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Holy Family (C)

This is from the book “The One Life We’re Given” by Mark Nepo, as an adult son remembers his last days with his father:

“When my father was dying, I was alone with him in the hospital and found myself feeding him applesauce. The moment opened and my whole being, my whole life, was suddenly concentrating on slipping the spoon with the utmost care into his mouth, waiting for him to swallow, and then sliding the spoon slowly from his lips, so as not to disturb his labored breathing. We repeated this ritual tenderly, spoonful after spoonful. And in the rare quiet of a January afternoon, wonder began to fill the room. I began to cry softly. There seemed to be a glow about us. There was no need for words. I didn’t want my life to leave this moment of feeding my father.

“...And in this moment of tenderness, all of life opened . . . My sadness had given way to care, which had given way to wonder. Wonder in the center of all that pain.

“As I slipped the spoon from his mouth one last time, I felt that I was in the moment of every child who ever fed their dying parent. I kissed his forehead and held his hand, both of us more alive than we could remember, completely covered in inexplicable wonder . . . And while wonder can surprise us, our daily work is to cultivate wonder in ourselves and in each other. Yet we only have a few seconds to love the wonder out of those before us or they will swallow it. Seconds to warm their life-force into the air where it will reveal the kinship of things. Seconds to let the timeless resource of aliveness come into our knowing, so it can soften our fears and save us from the brutality of insisting that our way is the only way . . .

“That day with my father, I learned that a presence waits beneath our chatter and our pain that can illuminate the world. When tired, we splash water on our face. If you find me half-hearted, please, splash some wonder on my face.”

This author reports how sadness gave way to care... which gave way to wonder... wonder in the middle of pain. And he relays that at that point, all of life opened for him. Today's Gospel is another of a series of unusual experiences that, as Luke describes them, Mary and Joseph undergo in raising their remarkable child. The family was holy—hence the name of this feast—but not without challenges or pain. And in their situation, sadness also gave way to wonder, for the text says, when they finally found Jesus in the Temple, "*they were astonished.*"

Think about what they had been through already during the young life of Jesus. The first visitors to his birthplace were shepherd nomads, rough people who lived on the periphery of civilized society, and strangers. Days after the birth, old Simeon warned the parents, "*This child is destined for the rise and fall of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be contradicted...*" Soon after, on account of a neurotic king embroiled in his lust for power, the family had to emigrate, with all the dangers involved in crossing a border, and in a hazardous trip with a mother and her newborn, exposed to the elements, to fears, and to uncertainty. Where would they find a home in Egypt? Would Joseph find work? How would the women at the neighborhood water well receive Mary, a foreigner, an immigrant?

Finally, in today's Gospel, Luke reports a Passover pilgrimage to Jerusalem, where the child Jesus, now twelve years old, did not join the return caravan, but remained in the Temple without informing his parents. After three days—an anticipation of the three days of Jesus lost during another Passover, his disappearance in death and his reunion in the resurrection—the distraught parents worried themselves sick, and the Blessed Virgin uttered a slight scolding: "*Why have you done this to us?*" But the text adds that when the family returns to Nazareth, Mary pondered all these things in her heart... wonder in the midst of challenges.

The Holy Family of Mary, Joseph and Jesus is a symbol of what every family can become. It is, in a special way, a sign of the unity of the human family. The second reading (Colossians) tells of all the qualities which should characterize the human family: respect, care, kindness, forgiveness, love, peace, duty. It expresses, in terms of the culture of biblical times, the ideal of harmony and working together. The boy Jesus disturbed his family's internal harmony momentarily, but with good reason, for the sake of something higher. The internal harmony of

today's human family is also being disturbed, but so often for the sake of things baser: greed, the will to dominate, disregard for human dignity, pride, and selfishness.

Mary said: "*Why have you done this to us?*" This is the question that must be impressed upon all those who disturb the unity of the human family: the oppressors, racists and sexists, the hoarders of wealth, the polluters of the land, the abusers of children, the neglectors of the elderly, the instigators of war, the killers and rapists, the indifferent. And, in our day, domestic and foreign terrorists and groups like ISIS. And we ask: "*Why have you done this to us?*"

During this Christmas season, we behold the light that illuminates the joys and sorrows of our lives with "glimmers of grace". Here, in the Christ Child, the sacred is not some abstract concept of theological theory. Instead, the love of God takes on a human face: the Word of God becomes "enfleshed" in the Child Jesus, enabling us to transform our hearts by his love. The challenge of Christmas is to continue to make that love incarnate in our own time, in the same way as that man feeding his father I mentioned earlier: by allowing pain and struggles to give way to care... and care to give way to wonder... wonder even in the midst of struggles... so that the fullness of life can also open for us.

During the days of 2019 that are soon to start: if you find yourself half-hearted, splash some wonder on your face!