

Title: Fatherless No More

Subtitle: A Call to Freedom, A Call to Serve

Video URL: <https://youtu.be/9FJYupqQ9-I>

Today is Father's Day. It's a day that has celebrated the influence of fathers in society for hundreds of years. The tradition of celebrating this day started with the Catholic church, which used Saint Joseph as an exemplary father figure due to his willingness to protect Mary and raise Jesus as his earthly father.

Joseph is the patron saint of the working man, who gave us a model of a loving father by teaching Jesus his trade. The Bible never tells us of anything that Joseph ever said. It only describes him as being "*a just man*" who "*did as the angel of the Lord commanded.*"¹ He compassionately accepted his responsibility to protect Jesus from the threats of King Herod, who was viciously determined to kill him.

His story as a father is easy to admire. As a practically-minded carpenter with a strong work ethic, he had sincere questions about the supernatural nature of the immaculate conception until "*the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream*"² and confirmed that what was conceived in Mary was from the Holy Spirit.

I can't help but wonder if the man in our Gospel today had a father like Joseph, he most likely would not have ended up where he did: alone, afraid, and tormented without a friend in the world.

Some stories, like the Gospel we have today, can seem quite strange. It is one that I am sure some of you would rather put to

¹ Matthew 1:24

² Matthew 1:20

the side and ignore. But the question that haunts me as I encounter it is that one that asks if I can find, in the midst of my disgust for his character, some compassion in my heart for his poor soul? Charity in such a bleak situation begins with an understanding that evil is a part of each of us. All of us have sinned and are tempted toward the dark side of the spiritual spectrum.

A week ago, I had the opportunity of babysitting three of my grandchildren who live in Richmond. While there, I asked the oldest of the three to grab a favorite book that we could read together. To my surprise, he chose one with the title “*Darth Vader and Son*,” written by Jeffery Brown. In the book, Darth Vader is the Star War’s Dark Lord of the Sith. But it had a twist. He’s a dad, like any other. He still had his dark side, but his son, Luke Skywalker, keeps pulling him toward the light by getting him to do things that most dads should do; like taking him trick or treating on Halloween, enjoying a birthday party, or patiently getting little Luke to pick up his toys. The book was written by someone who wanted to make the Star Wars story more accessible to children. But for me, it was a book in which I could laugh at the joys of parenting through the lens of a galaxy far, far away.

As I thought about this little book, it reminded me how the stories of the Bible need the same kind of twist, a twist that hopefully makes the stories in it more accessible. For example, in both the Psalm and the Gospel, we have depictions of people dealing with the “dark side,” which is the destructive side of human nature. This battle between good and evil is a dynamic within our souls we would all rather ignore and obviously don’t want to admit.

Our Psalmist today pictures this internal struggle by first acknowledging what is good and right in his soul. He starts by

admitting, “*As the deer longs for the water-brooks, so longs my soul for you, O God. My soul is athirst for God, athirst for the living God.*”³ But it is not long before you discover that these inspired longings are not always his experience. By the middle of the Psalm, he asks, “*Why are you so full of heaviness, O my soul? And why are you so disquieted within me?*”⁴ It is like the more aware he is of God, the more aware he is of his distance from God.

In a commentary on “*Learning to Pray Through the Psalms*,” the writer, James Sire, explains that “In great poetry, the content of the refrain and the necessity of its repetition yield great significance.”⁵ The threefold repetition, where he asks why he is disquieted and his consistent response, “*Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God,*”⁶ reveals a battle within his soul, which seems to become increasingly intense whenever he attempts to set his heart on God. It is a battle that is hard to understand. The Apostle Paul mentioned it when he exclaimed, “*I don’t understand why I do what I do. When I want to do good, evil is right there with me*”⁷ This tendency toward self-destruction never makes sense. Evil, in its essence, is insanity. That’s because we were not created for evil but for good. But no matter how hard we try to do good, the conflict still exists.

In the midst of this confusing conflict, the Psalmist describes “*a deep calling to deep.*” His rhetoric reminds me of the time I went scuba diving along the edge of a great canon, off the coast

³ Psalm 42:1

⁴ Psalm 42:6

⁵ James W. Sire, *Learning to Pray Through the Psalms*, p. 89, IVP books, 2005

⁶ Psalm 42:7

⁷ Romans 7:19 Paraphrased

of Cozumel, where, when looking over the edge of the abyss, I could see dozens of sharks swimming just below me. It struck a sense of awe and terrors, making the hair stand up on my neck. The abyss, in this instance, symbolized for me satanic forces that are constantly roaming in search of someone to devour. Yet, in the presence of our enemies, we can still have the confidence that God is with us. And even when we walk through deep dark valleys, God is present with us, brooding over us, much like the Spirit who hovered over the deep waters at the beginning of creation. Or like the time when Jesus came to his disciples walking on the troubled sea, calling out, “Take heart; it is I. ‘Do not be afraid.’”⁸

Like the demonized man in our Gospel today, we, too, may wonder, “***Jesus, what have you to do with me, Son of the Most High God?***”⁹ But God’s purpose for us is always redemptive. His goal is to restore us to a place where we can sit at his feet and be “***clothed in (our) right minds.***”¹⁰

When we are ready, willing, and able, our Great Shepherd calls each of us, saying, “***Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.***”¹¹ His voice is ever bidding us to sit at his feet and leave those things behind that bind and enslave. Then we, much like Joseph, can be used to care for others compassionately and quietly proclaim how much he has done for us.

⁸ Matthew 14:27

⁹ Luke 8:28

¹⁰ Luke 8:35

¹¹ Matthew 11:28