The Fulfillment of Our Hopes

By Mary Katharine Deeley

Parents who bring a new baby home bring also their hopes and dreams for the child. At the very least, we hope the child will be happy and healthy and will have a life that is better than ours. From there, we may harbor a secret hope that the child might create the cure for some disease, write a prize-winning novel, or bring peace to the world.

I did all of those things, and I also prayed I wouldn't mess things up too badly. That was a secret hope I didn't share with our children until they were much older and it already seemed I hadn't done too much damage.

Sunday Readings

Malachi 3:1–4

And the lord whom you seek will come suddenly to his temple; The messenger of the covenant whom you desire.

Hebrews 2:14–18

Because he himself was tested through what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.

Luke 2:22–40 or 2:22–32

[Simeon said,] “Now, Master, you may let your servant go in peace, according to your word, for my eyes have seen your salvation.”

I can only imagine what Mary and Joseph thought when they brought Jesus to the Temple. Even though the angel Gabriel had revealed their son’s identity, did they look at him and see the refiner’s fire of Malachi’s prophecy?

It’s possible, but I think they saw him more as their beloved child. The angel Gabriel told Mary that her son would “be great...[and] the Son of the Most High” (Luke 1:32), but did she know everything that meant? That’s hard to see when your child is an infant in your arms.

What we know is this: Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to the Temple, and two people who had been waiting all their lives for a sign from God took that child into their arms and into their hearts and saw in him the answer to their prayers and the fulfillment of their hopes.

In that moment, Mary and Joseph could simply hold their breath and pray for the grace and strength to raise this child of God—and to hold their own hope out to him.

The angel Gabriel told Mary her son would “be great,” but did she know everything that meant?

A Word from Pope Francis

In the Temple...Mary and Joseph find the roots of their faith, for faith is not something learned from a book, but the art of living with God, learned from the experience of those who have gone before us. The two young people, in meeting two older people [Simeon and Anna], thus find themselves.

—Feast of the Presentation of the Lord, February 2, 2018

Reflection Questions

- Do you cherish every child as belonging to God?
- How have you made your world better?
Honoring Our Parents

By Kathy Coffey

G

od’s Fourth Commandment reads, “Honor your father and your mother...” (Exodus 20:12). What nugget of wisdom does this commandment teach us? Today some parents and children are estranged; others wish their parents were alive so they could honor them. But the following story shows how delightfully some children still honor their parents.

Jan celebrated her sixtieth birthday with friends, far from her children living in five different states. “No gifts,” she had told her kids. “All I need are memories of you.” Then the postal service delivered a special box. Within it were sixty slips of paper on which Jan’s children had written sixty special memories. She read and cherished each one, mixing laughter and tears.

Why honor our parents? In the world of the Bible and in good homes today, parents provide images of trust, hope, and serenity that enable the young to face formidable obstacles. To their children they convey the message, spoken or unspoken, “You are loved. You are wonderful.”

All humans are constantly making the passage from the known to the unknown. Parents who have endured disappointment, even tragedy, can help their offspring travel that passage with dignity. “We’ve made mistakes,” they say.

“We’ve lost jobs, health, or our dearest loves. But it didn’t kill us. Something in people endures, continues to trust, and moves forward in confidence.”

Related Roles

Furthermore, parents are memory keepers. When their children hit snags, they remind them what glorious people they are. And if humor, perspective, or packages of goodies can lighten the load, they contribute those, too.

The wisest parents honor their children in turn. They count on their children’s good sense to pilot them through difficulties, so they restrain the “free advice.” They clarify the boundaries of their role: providing safe harbors, but holding the ropes loosely. They encourage children to explore God’s beautiful world, not burdening them with unnecessary anxiety. They recognize the arenas where the young have more expertise, inviting them to shine there.

Many parents struggle with handing on their faith to a generation that seems unenthusiastic at best. There, too, honor comes in. Realizing that the gift of faith, no matter how important, cannot be coerced or controlled, parents can follow the advice of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton. Agonizing over her sons’ shenanigans, she once said, “What’s a mother to do but pray and dote, pray and dote?”

If the roles of parent and child seem too idealized, we need only look to Jesus and his mother and behold them as our role models. (Unfortunately, Scripture records little of Jesus’ relationship with Joseph.)

Learning from Jesus and Mary

The wedding at Cana (John 2:1–12) provides the perfect example of their honoring each other. Mary wisely tells Jesus of the need: “They have no wine.” Then she backs off. She trusts his instincts to resolve the crisis.

