

TEXT: Matthew 2:1-12

January 8, 2006

A STAR, A DREAM, A LIFE

The long war was finally over, and soldiers, sailors and marines were flowing back home in huge numbers. Weddings that had been hastily arranged before shipping out finally came to fruition. Lives that had been put on hold were put back into gear. And all over America, families had been started.

It was one second past midnight, January 1, 1946. At St. Agnes Hospital in Philadelphia the homemaker wife of a Navy machinist named Casey gave birth to a seven-pound five-ounce baby girl. They named her Kathleen.

Growing up in a New Jersey suburb of Philadelphia, Kathleen experienced the things typical of her generation. She hid under her desk during air raid drills; watched Annette Funicello on the Mickey Mouse Club and danced on American Band Stand. She knows exactly where she was on November 22, 1963, when JFK was assassinated. She married at twenty; watched her husband fight in an unpopular war. She had two daughters, earned a Masters degree, became a teacher, got divorced and remarried, and now has five grandchildren.

But back in the opening minutes of 1946, her parents knew none of that. No doubt they had hopes and dreams for their newborn daughter. But little did they realize how her life would turn out. Little did they know that she would grow up to be famous. For she was at the vanguard of a swelling generation, one that would grow at an unprecedented rate. Indeed, between 1946 and 1964 some seventy-eight million American children were born, children who would become known as the baby boomers. And Kathleen Casey was the first in her generation, the first of those baby boomers.

Yes, she is famous today. Just this past Sunday Kathleen turned sixty, and, as it has been in each decade since she turned forty, her name has been in newspaper and television stories all around the world. (*USA Today*, 12-30-05, 4A; *Smithsonian Magazine*, January, 2006)

But who she would become, how she would turn out, that was unknown to her Irish Catholic parents as they marveled at her tiny fingers on a cold January night. All that was irrelevant as they changed her diapers and gave her baths. None of that mattered when they presented her for baptism and promised to rear her in the faith.

They had hopes. They had dreams. But they had no idea she would one day be known around the world.

And while Kathleen Casey-Kirschling, as she is now called, proves a rather dramatic example, the reality is she was like every other baby ever born. For no parent knows how his or her child will turn out. No parent knows what will become of his or her son or daughter. Not really.

There are those who would suggest Mary and Joseph are an exception to the rule. After all, there was that famous star, and angel visitors. There were excited shepherds and astrologers from the East bringing good wishes and telling them their boy was going to be the Messiah. Astrologers who even brought gifts that, as the well-known carol reminds us, pointed to his future. Gold to symbolize he would be king. Frankincense to announce his divinity. Myrrh, a spice used to anoint the dead, to herald his sacrificial death. With all those signs, how could they not have known?

Yet, in the only story of his childhood, told by Luke, when twelve-year old Jesus calls the Temple his father's house, they appear to be totally befuddled. And early in the gospel of Mark, when Jesus begins his teaching ministry, Mary tries to bring him home for fear people will think him irreverent at best and insane at worst. They may have been told he was going to be the Messiah, but they didn't really grasp what that meant. Like moms and dads everywhere they were given no guarantee, no sure bet as they embarked on the parenting journey. Indeed they had to step out in faith, and do their best. Hoping, dreaming, praying that all would turn out well.

But just as the Magi had a star to guide them on their way, so too Mary and Joseph were not without assistance. For they had the laws of Moses and the traditions of their Judaism to guide them along the path. They had family and friends, those who shared their values, to surround them with love and support—a community to help them live out their roles as parents.

And, sisters and brothers, that is how we are to function as a congregation. That is why, in our vision statement, we refer to ourselves as “a *Community* of Christ.” It is our job, our duty, our obligation to stand beside the Marys and Josephs in our midst and, like the Magi, offer them gifts. But not gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, rather the gifts of our tradition, and the gift of community.

Every time we participate in baptizing an infant or a young child, we reaffirm that commitment to providing those gifts. At every baptism we are charged anew to “maintain the life of worship and service, that . . . all God's children among us may grow in the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the knowledge and love of God.” And then each of us as members of this congregation renews a solemn vow. Hear again the words you and I uttered just a few minutes ago: “With God's help,” we say, “we will live out our baptisms as a loving community of Christ; nurturing one another in faith, upholding one another in prayer, and encouraging one another in service.”

