

Holy Family (Cycle C) Homily
St. William, Champion | December 26, 2021
1 Sm 1:20-22, 24-28 | 1 Jn 3:1-2, 21-24 | Lk 2:41-52

It's easy at this time of year to get caught up in a very romanticized view of the Christmas story, and on Holy Family Sunday, it's equally easy to get an idealized and unrealistic view of the home life of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. Our faith reminds us that Mary and Joseph were saints, and that Mary and Jesus were born free of original sin, so it's an easy conclusion to think that their life must have been perfect.

We hear very little about the life of Jesus from the time of his birth until he begins his public ministry around the age of 30. In fact, today's Gospel is really the only thing that we have to give us a glimpse into their home life. But when we look at the events leading up to today's Gospel, they give us a picture that is anything but idealized:

- Mary becomes pregnant out of wedlock at a young age, probably around fourteen.
- Her fiancé, Joseph, is ready to divorce her until he is visited by an angel in a dream.
- Jesus is born in the humblest of circumstances – in a cattle stall, on moldy hay, surrounded by animals.
- The family flees to Egypt and Jesus spends the first two years of his life as a political refugee.

Today's Gospel story today isn't very different. Mary and Joseph take the young Jesus to Jerusalem for the feast of Passover – just like they have done for years past. And while returning to Nazareth, they realize that he is missing. They can't find Jesus among their family and friends – and have to return to Jerusalem. After a lengthy search, they find him in the temple, talking to the rabbis teaching there. Mary's response is no different than I would expect from any parent today: We were so worried about you. You had us scared to death! When Jesus responds, "Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?", Mary and Joseph had to feel like the parents of any teenager who do not understand their child.

Mary and Joseph had to contend with challenges like any parent does today. However, their responses to those challenges teach us that their faith wasn't simply something that they practiced on the Sabbath. It was the foundation upon which all their lives were built.

When Mary was visited by the angel, she could simply have said, "No" to God. Instead, she freely offered herself to be a part of His plan: "Let it be done to me according to your word."

When Joseph found out that Mary was pregnant with a child that wasn't his, he could have divorced her quietly, or hung around for a year or two and then left. Yet

he listened to the angel in his dream and became the best foster father anyone could ask for.

What is special about this family's holiness isn't the fact that their son was Jesus, the Incarnate Son of God, but rather, about how Mary and Joseph responded to God in their lives. The fact that they were raising the Son of God didn't imply that their lives would be free of challenges.

The lives of Mary and Joseph were probably as busy as those of any parent today. They didn't have e-mail messages and phone calls throughout the day, or sports schedules to meet. But they lived a lifestyle which required them to do everything themselves and make everything by hand.

Every day, Mary would have to make fresh bread. She would have to walk or take the donkey to the market to buy grain and grind and sift it to make flour. She would have to take a bucket to the well at the center of the town to draw water, and gather up kindling and firewood to make a fire in her open hearth oven.

Joseph would take the young Jesus with him to work in his shop, to teach him a craft that could support him. He probably instructed Jesus in how to work safely with tools, and in the course of learning the carpenter's trade, removed a number of splinters from the hands of the young boy.

As the young Jesus grew, Mary and Joseph were the ones to teach him about sheep and shepherds, seeds and growing, seasons and the harvest, the lilies of the field, the birds of the air and nests, grapes and wine. You can almost picture them taking Jesus and showing him these things that connected him to our humanity.

The scriptures remind us that the challenges which Jesus, Mary, and Joseph faced were those that were common for the culture and time in which they lived. There was no “magic bubble” or cocoon that isolated them and protected them from all the pains and struggles of life. What enabled Mary and Joseph to bond together as a family and withstand the challenges that they faced was their faith and trust in God.

While some may think that having the Son of God as one of its members is what made Jesus, Mary, and Joseph the Holy Family, it was how they responded to God in faith and the love which they demonstrated for each other that really made them the Holy Family. And that’s good news for all of us today, because that same possibility exists for every family here – if we’re willing to work toward it. Maybe we might consider living as a Holy Family for our New Year’s resolution.