

“Parenting Is Not For Sissies”

Matthew 2:13-23

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Our first child was born on a Sunday morning at 8:06. What good timing for a preacher! After a couple of days in the hospital, Jackie and Jason came home.

That first week of parenting was a cinch. One reason was because my mother-in-law, who lived two hundred miles away, came to our house. She cooked, cleaned, took care of Jackie and our new baby. I can remember thinking after those first few days that parenting was not nearly as hard as I had been told. Then Jackie’s mother left. That changed everything, including my opinion of parenting.

Jason cried the night Mrs. Blair left. I mean all night. It made no difference what we did, he cried. We rocked him and he cried. We fed him and he cried. We changed his diapers even when they were dry and he cried. We walked him through the house and he cried.

I begged Jackie to let me call her mother and see if she would come back. By morning, I was ready to build a room on to our little house so she could move in permanently. I discovered in a matter of hours what others have said, “Parenting is not for sissies!”

I’m sure Mary and Joseph would have agreed. Quite frankly, I don’t know how they did it. They did not even have a week of peace and quiet before tough challenges had to be confronted and decisions made. Their baby was born in a stable while they were on a trip, a journey that did not end for over two years! Can you imagine how difficult their early years of parenting were?

What can we learn about parenting from their experiences? Let me share some lessons I glean from their story.

First of all, parenting will take you down roads you have never traveled. It certainly did Mary and Joseph. As I mentioned earlier, Jesus was born while they were on their way to Bethlehem to be counted in the census. Instead of returning home, though, they were instructed by an angel to flee to Egypt in order to protect their newborn son from Herod’s wrath. Even after Herod died two years later, they did not return to Judea. They were as fearful of Herod’s son as they were Herod and decided to settle in Nazareth of Galilee.

Bethlehem. Egypt. Nazareth. Most people in that culture were not very mobile. They settled and stayed in one place. Why did Mary and Joseph travel so much and go places they never dreamed they would? They were merely traveling down the long and winding road of parenthood.

Matthew hints at this by the way he structured this passage. “When the Magi had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. ‘Get up,’ he said, ‘**take the child** and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him’ ” Matthew 2:13.

Who was mentioned first in this sequence, Mary or Jesus? “**Take the child and his mother.**” All of this traveling was done to protect Jesus from Herod. Mary and Joseph were traveling down the unpredictable road of parenthood.

The road of parenthood will take you places you never thought you would go, too. Many of those places will be pleasant because what will happen there will be enjoyable. You will go to a school auditorium where you will watch your child perform on stage or receive an award for high achievement. You will go to a ball field where you will watch the next Andrew Jones or Michael Vick in the making. You will go on a youth retreat where you will hear your son or daughter talk about the importance of choosing good friends.

However, not all the roads you travel will be filled with sunshine and blue skies. Some will have furious storms raging and be frightening and stressful. Your son or daughter's journey may take you to a medical clinic or hospital, a principal or counselor's office, a courtroom or jail.

And what will be required of you in order to travel down these roads? Great courage and faith. You cannot and must not travel alone. You will need God and others as traveling companions. Mary and Joseph did and so will you.

Secondly, parenting will demand sacrifices you could never have envisioned before you had children. Do you think Mary and Joseph ever thought they would live in a foreign country with a newborn baby? The time in their lives when they needed family the most they would live the farthest away. Why? Because this was best for the child entrusted to their care.

Parenting will require that you make tough decisions that will demand great sacrifices. Selfish parenting is an oxymoron, or at least it should be.

Jackie and I have always considered Friday night date night. We were married five years before children came along and Friday night was very special to us. After our children came along, we continued to honor this tradition by getting a baby sitter and going out with friends.

After a while, we discovered that our children were very unhappy about our Friday night dates. This was a special night for them also and they became dissatisfied with having to stay home with baby sitters. So, Jackie and I made the decision that Friday nights would become family night. We would only go places that all of us could go and do things with the parents of their friends so we could all be together.

Now, Jackie and I did not quit dating. We arranged to have lunch on Friday or another time during the week when we could be alone and have adult conversation. However, the purpose for Friday nights changed for us for about fifteen years. This was a sacrifice on our part, small in comparison to many others, but a sacrifice nonetheless that we were glad to make.

What will be required to make tough decisions and sacrifices on behalf of your children? Strong discipline and a lot of love. Just ask Mary and Joseph.

Finally, parenting will put you in touch with feelings you never thought you had. I doubt that Mary and Joseph had ever experienced anxiety, apprehension, confusion, turmoil, anger and fear to the degree they did while traveling to Egypt. Each mile they got farther away from family and familiar surroundings had to be agonizing. I wonder how many tears Mary shed and sleepless nights Joseph spent?

Sound familiar? Every parent knows about tears and sleepless nights. They come inside every box of diapers or with the keys to a new car.

I'll be candid with you today. I never knew the height of love or depth of anger that I now know because I have had children. They have taken me places emotionally that I never knew existed. Their smiles can cheer me as no one else and their tears can break my heart beyond words.

What will you need in order to process your emotions? A good friend and uncompromising honesty.

Perhaps you read about Jillian Searle's dilemma during the Asian Tsunami. She and her two sons, 5 and 2, were swimming in a resort pool off the coast of Thailand. When the wall of water came crashing to shore, she grabbed both sons and rode the waves as best she could. Quickly she realized that she could not hold on to both of them and survive, so she made the decision to give her five-year-old to a complete stranger that was clinging to a post. In all honesty, she never thought she would see this son again. Later that day, she and her husband were walking through the debris searching for their five-year-old son when they spotted him covered in mud up to his head. He was cut, bruised and scared but alive and well.

I found the last part of this fascinating story most interesting. A psychologist was interviewed about the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder and was told about Jillian's ordeal and decision to let one child go to save the other. He was asked about what she must do to work through the emotions that accompanied this gut-wrenching decision.

“The way people like the Searles respond to their experiences will depend on their mental disposition before the event and how well they communicate their feelings afterward,” he said. After reading that I thought that the Searles must search for those feelings as hard as they searched for their lost child and uncover them.

Parenting will require the same of us. Intense feelings accompany every tough decision or experience and these feelings must not be denied. Find a friend with whom you can be candid and pour your heart out to them.

Parenting is not for sissies, is it? It’s hard work and the stakes are high. The rewards are, too. Can you imagine how Mary felt when she heard Jesus teaching and saw the difference he made in peoples’ lives? Her sacrifices were worth it and yours will be, too.