

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer  
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
12/24/2009, Christmas Eve  
Luke 2:1-20  
Protectors of this Child

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

<sup>4</sup>And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:) <sup>5</sup>To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. (Luke 2:4-5, KJV)

When I was a boy, our family lived along the good, ole Choptank River, down on Maryland's Eastern Shore. The Choptank is a broad and grand river as it draws near to the Chesapeake Bay. Upstream, at our house, it was a skinnier and more modest river, but it was home, sweet home for me. Back in my boyhood days, when the summer was hot and the river water became brackish, the Chesapeake Bay Blue Crab also came up to our neck of the woods and we caught 'em by the basketsful.

On our back lawn in those days, we had a small statue of Mary the mother of our Lord. Mary overlooked the river. The priest of the little Catholic Church in Denton, Father Harney, had given two church statues to my father. Perhaps they were doing renovations in the church and no longer needed those two statues. So Father Harney gave them to Dad, and they are part of my image of my childhood house.

Mary, then, overlooked the river. And Joseph, her husband, stood on our porch and greeted us as we came home from school or church. I think God blessed dear old Father Harney with spiritual insight and sensitivity in giving that statue of Joseph to our father. Dad tried to be like Joseph, to be a protector of his family. He was sick with cancer and died young, but he used what strength and wisdom he had to help raise the family.

What I want to do in this sermon is to invite us to admire Mary and Joseph as protectors of the Christ Child and to invite you and me to join them in that kind of life. That is, I want to encourage you and me to join young Mary and Joseph in being Protectors of the Christ Child. An interesting idea, this one, that we should strive to be protectors of the One who protects us!

But before turning to those matters, I want to pause to lift up a theme from Martin Luther about the monastic virtues and his directing of those virtues toward family life. I consider this to be an important lesson for you young ones out there in the congregation hoping or planning to be married. I also consider it an important lesson for us grey-haired husbands and wives as we seek to do even better in our marriages.

So, first, Martin Luther. Then Mary and Joseph as Protectors of the Christ Child.

And finally, you and me in that role too, in that holy role as Protectors of the Christ Child.

I believe that Martin Luther would have been proud of young Mary and Joseph. I believe that Luther made many contributions to Christian doctrine and life, but one of his most important and practical themes concerned the family. Luther urged that what are called the “monastic virtues” should not be reserved to the monks and nuns in monasteries and convents, but rather should be applied to all families and all homes.

There are four traditional monastic virtues. They are Chastity, Poverty, Obedience, and Stability.<sup>1</sup> Luther sought a Christian democracy of these virtues, applying them not only to the monasteries, but also to the homes of the people. He taught, for example, that the voluntary poverty of the monk should also be practiced by the husband and by the wife, who train themselves to do without in hope that their little ones will have a chance to flourish. A husband and wife, then, should be willing to be poor that the family as a whole might be rich. I suspect that this notion will ring true for many of you parents, because you have in fact been practicing such poverty.

The monastic virtue of “stability” is built right into the wedding vows. In a world where many things change and in which it is hard to predict what tomorrow will bring, at least this much should be settled: that husband and wife will be true to each other. Together they will face what tomorrow brings. This stability is a blessing for them and for their children.

Chastity becomes a reaffirmation of the Sixth Commandment, against adultery, against harming our neighbor by breaking our neighbor’s heart. Chastity calls to husbands and wives to seek purity in their thoughts, words, and deeds when it comes to matters of sex. It does not exclude pleasure, but focuses such pleasure on the beloved.

And Obedience reaffirms the fundamental Christian belief that none of us is our own, but has been bought with a price<sup>2</sup>, even the precious body and blood of our Lord Jesus, and that we are duty-bound to glorify him with lives offered to him in obedience. Such obedience will be a strong blessing for our families, for the one who obeys Christ is not likely then to turn to hurting his or her family.

So, let us admire young Joseph and Mary as they care for each other and for the Christ Child. In the tradition of the Church, Joseph has a lovely title: he is called “Protector of the Holy Family.” But I think of Mary that way too. She also is a Protector of her family.

Think of these two young people on the road heading toward Bethlehem. They have traveled from a town called Nazareth up north, in Galilee, all the way to

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<sup>1</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religious\\_vows](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religious_vows)

<sup>2</sup> <sup>19</sup>Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? You are not your own; <sup>20</sup>you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body. (1 Cor. 6:19-20, RSV)

Bethlehem, somewhat to the south of Jerusalem. Perhaps they walked all that way, along those Judean hills. It would have been nice if Mary had had a pony or a donkey to carry her along, since she was heavy with child, but the Bible mentions no such animal. You can well imagine young Joseph casting anxious glances at his bride, fearful that she would trip over some stone and fall, concerned whether she should start to have her baby before they reached shelter. He is not a doctor, but simply a carpenter. Who could blame this young man for worrying whether he and Mary would be up to this great event, the birth of *the* Child! Would there be a nurse at hand when it comes time for Mary to deliver? Would there at least be another mother at hand -- someone who had been through what Mary was about to go through? All of these things were unsettled as Mary and Joseph made their way along the Judean roads.

