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First Sunday after Christmas & The Holy Innocents (Series B)

December 28, 2014

Text: Luke 2:22–40; Matthew 2:13–18

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

It's the 4th Day of Christmas. According to the famous 16th century Christmas song, "On the fourth day of Christmas My true love gave to me four colly birds..." Did you know that many believe the song, The Twelve Days of Christmas, was written by English Roman Catholics in the 16th century when they were forbidden to practice their faith? And did you know that many believe the song was written as a catechetical hymn meant to teach Catholic believers the basics of the Christian faith using secret, symbolic language? It's fascinating. There's no hard evidence to prove or disprove this theory. Be that as it may, the 4 colly birds are meant to represent the 4 gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

Today, we don't have readings from the 4 gospels but only 2, Matthew and Luke. Luke 2:22–40 is the appointed reading for the First Sunday after Christmas. Matthew 2:13–18 is the appointed reading for the 4th Day of Christmas, otherwise known as The Holy Innocents. The two readings represent two very different periods in the life of the Lord Jesus. One is very joyous, the other tragic. My task is to tie them together in a meaningful, coherent way. The unifying theme I have chosen is the blessed sanctity of the family. I will approach the two readings with that theme in chronological order.

The setting for Luke 2:22–40 is 40 days after the birth of the Lord Jesus. Joseph and Mary are in Jerusalem in order to fulfill important, but routine, parental obligations. They must offer the appropriate sacrifices for Mary and Jesus as prescribed by the Law of Moses. The holy family is not exempt from the Law of Moses.

That last statement should cause us to pause for a moment. You might be tempted to think that if there was anyone or any family that should be exempted from certain religious requirements, it would be Jesus and His parents. Jesus is perfect God and perfect Man. Why must He submit to any Biblical requirements? He's God and the author of Holy Scripture! And shouldn't Joseph and Mary get a free pass? A sort of "fringe benefit" for taking care of God the Father's only begotten Son.

While there may be a certain form of human reason to this line of thinking, it doesn't follow God's way of doing things. On the one hand, God is God and He's bound by nothing except His own character and nature. On the other hand, the Holy Trinity – God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – is bound to His character and nature. He can't act contrary to Himself. And He declares that first born sons and recently delivered mothers are to be cleansed and sanctified by the appropriate sacrifices. God's Son and His virgin Mother don't get special treatment.

And so the holy family goes to the Temple in Jerusalem to worship together in obedience to God's Word. It's a beautiful picture of God's will for families. On Christmas Eve, I shared a statistic of some years ago stating that 37% of self-identified Christians said that Christ made Christmas unique and special while 44% said that "family time" made Christmas special. Why must those two things be set in opposition? Cannot families worship together at Christmas? Should not families worship at Christmas? I understand the realities of modern Christmas celebrations; people traveling to and fro, families trying to visit both sets of families if they are in the same area, Christmas meals must be prepared, and a whole host of other traditions. But I also realize that Joseph, Mary, and Jesus worshipped together as a family. They didn't take short cuts or make excuses. Maybe we shouldn't either. And I suspect that "family time" may actually become more significant and blessed when we put things in their proper priority.

And look what happens as this family goes about worshipping God...they are met by a man named Simeon and a woman named Anna. Both are righteous before God; both worship God regularly and faithfully.

Simeon is typically thought of as being an old man though the Biblical text doesn't indicate his age one way or the other. After holding the 40-day old Jesus in his arms, he declares that he can depart in peace for his eyes have seen the salvation of God prepared for all people. The "depart in peace" is most often interpreted to mean that he's ready to die; thus, he must be old.

Anna, we're told, is 84 years old. Both of them meet the holy family, most especially the infant Jesus, and worship God with rapturous joy because of them. In fact, we use Simeon's words of praise quite frequently in our worship services. We still call them by their Latin title, *The Nunc Dimittis*. After receiving the Lord Jesus' body and blood in Holy Communion, we confess that we are now ready "to depart in peace according to thy word." For we have received forgiveness of sins, shared that forgiveness with the rest of the congregational members, and participated in Christ's undying life. With such love and grace, we are prepared to leave the worship service in peace ready to love God and

one another in our daily vocation. In addition, we are prepared to die, if our time should come, in the peace and certainty of God's grace.

