

“What then will this Child become?”

Luke 1:57-66 ¹

If you'll take your Bibles and turn again to our text in Luke 1, I'd like you to notice the dramatic understatement in verse 57: *“Now the time had come for Elizabeth to give birth.”* This matter-of-fact description doesn't even come close to doing justice to what those moments have been like in our family, and I'll bet they don't do justice to your experience, either.

In the summer of 1975, Jill had a lot of Braxton-Hicks contractions with Nathan—“false labor”—and we got ready to go to the hospital several times prior to the arrival of real labor. With each of those false alarms, I became pretty much a basket case and of no help at all. And when the real moment came, I had our one car up on jack stands with all the wheels off when Jill came out to say, “I think you'd better put the wheels back on.” One way I could tell this was the real thing was that God gave me peace sufficient for the day and I didn't collapse, as I'd always done before.

Several years later, Anna made her arrival about a month early after an unlicensed driver hit Jill broadside in the driver's door while she and Nathan were on the way to church on a Wednesday night. When I got home to Ft. Worth that evening from Baylor Hospital in Dallas, where I was a chaplain, a neighbor came to tell me about the accident, and off I went to Harris Hospital in Ft. Worth. “When it was time for the baby to be born,” indeed! In Elizabeth's case, the baby was a boy—a miracle baby, for sure, since Elizabeth was probably decades past normal childbearing years—and all the neighbors and relatives came over to join in the celebration.

Eight days later, according to the instructions God had given Moses,² the time came for the boy to be circumcised as a sign of his membership in Israel, the chosen people of God. The situation for this ceremony was different from most, since Elizabeth's husband, Zechariah, had been mute during her whole pregnancy as a penalty for his disbelieving the angel who had announced that they would soon have a son.

In those days, children were typically named at birth, not at the circumcision ceremony, but for whatever reason, the neighbors and relatives didn't know the boy's name when they arrived. Of course, Elizabeth was well aware of the name the angel had given the boy long before his birth, and she'd probably been using it during those eight days. I doubt that she had been calling him “Roscoe”!³

But not knowing the boy's name, their friends and family wanted to name him after his father, which, of course, we frequently do, as well. My name is David after my father, and, had I been a girl, I would have been Sue, after my mother.

But to the request that the boy be named “Zechariah,” Elizabeth responded, *“No! His name is John!”* When the group protested, *“There is no one in all your family with that name,”* Zechariah wrote, *“His name is John,”* and at that very moment his ability to speak returned and he began to praise God.

All these events were so unusual and so remarkable that a sense of awe fell upon the crowd, and news of what had happened spread through the whole area. ***“What then will this child become?”*** everyone wondered, *“for, indeed, the Lord's hand was with him”* (Luke 1:66).

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on May 13, 2018. Mothers' Day.

² Leviticus 12:3.

³ Richard B. Vinson, “The Gospel of Luke,” *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2008), pp. 46-47.

Now while the sons born into our families won't become John the Baptist, as Elizabeth and Zechariah's son did, I think it's safe to say that it is God's purpose to bless the life of every child born into this world in a special way. After all, Paul would later write that "*we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared ahead of time for us to do*" (Ephesians 2:10).

These days, couples sometimes say, "Well, we're not going to have children. We're not going to bring children into a world like this. This is awful." And there's no denying that we live in a crooked and perverse generation . . . but the truth of the matter is that every generation is largely crooked and perverse.

The world situation may look bad, but for those who are in Christ, the future is not at all uncertain. The future of the world lies in God's hands, and moves toward God's goal, as it always has, and always will, and those parents who place their trust in God can raise their children in joyful confidence about the future!

Remember that when you look into the eyes of a baby! Remember that this child brings from God the message that things may indeed be difficult, but the world is still moving toward its appointed end. As Gloria and Bill Gaither put it so beautifully in their familiar hymn, "How sweet to hold a newborn baby, and feel the pride, and joy he gives; but greater still the calm assurance, this child can face uncertain days because He lives"!⁴

Becoming parents really is an act of faith; and becoming parents is also a wonderful gift. My friend, Les Hollon, is fond of encouraging parents to "give your children memories worth having," and that's a wonderful goal, but I sometimes think that our children give us far more in terms of memories than we give them.

For example, seven-year-old Matthew was an adventuresome eater who loved to try new foods. When his grandmother served some strange white stuff with roast beef, Matthew wanted to know what it was.

His grandmother told him that the white stuff was called horseradish, and that, while he was welcome to try it, he should take just a tiny bit, because it is very hot (I myself am fond of horseradish). Matthew took some and put it all in his mouth, then down with one swallow. As he gasped for breath in pain and shock, Matthew sputtered, "Which part of the horse is it?"⁵ Memories like that are beyond price, for sure!

