

Feast of the Holy Family, Cycle B

Genesis 15:1-6; 21:1-3; Hebrews 11:8, 11-12, 17-19; & Luke 2:22-40

Like a dog running through a flock of chickens, the Christmas holidays stir up memories with a cloud of disarray and loud bruh-cawing: glowing memories of love and contentedness; tearful memories of loss and disappointment; cutting memories of hurt and betrayal. We will always be, on some level, the persons we were in our childhood homes; our memories are not mere cobwebs. Whether we are glad that the pandemic allows us to avoid our families this holiday season or cruelly kept from them, families are where we work out our salvation. They are places where we meet God and prove whether we are for or against God. In the Christmas season, when we celebrate God's dwelling in the deepest levels of human life, the Feast of the Holy Family invites us to reflect on how we can see God in our families.

Look at this Sunday's readings about Abraham. Genesis and Hebrews hold him up to admire. God told Abram, "Count the stars, if you can. Just so, shall your descendants be." Abram responded with trust and was raised further in God's esteem. The writer of Hebrews commends Abraham on three counts, obeying God's call, trusting that God would create a nation through him and his willingness to sacrifice his son. Yet a closer look shows that Abraham was a complex person living with others, equally complex. He dragged his urban family into a foreign land to live in tents. He was the only one who could choose where to go; everyone else had to rely on him for protection and support. Some of them, Eliezer and Hagar, both slaves, were treated with trust and intimacy, only to be discarded in favor of blood relatives. Sarah, whom society would value only if she has a son, watched her worth slip away. Abraham gave her to kings for their harems so he could stay alive. Sarah and Hagar treated each other with cruelty as they protected themselves and their sons. Everyone in this family suffered and struggled, hurt one another, relied on one another and tried to stay together as each person figured out life. Doesn't this sound like any family?

Lest we think God only engages with the powerful, the divine revelation that shaped the writing of both Genesis and Hebrews slipped in reminders that every one of us is working out our salvation right where we are. Genesis could have omitted the name of the mother of Abraham's heir. Instead we read, "The Lord took note of *Sarah* as he said he would; God did for *her* as promised. *Sarah* became pregnant and bore Abraham a son... Abraham gave the name Isaac to this son of his whom *Sarah* bore. Hebrews 11:11 actually says, "By faith Sarah herself received power to generate," a phrase that mystifies any translator who fails to see that God is shaping all of us as we move through life.

God also shaped Jesus through his family. The Holy Family traveled to the Temple for a mother's purification and an eldest son's redemption. (The latter tradition honored the tenth Exodus plague when God saved eldest sons.) Although the Redeemer-Savior needed neither redeeming nor saving, Jesus was part of a people, who related to God in this way. As a human being, Jesus connected with God from within his family and the traditions of their culture. Mary and Joseph do their "new parents" thing; they perform the ritual for blessing their baby and respecting God. Two strangers, Anna and Simeon, name the holiness Mary and Joseph allow God to cultivate in their child.

In *The Reed of God*, Carol Houelander described Mary's relationship with Jesus in the womb.

For nine months, Christ grew in His Mother's body. By His own will, she formed Him from herself, from the simplicity of her daily life. She had nothing to give Him but herself... He asked for nothing else. She gave Him herself. Working, eating, sleeping, she was forming His body from hers. His flesh and blood. From her humanity, she gave Him His humanity. (38-39)

This same exchange continues after his birth, as Jesus grows up with Mary and Joseph. He will always be, on some level, the person he was in his childhood home. As they nurtured him, he made them holy. So too, now, as we include God in our family lives, messy though they are, God makes us all holy. We have nothing to give but ourselves. God asks for nothing else.

- ❖ Recall actions of profound goodness and love in your family.
- ❖ Where has God been revealed this week in your family?