

by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

**ALL:** We pray in the name of the God who shares divinity with us, who shares humanity with us, who unsettles and inspires us.

**LEADER:** Loving God, in the silent watches of the night long ago, you became one of us.

**ALL:** Your nearness fills us with wonder.

**LEADER:** Today a child is born to us.

**ALL:** Today we welcome this child among us.

Christmas celebrates the birth of a child, the ordinary event that most frequently puts mothers and dads in touch with the awesome, creative power of God in which they share. Their love for each other gives birth to a new being. This is what God is about—love giving birth, love creating.

A new baby calls parents to make room for another in their love circle and literally to make room for the child to sleep and play. Feeding, rocking, and bathing the baby build an unbreakable trust between parents and a child. Coaxing the child to smile, play peek-a-boo, talk, and walk expand the relationship that continues throughout life. Like every child, Jesus called Mary and Joseph into his future and purpose.

● What experiences of your children's birth do you bring to hearing the Christmas gospel?

● What room are you and your family making for Jesus in our world and lives this Christmas?

# SUNDAY

by SUNDAY

## GOSPEL

**Today a savior is born to you.**

**NARRATOR 1:** In those days Caesar Augustus published a decree ordering a census of the whole world. This first census took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to register, each in his own town. And so Joseph, too, went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem, for he was of the house and lineage of David, to register with Mary, his espoused wife, who was pregnant.

**NARRATOR 2:** It happened while they were there that the days of her pregnancy were completed. She gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

**NARRATOR 3:** There were shepherds in the same area, living in the fields and keeping night watch over their flock. An angel of the Lord came suddenly upon them and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were very much afraid.

**ANGEL:** You have nothing to fear! I bring you good news, a great joy to be shared by the whole people. For this day in David's city a savior has been born to you, who is Christ the Lord. Let this be a sign to you: you will find an infant wrapped in



swaddling clothes in a manger.

**NARRATOR 1:** Suddenly, there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God.

**ALL:** Glory to God in high heaven; on earth peace to those on whom God's favor rests.

**NARRATOR 2:** When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another—

**SHEPHERDS:** Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.

**NARRATOR 3:** So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told to them.

Luke 2.1-20



## A savior has been born to us.

**T**he birth story in Luke's gospel anticipates Jesus' whole life and emphasizes his mission to people who are poor. The birth itself is an intimate family event. Joseph finds shelter among the animals in a stable or cave. Mary gives birth, wraps the baby in swaddling clothes, and places him in a manger.

Like the holy family, many refugees, immigrants, and deportees today experience too little room for their families. Like finding shelter in a barn during a census, they live in cramped camps awaiting legal status in a new country.

Shepherds watching their sheep under the stars hear an angel bring a message from heaven that a savior has been born, the long-promised messiah, the Christ, the anointed one. A solo angel voice announces this good news of great joy and provides a sign to verify it—the child in the manger. Then a chorus of angels arises to sing a Gloria and blessing of peace.

The shepherds find the child in the manger and become heralds of the messiah's birth. We recognize with them Jesus is good news for the poor.

On the world stage Caesar counts potential taxpayers. Luke wants us to contrast the child and Caesar. People hail both as saviors. However, it is the child lying in the manger who incarnates the love and life-giving power of the universe,

not the emperor, even though his subjects give him the title Augustus—the divine.

Luke's birth narrative is not a realistic video in narrative form, but a story carefully crafted to communicate to every hearer the same tidings of great joy the shepherds hear. God's own Son is with us. God's own Son is born one of us.

● **Where might Jesus be born today to express God's willingness to identify with the lowliest among us?**

**M**any people today may identify with how unusual Jesus' family is. His mother is not married when he is conceived. His mother's husband is not Jesus' real dad. His mother is a teenager.

Our families have probably always been more diverse in form and less ideal than we remember them. Today we have regular nuclear families, blended families, single-parent families, grandparents raising

children, partners adopting children. Parents hold their families together in new and creative ways.

Families may no longer gather each evening for dinner but perhaps today's working parent puts a fun note in the lunch he or she packs for a son or daughter. In many young families husbands and wives take turns being the stay-at-home parent—sharing jobs, doing half-time or at-home work. Fathers today do more parenting than in the 50s, giving boys more realistic role models for being adult men.

Toward reflecting on the scriptures for the Feast of the Holy Family, share your experience of family life.

● **What is a way in which your family today doesn't fit the supposed mold?**

● **What is a strength your family has because you don't fit the mold?**

● **Think about a family you know that is struggling. What specific help can you offer them?**



Photo: Monkey Business Images/Shutterstock.com

# GOSPEL

## Mary and Joseph raise their child.

**NARRATOR 1:** When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, Mary and Joseph brought Jesus up to Jerusalem to present him to God.

**NARRATOR 2:** When the couple finished everything required by the law of God, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

Luke 2.22,39-40



the temple. The offering purifies her, so that she can again join in worship. The offering of the poor is two pigeons.

