

Homily  
December 31, 2023  
Feast of the Holy Family – Jesus, Mary & Joseph  
27:26-36:36

For those of you I haven't seen because you were away on Christmas, Merry Christmas!

We don't select our family. We don't command our future. We can choose how to live as family. And we can choose how to live into our future.

There is a wisdom here in these statements. And our readings today offer an even deeper wisdom as a foundation for them.

Our First Reading comes to us from Genesis, ironically from two different chapters. It's very unusual to have a reading so split and yet now joined: Chapter 15 and Chapter 21. A unique weaving of two moments in the life of Abram and Sara.

In Part I, Abram has an intimate encounter with God, who takes Abram outside after the discussion about his possible heir. God tells him, "Look up at the sky and count the stars if you can. Just so, shall your descendants be." In this intimate encounter Abram put his faith in the Lord and the Lord's promises.

In Part II, Sara has her hope of a child. Her barren womb becomes fruitful and bears a son, Yitzhak, a name akin to another Hebrew word for "laughter." Thus, Isaac's name means, "he laughed." Indeed, earlier Abram had laughed at God's ideas and Sara had done the same.

The faithfulness of Abram's response to God, a God not like his personal gods of wood, stone or precious metal, is a response to God's unique relationship with Abram and God's promises fulfilled, even though he could not hold God in his hand.

And as we heard a vast family of descendants, cared for by God, came forth from the promise and the response.

Luke Chapter 2 is the setting of what we heard in the Gospel. Mary and Joseph are now a family, sprung from the family of their Jewish ancestors. They are part of this people of faith. They come to the Temple to fulfill the customs that a family would in Jewish antiquity. In doing this, they bound themselves to the larger community. And in turn, they were supported by the larger community in the persons of Simeon and Anna.

In this moment, they find blessing as a unit: mother, foster-father, child. (pause)

We don't select our family.

We don't know how Abram and Sara met. In the customs of their times, they more than likely were betrothed to each other by their parents. And Isaac did not select his parents, but he found in them faithfulness. And yes, gave them moments of laughter.

We know that Mary was chosen to be Joseph's wife. Her becoming a mother was through the Spirit and her, "yes." Joseph was surprised by the dream in which he came to understand what was asked of him. And then the Spirit gave them a son. In many ways they did not select being a family.

We don't command our future, do we?

Neither of these families commanded their future. Abram and Sara relied upon God's faithfulness and promise. Read further in Genesis, especially the saga of the near-sacrifice of Isaac. They did not control their future.

Joseph and Mary turned to their faith, expressed in the faith of their faith community and the religious rituals meant to remind them of their connectedness to their God and to his people. In both of their lives as family, there were times serene, tumultuous, threatening, challenging, in need of pondering and demanding of faith.

Indeed, they were both immigrants. Abram and Sara from Ur of the Chaldees to Cana. And Mary and Joseph from Bethlehem to Nazareth. And Mary and Joseph were refugees -- from Nazareth to Egypt. Their future and how they lived it was theirs to choose, with the help of God and God's people.

Brothers and sisters, you may have noticed that we don't select our family. Do we? Just look around. What a motley mess! All of our families are the most amazing conglomerations of a variety of people that we are more than likely born into.

And we don't command our future. Many of you know this, right? We don't really know what's around the corner. However, we are called to choose how to live in this family we have and how to live into our future.

Saint Paul in our Second Reading gives us clear indication of how Christians – descendants of Abraham and Sara, Mary and Joseph – are to live as family. And how to live into their future. Let's be reminded of what Paul said to the Colossians:

*Put on heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience,  
bearing with one another and forgiving one another.*

All of those, my brothers and sisters, are an act of will. They are intentional. They don't just happen.

*And over all of these, put on love.*

You've heard me say it before. Love is a decision that has to be made again and again.

*And let the peace of Christ control your hearts.*

In other words, allow God's Son to live within.

*And be thankful.*

Look to find in life that for which to be thankful. It's not always apparent, is it? Because it's often concealed by life's stresses. We have to step back and ponder: for what can I be thankful this day?

*And let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as in all wisdom  
you teach and admonish one another.*

In other words, learn together.

*Then pray and worship together, singing Psalms, hymns,  
and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.*

And finally:

*Remember in whom you are named.*

As Paul says:

*And whatever you do in word or in deed, do everything  
in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to  
God the Father through him.*

Such sound advice from Paul, even in his run-on sentences. He gives us a road map for how to live as family and how to live into our future with the Lord. The question is, as this new year opens: Shall we follow his advice?