

**THE DAYS AFTER
Luke 2:22-40
January 1, 2012**

It's the first Sunday after Christmas and hopefully you have had a chance to catch your breath; maybe even pause and reflect. We did that as a staff at our meeting last Tuesday. All agreed it had been a high demand time, very worth it, but we're ready for a more relaxed pace. Now we can attend to the multitude of things pushed to the side track while the Christmas Freight Train rumbled into town . . . (or Polar Express.) Whew!

Preachers often experience a kind of homiletical let-down. The pastoral equivalent of post-partum depression – an appropriate image given the occasion of the birth of the Christ. (What do I know about post-partum depression? Only what I read.)

Mary (and Joseph) have other issues as first-time parents. They are away from home and, while for us the birth is typically regarded as climactic, for them it's fraught with questions from how to change a diaper to what do all these visits from Angels, Shepherds and

Magi mean? It had to be confusing, exhilarating, disturbing all at the same time. And all the proclamations that precede and accompany the birth, not to mention getting out of town just ahead of Herod's henchmen, brave warriors who rode into town to make war on babies and slaughter them. It is so often true that those who suffer most when tyrants become agitated, threatened are the defenseless, the most vulnerable in a society.

Somehow they . . . we all, survive it and life settles into a new routine, which for a Jewish couple meant having the baby Jesus circumcised on the 8th day in accordance with the law. Dutifully they go up to Jerusalem to present their firstborn . . . By the way, any firstborn here? Let's be a bit more specific . . . firstborn males? Had you been born in ancient Jewish culture, you would have a special status. You got twice the inheritance of other siblings.

Studies done in our day and culture would lead to the conclusion that firstborns (particularly but not exclusively) have certain traits. For instance, firstborns are often highly responsible, determined, eager to please, like to

avoid trouble, leaders. Did you know almost all the Presidents of the U.S. were either the firstborn child or firstborn son? All but two of the first astronauts were firstborns and those two were only children. There are all kinds of exceptions, to be sure, but there is a pronounced tendency toward those aforementioned traits.

It's not uncommon that parents and other adults like to predict (or sometimes project their dreams and unrealized ambitions) what a child will become.

- He or she as a toddler loves to throw a ball. That kid's gonna be another Nolan Ryan or Tom Seaver or some other Hall of Famer.
- The infant makes loud exclamations in church. That kids gonna be a preacher . . . a singer.
- A tot rocks and sways to music . . . a dancer.
- A baby is stubborn and talks a lot . . . a lawyer.

It's mostly doting adults who make such observations, common . . . community joins in futuring . . . but to have someone say of your baby: "Now I can die happy; my eyes have seen salvation in this child . . . one who will break your heart, Mary, but will be a sign, the fulfillment of all our hopes. This child is special."

That would almost be embarrassing. Mary and Joseph were amazed when an elderly man Simeon babbled such words. If that weren't enough, another old saint who "hung out" at the Temple made a similar ecstatic speech – praising God and showing the baby off to any who cared about the redemption of Jerusalem. 84 years old she was, serving in the Temple as a widow better than 50 years and Anna is remembered to this day for her role in recognizing the Christ child. Any octogenarians present? Be encouraged, alert and ready.

What we have here are two elderly saints who astound the parents of Jesus with their insight into his identity and destiny, insights that came from a source beyond

them. It's a bit like what happens when we baptize babies and ask people to extend a blessing . . . which they are eager to do . . . speak words that point parents, and in some way the infant, toward the identity and destiny of a child of God. It's common to see young parents well up with tears . . . perhaps hope and maybe some fears. It's not uncommon that the adult baby blessers have a little tear in their eyes as well as Simeon and Anna.

What's happening here? To Anna and Simeon. Their acts as in every situation in this story are woven into a larger story. As are ours. "At the birth of every child, there is a wider company of persons who have hopes and fears for the future. Some will remain silent and watch from afar. Others, like Simeon, will step forward and be devoted enough and courageous enough to tell parents what lies deep in their hearts. The parents of Jesus "were amazed" at what was being said to them. They heard the good news! But, Simeon was also honest and caring enough to tell them the painful news as well. No parent wants to hear a painful prospect for his or her child. But every parent, in order to fulfill the

responsibilities of parenthood, needs to have someone prepare them for the difficulties that are likely to lie ahead. It was the good fortune of Mary and Joseph to have such a person come to them early in their parental life."¹

What's happening here? That is, here and now for us? We stand at the beginning of a New Year, the memory of a divine birth still warm. Someone at some early stage in your life may well have pronounced words, prophetic words if you will that in essence said you'd have good times and bad, but your identity and destiny is secure in the call, in the love of God. Nothing can change that. So, after a year like 2011 with some tough times and with uncertainty about the future, this you must know. There will be heights, and depths, but through it all you need not be afraid. Live into your divinely appointed destiny. Be not afraid. And when given the opportunity, speak words of encouragement to those who will tread the unknown pitfalls and pinnacles of the future.

¹ Daily Feast, Year B, pg. 52



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