To present Jesus to God and purify Mary, the holy family makes a trip from Nazareth to the Jerusalem temple. Their religious practice centers in one place. Journeys to the temple for occasions like this and for the great festivals undoubtedly created a sense of belonging to the people of God.

- What rituals or customs have you observed in raising your children, for example, having them baptized? What do these practices express about your religious, social, or family identity?
- In what place does your religious practice center? What sense of belonging do you get from this center?

Catholics name churches and schools after the holy family. The adjective *holy* can distance this family from our own. Most art shows Mary as an idealized, dignified, older woman, not the young teenager who became pregnant before she and Joseph were married. Luke tells us Mary and Joseph can find no place but a stable for her to have her child. The holy family is a struggling family.

Sunday's gospel ends with a one-verse summary of the holy family's next ten years. Jesus grew in wisdom and God's favor. Most of us fill our scrapbooks with photos that mark children's accomplishments during these

## What makes families holy today?

The three verses of Sunday's gospel in its short form tell us that the holy family—Joseph, Mary, and their child, Jesus—belonged to a people. They are not an isolated, nomadic unit or just a nuclear family but part of a larger religious community that keeps the law of Moses, centers its life in the Jerusalem temple, and practices long-held religious customs. They are Jews. Jesus is an oldest child in a Jewish family.

In Sunday's gospel Joseph and Mary fulfill the ancient custom of presenting an oldest child to God, a custom reaching back to Israel's beginnings as a people. The law of the covenant that makes them the people of God binds them to remember how God spared

their firstborn on the night the angel of death killed every firstborn Egyptian and caused Pharaoh to free his Hebrew slaves.

Actually Luke runs two religious practices together in these verses—the presentation of every firstborn son to God, which Exodus 13.1 prescribes, and the purification of the mother after childbirth. Leviticus 12.1 considers a woman unclean for seven days before a boy's circumcision and for thirty-three days afterward. To be unclean means one cannot come in contact with the holy, so Mary during this time could not go into the temple holy places. At the end of 40 days, the new mother brings an offering to



growing years—first steps, playing with the dog, birthdays, Christmas presents, first bike ride, kindergarten graduation, first day of school.

Luke’s minimal account of these years invites us to use our experience of raising children to imagine the daily life of the holy family. We believe Jesus is truly human and truly divine, so we can imagine Mary nursing Jesus, noticing that he has her hair, teaching him to walk and talk, and later to read. We can imagine Joseph telling the stories of the Old Testament. We can imagine Mary teaching Jesus his prayers.

● **What makes a family holy today?**

● **What helps children grow in wisdom and a sense of God’s love?**

Sunday’s gospel tells us that Mary and Joseph practice their religion and that Jesus grew in wisdom and grace within the family circle of their love. This Holy Family offers us no ready-made pattern for how to be a family today. They lived in an era and culture scholars have studied intensively but which we cannot fully reconstruct.

Sunday’s second reading gives us a picture of family life

among Christians in the Greek city of Colossae. It, too, offers us no ready-made pattern. In his letter to the Colossians, Paul directs wives to be submissive to their husbands as their Christian duty. Preachers today may sweeten this submission by explaining that Paul also directs husbands to love their wives. However, from the early decades of Christianity, baptism has made one and equal in Christ both Gentiles and Jews, slaves and free, women and men. Today we expect love of both partners in a marriage, not submission from one and love from the other.

To shelter one another in our world challenges family creativity and calls us to identify what we value for our families. Families must invent ways to find time in seemingly irreconcilable schedules and make choices. Some turn off TV or keep cellphones captive during school work hours. Some play games. The virus has sheltered families together; some have rediscovered how much they enjoy each other.

Many families migrate outdoors to counter the time working parents spend indoors. Going to the beach, walking around the block, gardening, biking, looking for birds or

butterflies, fishing, shooting a few hoops—these restorative activities also provide time for family members to talk and enjoy each other.

“The triune God is a communion of love, and the family its living reflection,” writes Pope Francis in *Amoris Laetitia*, On Love in the Family (#11).

● **What are some of your family’s creative solutions to finding time together?**

● **What does your family value?**

● **What do you want for your children?**

## PRAY

**LEADER:** Loving God, you are three in one, a family whose love is life-giving to us all.

**ALL:** Help us bear with one another.

**LEADER:** Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, you struggled as a family but we celebrate you today as a holy family.

**ALL:** Help us bear with one another.

**LEADER:** Let us open our hearts to the gospel that calls us to grow together in strength and wisdom.

**ALL:** Help us bear with one another.



*Joan Mitchell, CSJ, the editor of SUNDAY BY SUNDAY, holds a Masters of Theological Studies from Harvard Divinity School and a Ph.D. in New Testament from Luther Seminary in St. Paul, MN.*

**DO SOMETHING**

**CHARITY** **JUSTICE**

● Visit the Catholic Relief Service website ([crs.org](http://crs.org)) and explore “Our Work Overseas” and “Where We Work.” In the Middle East CRS works with Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon.

Visit [goodgroundpress.com](http://goodgroundpress.com)