Joseph and Mary witnessed the grace and love that their 40-day old Jesus gave to two strangers. The Holy Family experienced this particular joy because they worshipped together. May not our families be so blessed by worshipping together? May not others be encouraged and strengthened by our families worshipping together?

The single, most fundamental unit of society is the family. On the sixth day of creation, God made Adam and Eve. He gave them the blessed mandate, "Be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth..." In other words, have children and establish families. All society is built upon the strength and stability of this divinely created institution. Governments and nations, institutions and organizations come and go with time. But the family endures. For God created it in the beginning and God the Son sanctified it all the more by become a member of one particular family, with a father and a mother.

And through that family, the Lord Jesus was preserved and protected until He could accomplish His divine task given to Him by His heavenly Father. But it wasn't without danger and difficulty. Now we turn to Matthew 1, the second gospel reading. December 28th, the 4th Day of Christmas, is also known as The Holy Innocents.

Jesus is, in all likelihood, between one to two years old. The Holy Family is still living in Bethlehem. They have just been blessed by the worship and gifts of the wise men from the east. Soon after the wise men's departure, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph warning him to flee to Egypt for King Herod desires to kill the infant Jesus. Joseph and Mary fulfill their parental vocation by protecting their holy Son as the angel commanded. They escape to Egypt. And Jesus is protected. But notice who gives the protection: Jesus' earthly parents. The Christ Child finds love and protection in His family. To be sure, Joseph and Mary receive divine aid, but they are called to fulfill their vocation as parents.

Tragically, Herod sends His soldiers to Bethlehem and all the boys 2 years old and younger are murdered. These innocent boys died because of the insanity and insecurity of a powerful, despotic ruler. Weeping and loud lamentations were heard. This was an outrage not only against those young boys but also against their families. For mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles had their loved ones taken from them. This was an attack against the family from another institution: government.

Government too is established by God. Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, said Jesus. Read Paul's teaching in Romans 13 to see how God establishes and blessed lawful

government. But government is built upon the foundation of the family and is required by God's Word to cherish and protect the family.

Tragically, we have our own version of the holy innocents perpetrated by our government: legalized abortion in particular and various forms of birth control in general. These are assaults against human life and the sanctity of the family. The LCMS is widely known around the world for its strong stand against abortion. In that regard, we remain faithful to the teachings of Scripture which forbid the killing of innocent people as well as to the Church's long-standing practice of saving life whenever possible. History records that it was the Christians living in larger cities in the Roman Empire who would go out in the early mornings to rescue the infants thrown out by Roman parents, particularly fathers, and left to die. The rescued infants would be placed in families; they were baptized and taught the Christian faith.

I did mention birth control. The LCMS has not made any formal statements about the use of birth control except to say that any technology which destroys human life cannot be used by Christians. I know quite well there are various forms of birth control and I know that they may be used for other reasons other than birth control, strictly speaking. But I would caution our congregational members to be very cautious about doing anything or using anything that would undermine the sanctity of human life and the family. Please do not hear my admonitions as politicized rhetoric. This is not about political parties and candidates for public office. It's about God's gift of the family; the same family the Lord Jesus was born into, was loved in, and protected until the time of His public ministry.

I know this sermon is very much out of the ordinary for me. But there are times and seasons when the usual doesn't do. It seemed to me that today was just such an occasion.

Christmas is certainly about families. Not just the nostalgic imagination of the family, but real families made up of very real human beings who have all kinds of sins, foibles, and eccentricities. Into those real families God has placed you.

And may God richly bless and protect you and your families.

Beloved of God, a very Merry Christmas to you all.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.