I'd like to suggest four other gifts that our children give to us as their parents. These four come from another Elizabeth, Dr. Elizabeth Achtemeier, in her wonderful book, *The Committed Marriage*.⁶

The first of Dr. Achtemeier's four gifts of parenting is **humility**. Before we have children, you and I may be able to tell ourselves that we're mature and self-controlled, but once we become parents, we quickly discover how very far we are from any such qualities. We find ourselves angry at our tiny infant, lying helplessly in her crib, because she is "perverse" enough to sleep all day and to cry all night. We lose patience with our elementary children because they seem to never have anything better to do than to bicker and fuss. We experience agonies of frustration

⁴ Bill & Gloria Gaither, *Because He Lives*, 1971.

⁵ Ruby Cleroux, Vauxhall, Alberta, Canada, "Kids of the Kingdom," from *Christian Reader*, www.preachingtoday.com.

⁶ Elizabeth Achtemeier, *The Committed Marriage* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976).

over our inability to get our adolescents to listen to us. We find ourselves powerless to steer our young adult children away from damaging decisions.

Somehow, in our relationships with our children, we're brought face to face with our frequent inability to love, to keep our tempers, to understand, to enter into another person's viewpoint, to convince by reason and to guide by faith. Parenthood confronts us rather quickly with depths of evil in ourselves that we never knew existed. And, though this is a painful discovery, it's also very valuable knowledge, because to recognize our need of God's grace is the first step toward receiving it.

The other side of this is that, beyond humbling us, the experience of parenting—if diligently offered to God—causes such growth in us that we begin to find ourselves capable of doing things we could never, ever have done apart from the shaping God does in the crucible of parenting. We find that we can go without sleep when a child is sick. We can love someone who is acting in a thoroughly unlovable manner. We can give up possessions or plans for the sake of our children's welfare.

Our children put us in touch, not only with our own rather frightening capacity for evil, but also with God's amazing resources of patience, compassion, goodness, and love. The second gift of parenting, then, after humility, is the gift of love. Our love for our children enables us to become persons we never could have become had we not been required to serve them and to put their welfare before our own.

This is one of the most basic lessons our children teach us—that the essence of love is being willing to take the time and the trouble to be concerned about someone besides ourselves. We love our children, not because they get good grades, nor even because they give us a feeling of pride when they do well. We love them for their own sakes, without regard for what they do or don't do, completely apart from what they become or don't become. We love our children because they are God's gifts of extravagant grace to us.

Cecil Clegg told a story about a young boy that illustrates this second gift, of love:

A young boy went into a pet store and spoke to the manager: "Mister," he said, "I want to buy that puppy."

The manager followed the pointed finger to a little crippled dog in a cage all by itself. "Son," he replied, "that pup is worthless. We're going to have him put to sleep in the next few days."

"But," the boy answered, "I've saved my money just to buy that one puppy. I've been looking at him in the window every day. He's the only one I want."

Once again, the manager explained the problem—the dog was crippled, could not be sold—and would be put to sleep. After the repeated explanation, the boy reached down with two little hands and pulled up his trousers. As the manager saw the braces of polio on the boy's legs, the boy said quietly, "Mister, you don't know what love can do!"⁷

The journey of parenting teaches us humility, and it teaches us to love. And for those who have eyes to see, this journey also reveals the true source of **wisdom**, which is the third gift of parenting. Parenting quickly takes us to the limits of our own wisdom, and then takes far

⁷Cecil Clegg, "Love," *Proclaim* (October, 1981), 33.

beyond those limits. We're in "water over our heads" from the start, and the wise know it! So many situations could be suggested!

- Should we insist that Susie take piano lessons?
- Should we allow Johnny to have certain friends?
- Does Bill need professional help with reading?
- Have we guided properly? Have we instilled the proper values and taught the essential skills?

And the uncomfortable fact is that we're never really sure whether we have or not. Parenting makes us aware that in many situations we simply do not know the right thing to do. And this is a valuable lesson for us to learn, we who are so ready to make gods of ourselves and to attempt to chart our own destinies, and those of our children.

We sometimes think that we can run our own lives; but our children teach us that we really, *really, really* need love and wisdom beyond what we ourselves possess. And every now and then, God gives us a word of encouragement about how we're doing.

Rich Tatum's eight-year-old son was reading on the couch on a Saturday morning when he asked his dad, "What does 'ponder' mean?" Rich thought a moment and replied, "Ponder' means you're wondering or thinking about things. You might say, 'I'm pondering the meaning of life.'"

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, Rich began to imagine what sort of conversation might follow with an eight-year-old about "the meaning of life," but his son was way ahead on that one. "I already know what the meaning of life is, Dad," he said. "It's to love God!"⁸ And so it is. Somebody had taught well.

