

“Parent and Child”
(Matthew 2:13-21)

1/1/23
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2022 is behind us, so it is a good time to pause and reflect, maybe pick up some nuggets of wisdom that can help us in our journey into the year ahead. So what might today’s Gospel offer us for consideration?

Love and Animosity toward Children

A couple of things stand out to me. On the one hand, there is a tenderness and hope that it places in the baby Jesus and by extension all children. And on the other hand, there is the deadly animosity toward and disregard for children shown by King Herod.

The tenderness and hope were beautifully expressed on Christmas Eve, when Bernie and Penny sang the song, “Mary Did You Know,” which contained words like “when you touch the little baby, you touch the face of God.” And “the child whom you deliver, will soon deliver you.”

Even from the beginning of her pregnancy Mary understood the infinite value of the child and that her baby would not only be a dependent, but would one day surpass them all, and that ultimately they would depend on him. The child she delivered, would one day deliver them. And as we hear the words to that song, we understand

that it is not only a song about Jesus, it is also a song that gives meaning to the life of every infant born into this world.

And when Jesus is born, the angels, shepherds and all creation echo this sense that something very precious has entered our lives. And Mary and Joseph, sense the importance of shielding the child from harm, and swiftly move the baby Jesus to a safer location in Egypt.

In the same way the Wise Men, sensing that King Herod has only pretended to take a friendly interest in the birth, return to their homes in a round-about way, avoiding him completely. And we see how right they are in taking this course, because Herod unleashes horrific violence upon children in general in his hope of putting an end to any potential competitor.

“Why does Herod behave this way? What problem could he possibly have with little infants?” The answer is that he is captivated by his own power and authority and is afraid of ever losing it. He lives in a self-centered universe in which only his own needs really matter. And so, he is perfectly willing to use force to get his way. So when Herod hears of the birth of someone else that the people might choose to

follow, he feels threatened and moves quickly and ruthlessly to prevent it from happening.

Two Worldviews

So these are two things that stand out for me in the readings on this New Years Day, as we look forward into the future:

The first is the conviction among the adults who witnessed Jesus' birth, that the child born in their midst will grow up to bring them salvation and how they act upon this conviction. From the moment of his birth they take up the role of diligently protecting and caring for him in a way that looks forward to that day.

They recognize with anticipation that somewhere along the way the roles will be reversed. The child will, so to speak, become the parent and the parent will become the child, and that when that time comes, their lives will rely on his grace and judgement.

The second thing that stands out to me is the response of King Herod, for whom the idea of relinquishing control is so unacceptable that he is willing to use force to prevent it from ever happening.

New Years Resolutions

I confess that usually, when I think about New Year's Resolutions, I think about things I can change that will make my own life better. I resolve to eat a healthier diet, to exercise more, to fulfill something new on my bucket list. My resolutions tend to involve doing things that will bring me give me greater control over my own life and arranging things so that they are more to my liking.

But it seems to me that, as we grow older, we feel a shift away from wanting things for ourselves toward wanting things for our children or for the next generation. Maybe we feel as though we've had our fair share and now we want them to have theirs. And so we start to see the future less as something that matters for us, than as something that matters for them.

We grow more child-focused like the folks surrounding Jesus at his birth, who sought to protect and provide for him through his vulnerable early start. Through our own life experiences, we have come to know a good deal about where the dangers and pitfalls lie in the world, so we take control of the situation on our children's behalf, whisking them

away (like Mary and Joseph did with Jesus) to places where they will be safe to grow and develop.

From Provided for to Provider

I remember well my own journey of going from childhood to parenthood. When I was in my late teens, I moved to Hawaii all by myself. I was like the Prodigal Son. The money I had saved from selling my motorcycle lasted all of a month and I got a job washing cars by hand. I didn't make enough from that job to stay in my room at the Y and so the Y impounded my tape deck and gave me a free ride to the Salvation Army shelter, where I worked off the back of a truck for a few weeks and slept in a dormitory with the other homeless people. It was turning into a disaster, so I wrote to my parents and they bought me a ticket and dad came out and cleared everything up and we flew home together.

Dad and Mom let me make a lot of mistakes and were always ready to rescue me. And so, 12 years ago, when my Dad died and a year later when Mom died, it took a while to register that they were no longer there to be a backstop for me and my brother and sister. They were no longer there to be "homebase" for us as a family during the holidays or at Christmas.

Suddenly, we who were once the children, had to somehow pick up the mantle and become a replacement for the sake of our own children and grandchildren. Could that even be possible? My parents seemed larger than life for me and I felt inadequate in comparison. Could we even hold the larger family together in this day and age, living as they do in various far places and being pulled in different directions?

