Feast of the Holy Family, Cycle B

2020, OSP

David Lose is an exceptionally gifted preacher and commentator

 Whose work I often consult

 In the process of my homily preparation.

 What especially impresses me

 Is not only his ability to see something new

 In familiar biblical texts

 Or Christian festivals

 But also his rhetorical gifts

 In naming this newness.

 In doing so he displays more than linguistic cleverness

 and rather something more akin to poetic insight

 crafting uncommon language

to break open sometimes hidden truths.

 Pastor Lose did that for me again this past week

 When I ran across his reflections on today’s Gospel

 Which he titles, “The oddest of Christmas Carols.”[[1]](#endnote-1)

 That title draws its inspiration from the lyrical passage

 That Luke places on the lips of the prophet Simeon

 Who does not sing of angels and mangers

 or hymn of dazzled shepherds and visitors from the East

 but instead intones a song of departure

 of letting go, and even of death

 in the presence of this freshly wrought family.

At first glance one might wonder

 What kind of perverse sense of humor

Would prod Luke into launching such a morbid tune

In the midst of what should be natal festivities

Filled with joyous odes and festive airs.

On the other hand, gospel nativity tales are haunted by shadows

Of an inhospitable barn for birthing

And livestock for midwives

Of a manger that folklore remembers

As constructed from enough wood

For fashioning a fair size cross

Of unkept shepherd peasants

Constituting the first wave of worshippers

And mysterious visitors from the East

Bringing gold and incense

And an aromatic spice

portending of death and entombment.

On the one hand one could commend Luke

 For at least being consistent

 And maintaining a kind of literary integrity

 Of the opening chapters of his gospel tale …

 But more, it seems necessary to recognize

 That Luke is more than a gifted storyteller

And is here revealed as a prophet of the first magnitude

Announcing fundamental truths about this first holy family

As well as declaring parallel truths about our own

 often less than holy families.

There is no little irony that this feast of the Holy Family

 Occurs in a this tensive holiday season.

 Evidence suggests that even in the most ordinary of years

 If those actually exist

 This is a season of increased stress and heightened anxiety

 Especially in and with our families.

 All indicators are that this celebrated stretch of December

 With its unexpected pandemic overtones

 Is generating even more stress and anxiety.

While unlettered in the ways of psychiatry

 And about 2 millennia early on any tips from Freud

 Luke nonetheless offers a unique strategy,

 One might say an early Christian strategy,

 Even a Jesus strategy for facing and embracing

 The tensions of family living.

 Simeon the old is nonetheless Simeon the bold

 Even Simeon the remarkable

 When he chooses the unlikely prophet path of stepping aside

 Of moving out of the way

 Of deciding to diminish so that the Christ light might dawn.

 We ordinarily think of John the Baptism as the one

 Shouting prepare the way of the Lord

 Or supplying that wisdom that he must decrease

 So that the Lord can increase

 But it is Simeon who is the real herald here

 In reminding us that sometimes our most helpful move

 Sometimes our most respectful move

Sometimes our most reverent move in care and concern

Is actually to get out of the way.

Admittedly I don’t know much about raising children

 And have relied upon decades of observation

 Siblings and their offspring

 Of listening to friends and their experiences

 And of absorbing second hand the wisdom

 Of gifted sages on the topic.

 One celebrated colleague of mine, a parent and pastor,

 Who has written extensively about family systems

 Introduced me to the wisdom of the early 20th century

 Poet and philosopher Khalil Gibran on the matter.

 who writes:

*Your children are not your children.
They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.
They come through you but not from you,
And though they are with you yet they belong not to you.*

*You may give them your love but not your thoughts,
 For they have their own thoughts.
You may house their bodies but not their souls,
 For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow* …

*You are the bows from which your children*

 *as living arrows are sent forth.*

*The archer sees the mark upon the path of the infinite,*

 *and He bends you with His might*

 *that His arrows may go swift and far.
Let your bending in the archer’s hand be for gladness;
     For even as He loves the arrow that flies,*

 *so He loves also the bow that is stable.[[2]](#endnote-2)*

That sagely advice strikes me as fundamentally incarnational,

 A poetic reimagining of the Godhead

 Bending that cosmic bow and releasing a Christic arrow

 That pierces the heart of humanity

 Even as humanity will ultimately pierce his own.

 The paradox of this self-less act on the part of the Godhead

 As revealed in the death of the only-begotten

 Is that without this Holy release

 Without dispatching the Christ from the heavens

 And humanity’s dispatching him on the cross

 Our own call to take up the incarnational vocation

 Might never have occurred.

