

“A Helicoptering Helper or Snowplowing Savior?”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
December 22, 2024 - Fourth Sunday of Advent

[Micah 5:2-5a; Luke 1:39-55](#)

Hovering above their child, keeping watch over their every move, is the ever-vigilant helicopter parent, who is ever ready to swoop down whenever they feel their child is in danger of facing some difficulty, either landing in the middle of the mess so as to jump out and personally take on whatever was challenging or about to challenge their child or just flying in low and pulling their child into the chopper to safely whisk them away from the perceived danger.

Related to the helicopter parent is the snowplow parent, who doesn't even allow for difficulties to present themselves to their child, but rather pre-emptively plows a wide path through any possible difficulties or dangers, clearing a smooth and straight way, free of obstacles, for their child to safely follow.

You don't have to look too hard to find these helicoptering and snowplowing parents, for they are all around us, we ourselves may be them. There are many well-meaning, overly protective parents today, who not only take too much care of their kids, but also continue to take too much care of them when they are no longer minors. According to a recent, nation-wide survey by the New York Times and Morning Consult of parents of young adults aging from 18 to 28, "...three-quarters had made appointments for their adult children, like for doctor visits or haircuts, and the same share had reminded them of deadlines for school. Eleven percent said they would contact their child's employer if their child had an issue. Sixteen percent of those with children in college had texted or called them to wake them up so they didn't sleep through a class or test. Eight percent had contacted a college professor or administrator about their child's grades or a problem they were having"

(<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/16/style/snowplow-parenting-scandal.html>).

Such overly-protective parenting, though quite common in today's society, is far from being the best way to raise kids, and, in fact hinders children from developing into independent, capable, confident, and happy adults. Fortunately,

we have plenty of examples of non-overly-protective ways to raise our children, whether they are own kids, grandkids, family members, or members of our church family. We read about two sets of parents providing such alternative examples in today's scripture lessons.

Our first lesson from 1 Samuel tells of the young prophet Samuel, who was dedicated as a child to the work of helping the people of the tribes of Israel in their worship of God, and who did not live with his own parents, but rather with a priest named Eli. We read how Samuel's parents still came to visit him when they offered their sacrifices (and how Samuel's mother Hannah would make and then bring a new robe to him each year), but they otherwise let him go about doing his work of assisting the priest Eli, preparing him for his own adulting work serving the people as their great prophet.

Our gospel lesson from Luke, which clearly echoes the story of Samuel, tells us about Jesus as a 12-year-old child and his own parents. Unlike Samuel, he was not raised by a priest in a house of worship, but like young Samuel, he was being prepared by his parents for a life of service to others. Today's lesson tells us that young Jesus went with his parents from Nazareth in Galilee to the temple in Jerusalem for the Passover festival and that this was his faithful Jewish family's usual practice. They would have traveled to Jerusalem with many of their relatives and friends from Nazareth, which is perhaps why the lesson tells us that when Mary and Joseph and his siblings returned home with their group, it wasn't until a whole day had passed before they noticed that Jesus wasn't among them. Mary and Joseph clearly were not helicopter parents (and I hate to criticize the holy family, but maybe you should at least do a head count of your kids before hitting the road), but they let young Jesus do Jesus things, including hanging out in the temple and amazing the teachers there with his own understanding of their scriptures. It was there in the temple that his understandably anxious family finally found him after a three-day search of Jerusalem. Luke gives us a likely softened version of Mary's reaction, as she asked, "Child? Why have you treated us like this?" Young Jesus then gave a blame-shifting response that wouldn't have flown so well in my own household, saying, "Didn't you know I would be here, in my Father's house?" We are not told exactly how Mary and Joseph responded to these words, perhaps so that the gospel could remain fit for family reading, but

we are told that Jesus left with them for Nazareth and obeyed them and that Mary “*treasured* all these things in her heart” (eventually).

Now I do not advocate for us taking on all of the social practices of first century Palestinian Jews like Jesus’ family were, or their ancient ancestors, as Samuel and his family were, but we can see that in both of these stories children being prepared to become great servants of God and leaders of people by their parents providing enriching experiences for them without hovering above them or plowing the way ahead of them. They were instead allowed the space to live and grow and succeed and falter.

And this is what, I believe, God our heavenly Parent does for all of us. God has given us life and resources to encourage our growth as people, but does not swoop in to save us when we face difficulties or danger, just as God didn’t swoop in to save Jesus from facing the terrible indignity of suffering and dying on a Roman cross. Rather, God encourages us and strengthens us and enables us to move forward when we do face life’s challenges, and to grow as faithful people through them.

Also, I believe that God does not pre-emptively clear the path in front of us from all obstacles or give us a perfect plan for avoiding them. Because God loves us, God lets us live freely and to blaze our own trails through life.

Thanks be to God for this gift! Let us use it well. As we look ahead to the beginning of a new year, let us resolve to using the freedom we have been given as God’s children to serve God and serve others and so to grow in goodness and love. Let us resolve to lovingly help others on their own journeys, especially our children, by providing experiences that will help them to grow and flourish but without controlling their lives. May we all journey on together as a community of God’s children on a shared path that leads us all to enjoying more of God’s love and more of God’s life. Amen.