Despite his reservations (“My hour has not yet come”), Jesus in turn honors his mother. Whether he was responding to her, or to the couple’s dire need, we may never know. Despite the exhaustion and pain of his passion, Jesus continues to honor Mary, making sure even from the cross that his beloved disciple would continue to care for her (John 19:26–27).

In Jesus’ day, women with no son or husband for protection often became desperate beggars. Knowing that sad reality, Jesus makes sure that John will take her into his own home. Saint Ignatius imagined that the first appearance of Jesus after the resurrection, although not recorded in Scripture, must surely have been to Mary.

As parents and children who follow Jesus, we are called to do likewise.

PRAYER

Lord, you dwell in the depth of my being. May your Spirit help me to seek and to know you with all my heart, mind, soul, and strength.

—From Peaceful Meditations for Every Day in Ordinary Time, Rev. Warren J. Savage and Mary Ann McSweeny

WEEKDAY READINGS

February 3–8

Monday, Weekday: 2 Sm 15:13–14, 30; 16:5–13 / Mk 5:1–20
Tuesday, Weekday: 2 Sm 18:9–10, 14b, 24–25a, 30—19:3 / Mk 5:21–43
Wednesday, St. Agatha: 2 Sm 24:2, 9–17 / Mk 6:1–6

Thursday, St. Paul Miki and Companions: 1 Kgs 2:1–4, 10–12 / Mk 6:7–13
Friday, Weekday: Sir 47:2–11 / Mk 6:14–29
Saturday, Weekday: 1 Kgs 3:4–13 / Mk 6:30–34

Humble Bright Lights

By Fr. Mark Haydu, LC

Saint Paul says he came to the Corinthians in weakness and that he didn’t use eloquent or persuasive words; rather he evangelized them in humility and with signs of the power of God. He doesn’t claim to be a powerful or influential preacher. He was a humble and convinced apostle. Thus, when he evangelized, the power of God was at work in him.

Of course, Paul’s humility doesn’t mean he didn’t make the best case possible for the faith. On the contrary, we are all called to profess and witness to the truth and to develop and use all our gifts and talents. Paul is simply stating that what is most important is that we remain open to the stirrings of the Holy Spirit within us and maintain our confidence in God and not in our own qualities or abilities.

If we are humble servants of the truth, then God’s power will be shown. Isaiah prophesies that if we live charity in a real way—offering food to the hungry, sheltering the homeless, clothing the naked—then our light will shine its strongest. Not only that, but our own personal wounds, whatever they are, will be healed. Truly, loving others is the best way to heal our own soul.

Isaiah proclaims further that if we live this way, God will have our backs. Isaiah proclaims that if we live charitably, God will have our backs.

Sunday Readings

Isaiah 58:7–10
If you lavish your food on the hungry and satisfy the afflicted; Then your light shall rise in the darkness.

1 Corinthians 2:1–5
I came to you in weakness and fear and much trembling, and my message and my proclamation were not with persuasive (words of) wisdom.

Matthew 5:13–16
You are the light of the world. A city set on a mountain cannot be hidden.

A Word from Pope Francis

Christian life has to be a life that must blossom in works of charity, in doing what is good. But if you have no roots, you cannot blossom, and who is the root? Jesus!.... “What blossoms a tree bears come from what lies underneath it.” Never cut off Jesus’ roots.

—General Audience, March 21, 2018

Reflection Questions

• How do I live out God’s love at home? In my workplace? In public?
• How can my light shine even brighter this week?
Why Do We Suffer?

By Fr. Michael D. Guinan, OFM

Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria. Wildfires in California. The Indian Ocean tsunami. Accidents, mass shootings, disease, and death. Natural disasters and those produced by humans bring with them so much suffering. Ancient literature from Egypt and Mesopotamia attests that even then people called out, “Why?” In Psalm 10:1, the psalmist cries out, “Why, Lord?” Our voices join an age-old chorus!

The problem of suffering is difficult. How can we understand a benevolent, just God in the face of such human experiences?

Perhaps the best biblical example of this struggle is found in the Book of Job. Job suffers the loss of possessions and family and is afflicted with a terrible disease. Friends hear of his plight and come to console him. After Job’s cry of pain, the discussion begins.

Why is Job suffering? One easy answer that surfaces immediately is that Job deserves it; he is suffering because of his sins. When Job rejects this, his friends counter, in effect, “Don’t give us that! All humans are rotten sinners!” For them, all suffering is somehow a punishment for sin. Sad to say, Job’s friends have vocal descendants even now. While it is true that our sinful actions have consequences, as an all-purpose explanation, this one is too simplistic.

Problem or Mystery?

