

**The Other Holy Family**  
Sermon on Luke 1  
Sunday December 6, 2009  
Trinity United Ottawa  
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Introduction to the Scripture:

Luke, the doctor who travelled with St. Paul around the Mediterranean, and later authored both the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts, was the best of the New Testament storytellers. He cleverly parallels the stories of two holy families expecting boys, moving back and forth like a good movie script, between the events heralding Jesus' and John's births. Alas, the Lectionary never offers us a reading of the whole story of John the Baptist's family, so I've cobbled it together for us to hear today.

Reading of Selections from Luke 1: 5-23, 57-80.

John the Baptist is born! He is to be the 'peacemaker' who goes before the Lord to prepare the way. We hear that he "will turn the hearts of parents to their children." Now there is an intriguing verse to explore today. But first, let's look at Jesus' family and John's family...the 'other' holy family, whose story invites us to consider our own 'holy families.' To imagine how God is calling us to nurture the birth of the Christ Peace this Advent.

In Luke's wisdom tale, both boys, Jesus and John, are prophetically announced to a parent by an Angel. Both parents receiving this news have mixed emotional reactions to their angelic messengers - Mary the mother of Jesus is filled with fear and awe. Zachariah the Priest, John's father, is struck dumb by disbelief. Both boys are 'impossible pregnancies' - signified by Mary's virginity and Elizabeth's advanced age. Their births, months apart, are evidence of the impossible made possible by God. Both of these holy cousins are heralded by poetic speeches echoing the same words of the ancient prophets. Words of God's promise to his people, fulfilled by a saviour. Words that would have been familiar and sacred to all

Hebrew people, are spoken by these 'chosen' parents as "Mary's Song - The Magnificat" and "Zachariah's Song - The Benedictus."

It is interesting for us today to note that Jesus and John are both born into 'unconventional' families. Jesus' father isn't really his father, as the story goes. And John's parents are too old to be parents. Both families have blood ties to the exalted line of the House of King David, but as Helen pointed out in Scripture Circle Wednesday morning, Mary's is presumed to be of peasant stock, while Zachariah, the husband of Mary's older cousin Elizabeth, belongs to the powerful Priestly class of the Temple. (Perhaps that's part of why Mary ran to them in Bethlehem for protection?)

In Luke's gospel, there are clearly these two 'holy families', blessed by God with offspring who were being called into the world to bring about a longed-for peace. While Jesus is our hero, John was his mentor, preparing the way. While Mary is the acclaimed Holy Mother, Elizabeth midwifed her young cousin's pregnancy. While Joseph courageously chose to listen to his particular calling and step beyond shame to be Jesus' step-dad, Zachariah gave up his traditional right to name his son for himself, humbling himself to support his son's calling. Everyone in each family took a part in fulfilling God's promise.

Our Christmas story is not just about one Prince of Peace, it is about all the members of all the families who take part in the fulfillment of the Promise of Peace - then and now. These parallel family stories in scripture invite us to broaden our definition of a holy family, and to believe in our own sacred callings - and the holy purposes of our families. Each one of us is intended to take part in preparing the way for God's promise of peace.

So...what hope is pregnant in you in this year of our Lord? Or whose calling to bring about Kingdom justice are you meant to nurture? How can you prepare the peace?

Back to that surprising phrase about John turning people of Israel toward their God

and “turning parents’ hearts toward their children.” Were they ever turned away?! What might it mean for us to turn our hearts toward our children? Not just love, with which we surely already amply gift them. Perhaps, today, and even in biblical days, to truly turn our hearts toward our children, we would have to look toward their future, focus on their longterm promise and callings, nurture the next generation’s survival to give birth again.

When wise parents ‘turn toward their children’, they feel called to prepare the way for a long-term future of peace. Native spiritualities require that today’s decisions always be made with the seventh generation in mind. So we too can only truly ‘turn our hearts toward our children,’ by taking responsibility for the world they will inherit. We are called to prepare a peace that will last for our children’s lifetimes, and their children’s. And we are not naive. We know that peace can only last in a just world, on a sustainable earth.

How will your family - whether conventional or unconventional, humble or esteemed, express its calling to holiness this Christmas season? How might you turn your heart toward the children? In what way will you prepare a peace that will last?

Some of us may take a deeper look at a family conflict or the bitter fruits of divorce this Advent season, and begin to prepare the way of reconciliation that promises a family peace that will last past Christmas. Some of us will gather at First United at 7:30 tonight for a Service of Remembrance on this 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Montreal Massacre, to support an end to violence against women, preparing the way to peace in the lives of our daughters and granddaughters. Thursday is International Human Rights Day, so some will be at Amnesty, writing letters to set children free from poverty. This week, the Copenhagen negotiations on Global Warming begin. Some of us will take part in a Gandhian fast and prayer, to draw our government’s attention to Canada’s calling to lead with courage toward change - rather than lag behind on this world-saving mission.

Remember, ‘nothing is impossible, with God!’

As you prepare for Christmas, listen for the angel who will whisper a calling to you, to your family. You are part of God's saving story. Every family is holy. Every child - in your arms or in Afghanistan - is a Christ child. And we are all part of the extended Christian family. So perhaps we will find ourselves this Advent surprisingly pregnant, and charged with preparing the way for the Promise of Peace.