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)