The final gift of parenting I'll mention this morning is the gift of **forgiveness**. One of the most precious things we learn from our children is the beauty of forgiveness—both theirs and God's.

We want so much to love our children perfectly. We don't want to become angry with them or to yell at them. We don't want to become impatient with their failure to understand. We don't want to punish them unjustly simply to relieve our own anger. But we do.

I suspect that there have been moments for each of us as parents when we've been tired and out of sorts, and we whacked our child on the behind, not so much because she or he had been bad, but mostly to relieve our own frustrations. And a few minutes later, that same child hugged us and kissed us and said, "I love you, Daddy," or "I love you, Mommy," and we knew that we'd been forgiven. The wrong that we'd done had not been held against us. It had been forgotten in love. We were granted the possibility of starting over, of making a new beginning. **Perhaps more than all the other things, it may be forgiveness that makes parenting possible.**

And because this is true, **one of the most important things we can do as parents is to learn how to admit to our children that we've been wrong**. There are some parents who can never bring themselves to say, "I was wrong," or "I'm sorry," to their children. They never want to admit to their children that they've made a mistake. But children must learn that parents do wrong things, too, and there are at least three reasons for this.

⁸ Rich Tatum, Grand Rapids, Michigan; www.preachingtoday.com.

In the first place, a parent's confession of wrongdoing teaches a child that **no one is sinless**. Our confession of sin teaches our children that no one is good except God. That's true, and they must know that it's true.

Second, if we're able to apologize to our children, they begin to learn that **forgiveness forms the fabric that holds our lives together**. Forgiveness is absolutely essential for any durable relationship, and our children need to know this. They need to know that a wrong done does not have to mean the end of a relationship, and that hurt can be overcome by forgiveness and reconciliation.

Finally, by asking forgiveness from our children, **we strengthen and clarify their sense of right and wrong**. Children know very well when they've suffered an injustice. And if we don't confess that we've been unfair or that we've made some error, then our children become confused about what's really right and what's really wrong. If we as parents violate God's moral code, we must admit it, or that code will eventually become meaningless for our children.

Yes, God has given to us the power to reproduce and to have children; the power to share in God's creative, redemptive purpose. And even as God puts the fearful and wonderful responsibility of parenting into our hands, God grants to us one more marvelous mercy—**God Himself works in the lives of our children**. Beyond our fumbling and our bumbling, beyond our misdirection and our Sin, God shapes and molds our children's lives and draws them to Himself.

For our children do not belong to us, after all. They belong to God. Realizing this, we must be willing to let God do a "new thing" in our children's lives. That for which our children are prepared by God and that to which they are called by God may involve departures from old and accepted ways.

Because our children belong to God and not to us, once we've nurtured them in the instruction of the Lord as best we can, we must then give them freedom from our direction, that they may be free to follow Him. As the old saying goes, "**Our task as parents is first to give our children roots, and then to give them wings.**"

Here's a final word of encouragement. On what seemed like an ordinary winter day in 1961, a meteorologist at MIT named Edward Lorenz was using a computer model to work on a weather forecast, and as a shortcut he entered the decimal .506 instead of the more accurate .506127. What came out was a radically different weather scenario from what Lorenz had expected. The tiny and seemingly insignificant changes in input resulted in enormous differences in the final result.

As he continued to study what this meant, Lorenz published a scientific paper entitled, "Predictability: Does the Flap of a Butterfly's Wings in Brazil Set off a Tornado in Texas?"⁹ Lorenz didn't really think a butterfly could actually cause a tornado, but he did suggest that such a small event could start a chain reaction that would lead to huge changes in global weather.¹⁰

Some of you will recognize Lorenz's discovery as the origin of the unusual graphics in this morning's *PowerPoint* (it's the *Lorenz Attractor*). Lorenz's discovery became foundational for

⁹ Edward Lorenz, "Predictability: Does the Flap of a Butterfly's Wings in Brazil Set Off a Tornado in Texas?" a paper presented to the American Association for the Advancement of Science in Washington, D.C. in December 1972.

¹⁰ Kenneth Chang, "Edward N. Lorenz, a Meteorologist and a Father of Chaos Theory, dies at 90," www.nytimes.com, 4.17.08.

modern scientific theory, and parenting offers many such “butterfly moments” each and every day as we change the course of our children’s lives in small, even tiny ways, changes God will later use to change the lives of others.

Dr. Achtemeier concluded, “I cannot help thinking that perhaps finally this is what parenting is all about: to receive our beloved children as the gifts of God’s extravagant grace, to bring them up in godly discipline and instruction, asking constantly for God’s working and guidance beyond our own limited wisdom and understanding, and then to rest content, knowing that our children’s lives are *‘hidden with Christ in God’*” (Colossians 3:3).

“What then will this child become?” – only God knows, but we get to help. And for this, we thank God!