Even within the Book of Job, the situation is more complicated. As readers, we know from the start that his friends are wrong. Job is righteous, and his suffering is allowed by God to test his virtue. Other answers also appear in the book. Like any good ancient Near Eastern father, God disciplines us through suffering to make us better (5:17–18, 36:15). Or, suffering is mysterious, so who are we to understand God’s ways? (11:7–10, 15:8–9).

Although these responses may give temporary relief, ultimately they are not satisfactory answers to the meaning of suffering. While we seek understanding, perhaps this is not the best approach to the problem. In fact, maybe the problem with suffering is that it is not really a “problem” at all but a mystery.

What is the difference? A problem is something “out there.” We can see all the pieces, survey its dimensions. The question is, how do we put it together? How do we solve it? Problems are solved intellectually. A mystery is different. It is a situation in which I am so immersed that I can never get far enough away to see it all “out there.” Love and death are mysteries. So is suffering.

Mysteries involve us on the deepest levels of our relationships with ourselves, others, the natural world, and with God. To be human is to be enmeshed in these relationships. When they grow into greater wholeness (through love) or come apart (through suffering), we are in the presence of mystery. We will never solve the meaning of suffering any more than the meaning of love.

“I Am with You”

At the heart of Christianity is the affirmation that, through the Incarnation, Jesus entered into these relationships too. Jesus fully shared in the human condition. When he faced suffering and death, he also called out, “Why?” The Book of Mark quotes these as his last words from the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34). We know that God did not forsake Jesus but raised him to everlasting life.

Nowhere in Scripture do we read, “Have faith in me, and you will understand everything, including suffering!” But we do read, whatever the suffering, “Do not be afraid, for I am with you.” We do not suffer alone. Together, we survive all suffering—even death itself!

PRAYER

Lord, you have blessed the world with goodness and love. Help me to use my gifts and talents in accordance with your will.

—From Peaceful Meditations for Every Day in Ordinary Time, Rev. Warren J. Savage and Mary Ann McSweeney

WEEKDAY READINGS

February 10–15

Monday, St. Scholastica:
1 Kgs 8:1–7, 9–13 / Mk 6:53–56

Tuesday, Weekday:
1 Kgs 8:22–23, 27–30 / Mk 7:1–13

Wednesday, Weekday:
1 Kgs 10:1–10 / Mk 7:14–23

Thursday, Weekday:
1 Kgs 11:4–13 / Mk 7:24–30

Friday, Sts. Cyril and Methodius:
1 Kgs 11:29–32; 12:19 / Mk 7:31–37

Saturday, Weekday:
1 Kgs 12:26–32; 13:33–34 / Mk 8:1–10
St. Maximilian’s Choices

By Fr. Mark Haydu, LC

Saint Maximilian Kolbe died in 1941 taking the place of another prisoner in Auschwitz, but his martyrdom started many years before. The boy born Rajmund Kolbe in 1894 was quite a handful—so much so that at one point his mother cried out, “What will become of you?” Shaken by his mother’s grief, Rajmund went to the town church to ask our Lady what would become of him. He wrote that the Virgin Mother appeared to him holding two crowns: one white and one red. The white crown meant he would remain pure, and the red meant he would be a martyr. Our Lady asked the child which one he would like. He chose them both. Given the religious name Maximilian as a novitiate, the man who offered his own life at a concentration camp so a man with a wife and children could live would be called “a martyr of charity” by the Pope who canonized him, St. John Paul II.

We are offered choices as well. Sirach says that whatever we choose will be given to us, but what Jesus offers is challenging. Jesus offers each of us a new heart, a new spirit, a new love, and a new trust. Jesus defines what it means to be his follower, and it is a challenging task. This standard is not lowered for Christians, nor is it defined by what is legal in a country or popular in a social group. In fact, we are not only asked to live this life but we are called to teach it to others.

The rewards, however, are equal to the challenge. What Christ promises to those who love and teach his gospel is a glory and reward greater than any we have ever seen, heard, or imagined. Maximilian Kolbe knew this, and he fought earnestly for the truth in Nazi Germany, even though it led to his arrest and death.

A Word from Pope Francis

We must ensure that in the usual activities of every Christian community, in parishes, in associations and movements, there actually be at heart the personal encounter with Christ who communicates himself to us in his word, because, as St. Jerome teaches us, “Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ.”

—Address to Catholic Biblical Federation, June 19, 2015

Sunday Readings

Sirach 15:15–20
Before everyone are life and death, whichever they choose will be given them.

1 Corinthians 2:6–10
But as it is written: “What eye has not seen, and ear has not heard… what God has prepared for those who love him”

Matthew 5:17–37 or 5:20–22a, 27–28, 33–34a, 37
[Jesus said,] “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.”