Friends, these are not vague promises. They are not intended to simply be pretty words for a Sunday morning. They are words carefully crafted to convey our very real and necessary commitment to give every parent who comes through our doors the kind of spiritual and emotional support needed to undertake the hardest job in the world! They are words created to remind us that each one of us has a role to play in passing on the life-giving practices of our faith to the children in our midst. They are words which speak volumes about the importance of taking seriously the fact that even the best of parents need help and support as they raise their children. As we consider our budget, let us remember our vows. When we hear that the church school needs help, and read something like the current announcement in the bulletin that the red room needs two volunteers, let us remember our vows. When we make choices in our own lives, let us remember our vows; let us remember we are providing models for the children of Saugatuck, models of what it means to be followers of Christ.

Recently I was intrigued to learn about a new website called futureme.org. It seems that if you go to the site you can create an e-mail to yourself which will be electronically stored and then sent to you at anytime you want up to thirty years in the future. As one reported noted: “These e-mails are miniature, personalized time capsules, delivered via computer.” (Orlando *Sentinel*, 12-29-05, E-1)

The website is designed to allow folks the ability to not only send themselves good wishes for the future, but also to remind themselves of their past—of where they’ve come from, and who they’ve been.

If little ones like the newly baptized Nolan could send themselves a futureme e-mail on their baptismal day, perhaps it would tell of being surrounded by a loving community. Perhaps it would speak of a Mom and Dad committed to raising their child in an atmosphere of trust and in tune with the ancient values of the church. Perhaps it would tell of the vows we have taken here today.

Of course we never know for sure the future of any child we baptize. Not even Nolan, with his rather auspicious start this past Christmas playing the baby Jesus in our pageant. But while we cannot predict any child’s future—in living out our vows we can help lay the foundation a child needs to grow into the fullness of faith. We can help lay the foundation a child needs to become a loving, generous, kind and just adult.

As I came out the church door after our Christmas Feast this year I saw a man standing outside as it started to rain.

He was a rather tall, bespectled gentleman. He had a cane, and a small knapsack—and slightly mismatched clothing. He may have been somewhere around seventy or so. I recognized him as someone who had attended the Feast.

“Hi there,” I said, “Are you looking for someone?”

“Well,” he said, “I thought I might hitch a ride home.”

I was taking my mother and father-in-law home, and with all their paraphernalia in the car there was no room for an additional passenger.

“Why don’t you wait inside,” I said, “I’ll be right back and I’ll give you a lift.”

“No,” he said at first, “I’ll just walk.” But then it started to pour.

“OK,” he said as he walked towards cover, “I’ll wait.”

When I came back a few minutes later there he stood—patiently waiting.

He got in the car and told me where he lived, and off we went.

We chatted as we drove along. Nothing particularly important, just two strangers, being polite.

When we finally got to his door, though, he said something I shan’t soon forget.

“Here you go,” I said, “Have a good evening.”

“Thank you,” he said. Then he paused as he opened the door. “You know people always say that—but n evening passes by so quickly. Why don’t we say, ‘Have a good life?’”

I nodded, a bit stunned by this simple bit of wisdom.

Take care,” I said as he got out.

“You too,” he said shutting the door, “You make sure you take care.”

And with that he was gone up the steps, out of sight and probably out of my life.

I think I met one of the Magi.

My wise passenger reminded me of the importance of taking our words seriously. In a way, the vows we have taken this morning are a fancy way of saying “Have a good life!” But for them to have any real meaning, we must be willing to back them up with our actions. We must keep our word. We must keep our promises.

In baptizing Nolan it is as if we have said, “Have a good life. Have a good life, baby Nolan.” But like Kathleen Casey’s parents, like Mary and Joseph, we have no idea what his future may hold. But we do know there are things that all of us, parents,

god parents and members of our congregation can do to give him a good start. For now the real work begins.

It is my prayer that we all keep our vows and live into that a sentiment, so that we can help lay the foundation needed by Nolan and all the children in our midst. It is my prayer, that like the Wisemen, we might not only bring good wishes, but also our gifts.

**Amen
John H. Danner**