 By stepping into humanity and then stepping aside for humanity

 Jesus elevated our purpose

 And divinely enhanced our human dignity

 By ordaining us as incarnational agents

 Appointing us as heralds

of God’s enduring presence in the world

 and created us as a holy vanguard

 commissioned to uphold the dignity of every child

 the embodied proof of God’s own enfleshment

 and unbreakable bond with humanity.

Part of our evolution, both biologically and psychologically,

 Programs us to hang on to life – to cling tightly to power.

 Such instincts for survival are built into our DNA.

 And so we hold fast to our influence, our control

 Whether in the White House or in our own house

 Whether in the family or in the workplace

 Whether in the classroom or in the Church

 Where we are reluctant to chant any Nunc Dimittis

 Our own version of Simeon’s hymn

 Fearful that such will diminish our value

 Erase the self-worth in which we have invested so much

 Subvert our purported legacy.

Legacy is an interesting word, most often used

to designate something left over from a previous era

but the always informative Oxford English Dictionary

notes that an earlier definition of legacy was

“a body of people sent on a mission or as a deputation”

A poignant example of this missioning definition

That puts more emphasis on the future than the past

Is illustrated by the work of a former student

Who studied the legacy of women’s religious communities

Most of whom are in steep decline.

What my student documented in vivid terms

As that even though some of these communities

Are teetering on the edge of ecclesial extinction

They are actively engaged in creating fresh legacies

Gifts to the future in land and programs and funds

And not simply enshrining memories from their past.

The feast of the Holy Family in the spirit of Simeon’s unsettling carol

 Is an invitation to rethink our own legacies

 In the multiple families that enfold us

 And in in the grips of whatever diminishment confronts us.

 And in a year, when so many have been forced

 To give up so much so quickly

 With untold scarcity touching so many

 We are invited to discover

 whatever grace might lurk in such diminishment

 And how our own stepping aside

In preference and power

In opinion and persuasion

might not only shape our true legacy

 but be a source of life for others.

In her 1991 novel, *Saint Maybe,[[3]](#endnote-3)* Pulitzer prize winner Anne Tyler

 Weaves an unusual tale of family and legacy

 Ian is an affable 17 year old who lives a comfortable life

 Though in the shadow of his older brother Danny

 The football star and all around golden child.

 Nonetheless, early in the novel Ian imagines

 That his future biographer will narrate his life

 As having made a difference.

 A turning point in this placid family history

 Is when Ian suggests to his older brother

 That the sister in law has been unfaithful

 And while this is only Ian’s suspicion

 It triggers a series of two tragic events:

 First the death of the older brother

And then the death of his sister-in-law

Who together leave behind three young children.

 When Ian discovers that his suspicions were incorrect

 He is plunged into guilt

 For his role in their deaths.

 In his guilt Ian stumbles across a church –

 “The Church of The Second Chance”

 And when he confesses his actions to the pastor

 Expecting to be absolved of his guilt

 The Pastor instead advises him to drop out of college

 And help raise the three young children.

 Though shocked by the advice, Ian takes this difficult path

 And accepts responsibility for raising his brother’s children

 Along with his aging parents,

 Eventually becoming their primary caregiver.

 Over the next 20 years

 While haunted by the fear that his life has not been fulfilling

 It slowly dawns on this “saint maybe”

 That this sacrificial path . his painful letting go

 Has not only been a grace

 But allows him to grow into a legacy

that otherwise never would have dawned.

 The novel ends with Ian, now married,

 Holding his own newborn son in his arms

 A son named “Joshua” – or “the Lord is my salvation.”

 Ian achieved his own salvation, figuratively and literally

 In the nurturing of three young lives,

 By stepping aside, letting go,

and there finding true salvation.

While our own stepping aside

might not be as dramatic as Ian’s

 nor as final as Simeon’s

 nor as absolute at Jesus’

 it, too, is our way to salvation.

And so we heed the poet’s call:

# To lose the earth you know for greater knowing;

# to lose the life you have for greater life;

# to leave the friends you loved for greater loving;

# to find a land more kind than home, more large than earth[[4]](#endnote-4)

 Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

1. http://www.davidlose.net/2014/12/christmas-1-b-carols-of-thanksgiving-and-lament/ [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. https://poets.org/poem/children-1 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Anne Tyler, *Saint Maybe* (New York: Random House, 1991). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Thomas Wolfe, *You Can’t go Home Again* (New York: Scribner, 2011 [1940], p. 489. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)