Reflection Questions

• What choices did Jesus place before me this week?
• How have I been an example of Christ to others this week?
Jesus said, “For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it” (Luke 9:24). What is this topsy-turvy world Jesus is talking about, this world in which saving means losing and losing means saving? It sounds like telling the Yankees, “If you win a game, you lose; and if you lose a game, you win.” Say that to a baseball fan in the Bronx and see how far you get! What do Jesus’ words really mean?

Well, for starters, note that Jesus is not making the simple equation: save = lose, and lose = save. He is talking about losing one’s life for the sake of Jesus. This would have made perfectly good sense to the early Church martyrs (like Sts. Stephen, Agnes, and others), as it would for modern martyrs (Archbishop Óscar Romero, Jean Donovan, and others). All gave their lives in witness to their faith. For them, losing their mortal lives for Jesus’ sake meant achieving immortal life with him forever.

What does losing our lives for the sake of Jesus mean for us everyday Catholics who are not called upon to witness to our faith with bloodshed?

**Taking on New Life**

What does it mean for us to lose our lives in order to save our lives? First we need to realize that the life we lose is not the same as the life we save. Saint Paul tells us that in Christ we become a new creation. We take on a new life in Christ. Years ago, a low-budget movie, *Jesus of Montreal*, was made in Canada. It is about the restaging of a passion play by a group of underemployed actors. In the show, an actor named Daniel takes the part of Jesus. At first he appears to be simply playing a role, but as the play progresses the role begins to turn real. He becomes increasingly identified with Jesus in his daily life.

On one occasion he goes into a studio where a sleazy commercial that demeans women is being made. He protests against it. When the producers try to eject him, he overturns their lights in a rage and walks out. The scene is clearly reminiscent of Jesus and the moneychangers in the temple.

This may be seen as a metaphor of our stories. We put on Christ in baptism. But that is only the beginning. At first it’s as if we are play-acting: doing Christian things without the full realization of who we have become. We have to grow into Christ in all aspects of our lives—and that takes time. The Apostle Paul writes: “We should grow in every way into him who is the head [of the body], Christ” (Ephesians 4:15).

**The Price of Discipleship**

All this sounds fine until we read Luke 14:27: “Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.” Reflecting on it jolts us to the core. It tells us that to grow into Christ, to become his disciples, we have to pay a price. Discipleship may bring joy, peace, and a sense of being grounded in Christ. But it inevitably brings the cross, too. Carrying our own cross will surely be part of our lives if we truly want to follow in the footsteps of a crucified Jesus.

The Scriptures make clear that it was necessary for Jesus to suffer. And Jesus makes clear that suffering applies to his disciples as well as to himself. The invitation to be a disciple is a great but costly grace. And it is an invitation. Jesus always respects our freedom.

Each of us needs only to look into our own lives to find our crosses. We can resist or embrace them. Embracing is the mark of a true disciple. +

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**PRAYER**

Lord, you reveal the mercy of God in the world. Forgive me for the times I’ve hurt others out of anger and resentment.

—From Peaceful Meditations for Every Day in Ordinary Time, Rev. Warren J. Savage and Mary Ann McSweeney

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**WEEKDAY READINGS**

*February 17–22*

| Monday, Weekday: Jas 1:1–11 / Mk 8:11–13 |
| Tuesday, Weekday: Jas 1:12–18 / Mk 8:14–21 |
| Wednesday, Weekday: Jas 1:19–27 / Mk 8:22–26 |
| Thursday, Weekday: Jas 2:1–9 / Mk 8:27–33 |
| Friday, Weekday: Jas 2:14–24, 26 / Mk 8:34—9:1 |
| Saturday, Chair of St. Peter the Apostle: 1 Pt 5:1–4 / Mt 16:13–19 |

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Accentuating the Positive: Easier Said than Done

By Fr. Mark Haydu, LC

Hate is a passion that can take over a person's heart in a short amount of time. God knows this, and he challenges us to avoid hate and holding grudges. In the law that Jesus preached, we are not even allowed to hate our enemies or persecutors. That is radical!

It is easy to let injuries build up over time. Eventually we find ourselves far away from those we should be closest to or those we once loved. This separation starts in our thoughts and settles into our hearts and behavior. Hate grows, and if it isn't controlled and redeemed, it can pull us down.