These things were bound to be frightening for a young couple, yet Joseph remained at the side of Mary and the Christ Child in her womb. He did not run off. He did not abandon her. He was stable. When his wife was near the time of birth, he was not out gallivanting around. When they traveled to Bethlehem, they arrived together. He did not stop at some tavern and send her on ahead. No, he remained with her. They faced together the inability of the innkeeper to give them a room. They faced together their weary walk in the nighttime out to the stable, where there was no bed for them, no doctor or nurse on call, no more time, for the time was fulfilled:

<sup>6</sup>And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. <sup>7</sup>And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn. (Luke 2:6-7, KJV)

Later on in this story, we will find Mary and Joseph continuing to protect the Christ Child. When she was pregnant, Mary sheltered the Christ Child with her body, accepting the risks that all mothers face in pregnancy. Now, think of Mary and Joseph gathering up baby Jesus and taking him down to Egypt. They have learned that King Herod means to kill the Christ Child. It is an awful thing to have the king as your enemy, but no matter, they are determined to protect the Child. That could not have been easy, to have left behind family and kin, to have traveled along roads sometimes troubled by robbers and sometimes brutal weather, to have settled in a foreign land where you did not even speak the language. None of that sounds fun, but all of it is compatible with protecting the family and with loving and cherishing that one who has won your heart. Joseph and Mary walk together, and thereby prove themselves worthy of the title I would give them: Protectors of the Holy Family.

And now I close this Christmas sermon with a few thoughts about you and me as Protectors of the Christ Child.

At first, we might think it unnecessary to protect this Child, since, after all, he has

grown up, suffered, died, overcome death, and is now installed as King of Kings and everlasting Lord of all the universe. And all of that is true. Yet, we must not forget his *method*. He forever remains the Man of the Cross. His heart is still tender and his love for others is so intense that he suffers too when they suffer.

Think of that closing image of Jesus in the Bible. Though Jesus is King of Kings and Almighty Lord of all creation, how does he stand there at the door of your life? Does he hammer on the door? Does he cast a lightning bolt at it? Does he send mighty winds to knock that door down? No, he stands there and simply knocks. Listen to the Bible's description of it. Listen to the *hope* in his voice as he speaks to you:

<sup>20</sup>Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.  
(Revelation 3:20, NRSV)

If Jesus had wanted slaves as followers, he could easily have made you a slave. But he did not. He made you a free man, a free woman, a free boy, a free girl. He would be awfully glad if you would not leave him standing out in the cold of your life. He would awfully glad to find a place in your life and for you to give him some protection.

Think, then, of his intervention in the life of Saul, the persecutor of the early Church. Do not imagine his words to be calm and untroubled. Imagine them instead to be heartbroken, desperate words. He is troubled because he himself is suffering through Saul's persecution of others:

<sup>4</sup>And he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou *me*? (Acts 9:4, KJV)

Put a similar emphasis on the great judgment scene in the Twenty-fifth Chapter of St. Matthew. Jesus is teaching a lesson that is hard to take in. It is hard both for the righteous and for the unrighteous. Jesus is explaining to them that in neglecting the poor, the hungry, and the lonely, they were neglecting *him*:

<sup>42</sup>for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, <sup>43</sup>I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' <sup>44</sup>Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see thee hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to thee?' <sup>45</sup>Then he will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not *to me*.' (Matthew 25:42-45, RSV)

Finally, think of the Cross, think of that awesome final scene when the sufferings

that began in his birth in a stable culminate in his death on the Cross. In St. John's telling of the passion story, with his dying breath Jesus was trying to protect people, and so, he entrusts his mother, Mary, to his disciple, John:

<sup>26</sup>When Jesus therefore saw his mother, and the disciple standing by, whom he loved, he saith unto his mother, Woman, behold thy son! <sup>27</sup>Then saith he to the disciple, Behold thy mother! And from that hour that disciple took her unto his own home. (John 19:26-27, KJV)

In the traditional, spiritual interpretation of this scene, Mary represents the Church and John represents *you*, the disciples of Jesus through all the ages. But when we ponder that this dying Jesus identifies so deeply with both you and the Church that to harm either is to harm *him*, then I say, let's do no such thing. Let us not be the ones who harm the Christ Child by injuring his Church or his people. Rather, let us be the Protectors of this One who has paid everything to protect us, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.