh."

In the same vein, the unknown author of the letter to the Ephesians reflects on one of earliest Christianity's most surprising events: "Gentiles are coheirs, members of the same body, and copartners in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel." No one could have predicted that a Jewish reform movement would eventually be the driving force behind a non-Jewish faith.

Maybe we Christians should make Al Jolson's famous line, "You ain't seen nothin' yet!" a mantra for our faith, especially after hearing today's three readings.

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