We don't have to hate, be angry, or carry grudges if we don't want to. Our hearts and minds can be filled with God's grace. We can work on three levels to overcome hate and anger: visual, verbal, and physical. When angry thoughts invade your mind, look up (visual), speak the truth to yourself (verbal), and change your posture (physical). This helps alter self-destructive thought patterns and helps us refocus our heart and mind. Add these natural means to the supernatural means of calling on God's grace, of receiving the sacrament of penance, and of taking moments of prayer to see and speak his truth over a situation.

We are God's temple. His spirit of peace, mercy, and serenity needs to reign inside us. That means getting rid of negative, hateful, and hurtful thoughts toward ourselves and others. Don't let them pull you down! +

Hate grows, and if it isn't controlled and redeemed, it can pull us down.

A Word from Pope Francis

One of the essential characteristics of this vocation to perfection is the love of our enemies, which protects us from the temptation to seek revenge and from the spiral of endless retaliation....Those who evangelize must therefore be first and foremost practitioners of forgiveness, specialists in reconciliation, experts in mercy.

—Homily in the Central African Republic, November 29, 2015

Sunday Readings

Leviticus 19:1–2, 17–18
You shall not hate any of your kindred in your heart....Take no revenge and cherish no grudge against your own people.

1 Corinthians 3:16–23
Do you not know that you are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?

Matthew 5:38–48
[Jesus said,] "Offer no resistance to one who is evil. When someone strikes you on [your] right cheek, turn the other one to him as well."

Questions for Reflection

• Which passions weigh down my heart?
• How can I use human and spiritual means to point my heart and mind in a healthier, God-focused direction?
How Can We Love Our Enemies?

By Fr. William H. Shannon

“Love your enemies,” Jesus says in Luke 6:27. What in the world was he thinking about? Why, there are times when I have trouble loving some of my friends! How can I possibly be expected to love my enemies?

If that’s what you’re thinking, you have lots of company. To reflect prayerfully about these strong words of Jesus, let me point out that this command is one of four different love commands in the Gospels.

First, there is the general Christian responsibility to “love God above all and your neighbor as yourself.” Then there is the general Christian responsibility to “love your neighbor as yourself.” Then there is the command that relates the disciples of Jesus to one another. Jesus says, “This is my commandment: love one another as I love you” (John 15:12). Finally there is the command that calls for a love that includes everybody. It’s not enough to love friendly neighbors or other disciples. We must love without limits. For Jesus says: “I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:44).

The first two commands make sense. Peace and harmony in family and society come from loving those we are close to. The disciples’ loving of one another, though demanding at times, also makes good sense. For Jesus’ disciples are called to imitate him. But “Love your enemies”—a command—doesn’t seem to make any sense at all. It seems to go against fundamental principles of justice and the duty we have to love ourselves and not allow ourselves to be victimized by others.

Jesus Gives Us No Wiggle Room

The maddening thing is that this central teaching of Jesus is so all-inclusive. It allows us no wiggle room. We cannot choose which enemies we will love and which we will not. Nor can our love be simply an attitude. We have to act. We must do good to them even if they hate us. We must ask God’s blessings for them even if they curse us. We have to pray for them even if they mistreat us.

The love Jesus calls us to is unconditional. It brooks no ifs. It’s a love that says, “I love you, no matter what you do or say, for you are the image of God.”

Finding All of Our Sisters and Brothers

There’s a story about a rabbi who was discussing with his disciples the difference between day and night: “Is it the moment when you can tell the difference between a sheep and a dog?” “No,” the rabbi answers, “it isn’t that.” Then peering deeply into their eyes, he says, “It is the moment when you look into the face you have never seen before and recognize the stranger as a sister or brother. Until that time comes, no matter how bright the day, it is still night for you.”

That is a moving story, but we have to take it a bit further. We have to be able to look into the faces of neighbors we have seen and responded to with anger, impatience, ill will. To look into the face of such people and see a sister or brother: This is the kind of unconditional, nonviolent love to which Jesus calls each of us.+

The love Jesus calls us to brooks no ifs. It’s unconditional.

PRAYER

Lord, you command me to love my neighbor. May your love dispel the hatred and resentment in my heart so that I may love all people unconditionally.

—From Peaceful Meditations for Every Day in Ordinary Time, Rev. Warren J. Savage and Mary Ann McSweeny

WEEKDAY READINGS

February 24–29

| Monday, Weekday: | Thursday after Ash Wednesday: |
| Tuesday, Weekday: | Friday after Ash Wednesday: |
| Jas 4:1–10 / Mk 9:30–37 | Is 58:1–9a / Mt 9:14–15 |
| Wednesday, Ash Wednesday: | Saturday after Ash Wednesday: |
| Jl 2:12–18 / 2 Cor 5:20—6:2 | Is 58:9b–14 / Lk 5:27–32 |