

Our Children, God's Children

1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26; Colossians 3:12-17; Luke 2:15-24, 39-40

1st Sunday of Christmas - December 27, 2015

The Rev. Dr. Ritva H. Williams

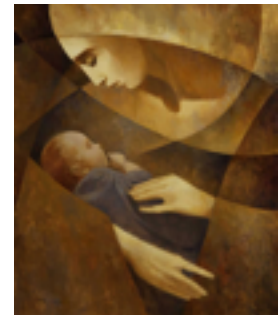
Can you imagine permanently “lending” your child/grandchild to God for life? Giving the newest member of your family into the care of a religious official or institution to be trained to serve God? Inconceivable!



Welcome to the world of the boy Samuel. He was the son of Elkanah and his wife Hannah. They suffered through years of infertility, even though Hannah prayed and prayed and prayed for a child. In desperation, she vowed that if God have her a son she would consecrate him permanently to God's service. Finally she conceived and gave birth to a son and named him “Samuel” which means “he who is from God.” Once he was weaned, sometime between the ages of two and four, Hannah brought her son to the sanctuary at Shiloh, and presented him to the priest Eli with the words, “For this child I prayed ... Therefore I have lent him to the LORD, as long as he lives, he is given to the LORD” (1 Samuel 1:27-28).

Today we meet little Samuel dressed in an ephod — priestly garment — ministering before the Lord, receiving an annual visit and a gift of a new robe from his parents who, in turn, were annually blessed by the aging priest Eli. Hannah and Elkanah went on to have three more sons and two daughters, while Samuel grew up in the presence of the Lord, in time becoming priest, prophet, and judge over Israel.

[STEP 1] Samuel's conception, birth and childhood presents both parallels and contrasts to the infancy of Jesus. Hannah understands her son to be a child “from God” given in response to her prayer, a child she literally gives back to God. Mary doesn't pray to have a baby, but does consent to bear a child mysteriously conceived by the Holy Spirit. Joseph after initially freaking out, agrees to stand as the child's father. Caught in the midst of political turmoil and regime change that forces them to temporarily leave their home, Mary's baby is born in a stable with a feeding trough for a crib. Angelic hosts sing praises to God, but are witnessed only by lowly shepherds living in the fields with their flocks of sheep. We are told that Mary pondered all these strange events in her heart.



Like Hannah and Elkanah, Mary and Joseph are devout members of the Jewish faith community. They make sure that this baby is circumcised on the eighth day following his birth, given the name Jesus as instructed by the angel, and presented to the Lord. In keeping with the traditions of Israel, Mary and Joseph present Jesus in the temple, as a firstborn son belonging to God in a

special way, and so dedicated to a life of serving God. Then they take him home to Nazareth where he grows and becomes strong, filled with wisdom and God's favor.

So what do these biblical stories have to do with us? The story of Samuel's childhood is almost incomprehensible to us. Sure there were moments, hours, perhaps even days when my children were small that I might have been tempted to give them away, or maybe even to pay someone to take them away. Maybe you've felt that way too? But I would never have seriously considered acting on those feelings and thoughts. **[STEP 2]** After all, they were, and still are, my dearly beloved children. It is probably easier to connect with Mary and Joseph taking care to ensure that their infant son went through all the rituals that accompanied the beginning of a boy's life in their Jewish faith — circumcision, naming, presentation and consecration to God's service. **[STEP 3]** That feels a lot more like the baptismal/christening/naming rituals that accompanied the beginning of our lives and the lives of our children and grandchildren.



[STEP 4] But here's the thing, Jesus' presentation in the Temple as well as the sacrament of Holy Baptism is a giving away of a child to God. Immediately after a person is baptized by having water poured on their head we proclaim, "You belong to Christ, in whom you have been baptized." This "giving away" of a child in baptism is a public declaration that as parents we recognize that we are not just raising our own child, but a child of God, and that we need

God's help to do so. The baptism of an adult is similar, representing the person's giving of him/herself to God, recognizing that they need God's help to nurture and grow into their true child-of-God self. The presence of sponsors and the community of faith during the sacrament of holy baptism reminds us that God provides us with human help in raising up and nurturing children of God.

As a parent and grandparent, I am comforted by the knowledge that my children and grandchildren have been given to Christ in baptism. I know that Christ has claimed them for his own, sealed them with the Holy Spirit, and surrounded them with guardian angels. I am thankful beyond measure to have had God's help in the raising of my children. They have turned out to be fine human beings in spite of my inadequacies as a parent. Each of them faces challenges in their lives which I don't always fully understand, certainly don't have control over, and cannot fix no matter how much I would like to. I trust that the Christ who claims them as his own is with them through it all.

The author of our second reading from Colossians reflects on what happens to persons who are baptized. In baptism we are claimed by Christ and publicly acknowledged as "God's chosen ones, holy and beloved." We are metaphorically clothed with Christ, just as in the ancient church the newly baptized were clothed in special white baptismal robes. What this means is that baptism establishes an intimate relationship between the person and Christ in which Christ shares himself with us, empowering us to act and think and feel more like him. In relationship with each

other we are given opportunities to cultivate, nurture and practice compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, and forgiveness. All of these virtues are rooted in love.

[STEP 5] On Christmas Eve, I described Jesus as the Christmas child standing at our stable door, bearing the unwrapped gift of God's unrelenting love. I asked if you were willing to unwrap that gift, to receive God's love, to accept that you truly are God's holy and beloved children. Last Sunday at the early service, I talked about love as a spiritual connection and a spiritual practice rooted in our relationship with God. The more firmly we are grounded in that relationship, the more deeply we trust in our identity as holy and beloved children of God, the more we are able to cultivate and practice love in our daily lives. The gift of love that the Christ-child offers each of us is meant to be shared. The very best gift we can give our children and grandchildren is the knowledge and assurance that they are loved, that they belong even if they don't always fit in, and that they are good enough even if they are different than other children. The very best gift that we can give each other is the reminder that by claiming us for God, Christ is the one who makes us holy and beloved, worthy of love and respect just as we are, and who empowers us to use our own particular strengths to make a positive difference in our homes, schools, workplaces, playgrounds, and communities.



Please pray with me:

Holy Child of Bethlehem, you stand at our stable door, bearing the unwrapped gift of God's unrelenting love. Unlock our the doors of our hearts and minds to receive and accept your gift of love. Help us to nurture and grow your love in our lives. Give us the courage to share your love with our family members and neighbors, with our friends and with our enemies. May the gift of Christmas live in our hearts all year long. In your holy name, Jesus, I pray. Amen.