Setting the Example

I guess that over time I have come to feel more comfortable with being in the “next boat to go over the falls.” I recognize that death is frightening. And my hope is that our children and grandchildren will feel safer and draw some comfort from being separated from that great mystery, by seeing us in the boat that is ahead of them, and seeing that we are not governed by fear, but intent on setting an example of grace. I know that I have a job to do. And that job is to not focus on fear, but instead to focus on sharing as much love as we can before we go.

I am sure that setting that example is central to why Mom and Dad remain large in my life. I am sure also that it is a reason for so much of the good that has befallen us over the years. My hope is that, in spite of our frailness, we might succeed in passing the same sense of being

rooted in God's grace on to our own grandchildren and that it may bring them an equal joy.

The Herod Complex

I find that there is a lot worth enjoying in having the years of life experience, and the opportunity to set the example and look out for the next generation. It is nice, even flattering, to sit at the head of the table and say grace or to be treated with deference or occasionally admired. It was nice when our daughter Angie and her fiance sat at the table with us and asked what I thought about some of life's most meaningful questions. There is something seductively nice about receiving that kind of respect.

And so I find that Sheryl and I are in a very pleasant phase of our lives; a time when our children and grandchildren and also professionally we get to represent a kind of foundation or bedrock for those around us; a kind of authority to others who are younger than us. That they may look to us as an example or look to us for wisdom and safety.

And yet there is a subtle, sometimes not so subtle, downside to this. King Herod so craved the respect of others, that when he promised his daughter Salome that she could have anything she wanted in front of his guests, and she asked him for the head of John the Baptist on a

platter, he gave it to her. He gave it to her, not because it was the right thing to do. He gave it to her because he could not bear the thought of losing the admiration of his daughter and his guests. The irony is that “Mighty King Herod” was not being magnanimous at all, nor was he even in control, as he wished to be seen. His behavior revealed that he was entirely a slave to his fear of not being admired.

Herod is an extreme example. But we too, in less dramatic form are prey to similar desires to demonstrate some form of power and authority that will impress and draw the pleasant applause of those who are gathered around us, especially our own children. Whether the setting is a kingdom or church or a family, the desire exists to be admired and the darker temptation to use whatever means necessary to keep it that way. And the fear that drives this is the fear of being thought of as a nobody.

The Ethos of the Community Surrounding Jesus

But the community that surrounded Jesus at his birth understood the course of life in a very different way. While for Herod, the epitome of life and the fulfillment of his identity lay in his power to establish his own impressiveness before others, those surrounding Jesus believed that the fulfillment of who they were lay in witnessing to the fulfillment of another and the future it would bring. Although they first

understood the baby Jesus as a dependent who needed to be cared for and raised properly; they were also filled with joy at the prospect that he would surpass and come to care for them. They did not live in fear that in being surpassed, their own value would somehow be diminished.

Christmas Observations

This past Christmas Day as I thought about the next generations of the family that Sheryl and I share, I felt that I could identify with those followers of Jesus who defended him at his birth. Unlike Herod, I do not think that the greatest joy in life lies in any applause or accolades that I can wring from them.

Ultimately, I think my joy will have to come in graciously accepting the reversal of roles; in being a witness to the children, as they take up the mantle of becoming the parents. And as they increasingly do so, I will increasingly enter into the further adventure of becoming one of their beloved children.

Because one thing is certain, my powers, our powers will diminish and theirs will increase. And the course of love cannot be to fear them as competition or quash them as Herod did. The gracious course will be to

welcome their ascendancy and witness to the interesting ways in which they undertake the adventure of growing into the role of parent. As children, we become parents, and as parents we will become as children. And both journeys require courage.

But we can take comfort in the fact that both journeys will be accompanied by the grace of God which assures us that whatever we take up or let go of, as long as our motivation is to love and defend what is precious, we need have no fear. There are no “nobodies”, in the eyes of God.

Looking ahead to 2023

As we look ahead to 2023, perhaps an important message that lies in this morning’s Gospel, is that the joys that lie ahead for us may have more to do with what we do on behalf of others than what we do on behalf of ourselves, especially today’s children.

I think that all of us who see ourselves as “grownups in charge,” might aspire to learn to listen like children, even to those we think of as our children. Because it is worth considering that for many of us, the time is not far off when there will be no choice but to let go and let the child become the guardian. And at that time, without pride or humiliation

and perhaps with some deeper experience of joy, we will have the opportunity to triumph in carrying out what may be the most powerful act of self-giving love of which we are capable, i.e handing over the reins.