

Behold

(Sermon by Rev. John Dieterly, March 3, 2010)

Proverbs 23:22-25 (TEV) ²²Listen to your father; without him you would not exist.

When your mother is old, show her your appreciation.

²³Truth, wisdom, learning, and good sense—these are worth paying for, but too valuable for you to sell.

²⁴A righteous person's parents have good reason to be happy. You can take pride in a wise child.

²⁵Let your father and mother be proud of you; give your mother that happiness.

1 Timothy 5:1-8 (The Message) ¹Don't be harsh or impatient with an older man. Talk to him as you would your own father, and to the younger men as your brothers. ²Reverently honor an older woman as you would your mother, and the younger women as sisters.

³Take care of widows who are destitute. ⁴If a widow has family members to take care of her, let them learn that religion begins at their own doorstep and that they should pay back with gratitude some of what they have received. This pleases God immensely. ⁵You can tell a legitimate widow by the way she has put all her hope in God, praying to him constantly for the needs of others as well as her own. ⁶But a widow who exploits people's emotions and pocketbooks—well, there's nothing to her. ⁷Tell these things to the people so that they will do the right thing in their extended family. ⁸Anyone who neglects to care for family members in need repudiates the faith. That's worse than refusing to believe in the first place.

Luke 8:19-21 ¹⁹Then his mother and his brothers came to him, but they could not reach him because of the crowd. ²⁰And he was told, "Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to see you." ²¹But he said to them, "**My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.**"

John 19:25-27 (KJV) ²⁵Now there stood by the cross of Jesus his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the *wife* of Cleophas, and Mary Magdalene. ²⁶When Jesus therefore saw his mother, and the disciple standing by, whom he loved, he saith unto his mother, **Woman, behold thy son!** ²⁷Then saith he to the disciple, **Behold thy mother!** And from that hour that disciple took her unto his own *home*.

When Jesus saw his mother, and the disciple whom he loved standing near, he said to his mother, "Woman, behold, your son!" Then he said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother!"

What picture do we get in our mind when we think about Jesus and his mother? That's an image that is more like Christmas than Lent, isn't it?

Silent night, holy night
All is calm, all is bright
Round yon Virgin-mother and Child.
Holy Infant, so tender and mild,
Sleep in heavenly peace
Sleep in heavenly peace.

Isn't that more like the picture we want to see, the familiar Christmas picture of Mary holding her newborn Son in her arms. But the famous painter and sculptor, Michelangelo gave us another picture, a picture of Mary, once more holding Jesus, the drained, lifeless body of Jesus, at the conclusion of the crucifixion.

What a stark contrast in these two pictures: Then he was pink with new life; now he is ashen white in death. Then he had cried out with the first happy baby cries of the newborn; now he had cried, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Then the night had been bright as day, as “the glory of the Lord shone round about”; now the day had been turned into night. Angels had shaken the sky with song; now it is the earth that quakes and rumbles, in sorrow. Shepherds had come to worship and adore; now men cursed and turned away. Wise men brought their gifts of gold; now a very foolish man was left holding his thirty pieces of silver. Then Mary had held him in her arms, and everything was just beginning; now she held him in her arms again, and it all seemed to have ended. It ends, so it seems, where it had begun, only so much differently ...or does it end?

For Mary it all began, well, right around now, as it happens. March 25, which usually is in Lent, is celebrated throughout the Christian Church as the Day of the Annunciation to Mary, exactly nine months before Christmas, the day on which “the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin’s name was Mary.” What happened on that day was that there, in the unlikely surroundings of Nazareth, Mary was informed that she was “in a family way,” so to speak. Mary protested that it was not possible for her, a virgin, to be “in a family way”, only to be informed that when God says things, they happen: impossible, wonderful, beautiful things happen: like being made a family.

And so it happened that by the grace and power of God, nine months later Mary the virgin was holding in her arms the One whose name was “wonderful Counselor, mighty God, everlasting Father, Prince of Peace,” the Son of God, who was very much her son as well. They were a family. God had given them to one another, and that was what made it work. Joseph could lean with her over the cradle and say, “Behold your son!”

(Pause) “Behold your son!” Those words come back with a dark and painful echo now, don’t they? “Behold your son!” says Jesus, and in saying so, he is now referring to another—the disciple whom he loved. Some Biblical scholars have suggested that here at the foot of the cross in the Fourth Gospel, we have a beautiful image for the founding of the Christian Church and the ideal picture of how it is to function.

In a way, it’s the story of the Annunciation and Christmas brought to its great conclusion. If the message of the Annunciation is that God was miraculously creating a holy family, the message of Lent, of Good Friday finally, of this Word from the Cross, is that God continues to create and to sustain his Holy Family. Only now the family is defined in much broader terms. It is not just Mary, Joseph and the baby, but it includes another one, not a blood relative, but one related in faith, and in love, a faithful one, one who was loved. Here again we see that it is not the end, but a beginning, the beginning of a new family, but now it includes John, and the disciples, and us.

And so it comes full circle. The story of Christmas finds its conclusion and its purpose and its goal at the foot of the cross. “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son.” God’s Son so loved the world that he gave: John to Mary... and Mary to John... And God gave both of them, and all our Johns and Marys... to you and me... and me to you... and you to you... and you to me ...”

Earlier I gave you a list of contrasts between the two pictures, the first, a picture of the mother and baby, the second of the mother holding the lifeless body of our Lord, but there is at least one point in common: if the miracle of Christmas is a family time, lifting up the Holy Family, so is Good Friday, so is Lent, except now we are family, God’s own family. Amen.