



Giuseppe Mazzola, *Holy Family (Adoration)*,  
Brigham Young University Museum of Art.



# FAMILY AND HOME IN THE SAVIOR'S LIFE AND MINISTRY

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A fair question arises: on Easter, why turn to a topic such as family and home in the Savior's life and ministry? My presentation, I hope, will answer this question. Family and home are so deeply embedded in the story of Jesus that, upon review, it becomes clear he is concerned with them from the beginning to the end of his ministry. And in that story we dare not bracket his Atonement.

Luke's Gospel account opens with a series of stories that feature the home, and each in some way touches upon the Savior. As a preface, I observe that the first mention of place in the Gospel is the sanctuary. Luke writes about the priest Zacharias, "He went into the temple of the Lord" (Luke 1:9). With this note, Luke confers a sense of holiness across his two books, the

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Gospel and the book of Acts. Within this holy environment, we meet the angel Gabriel, who comes to Zacharias and prophesies about a child. We hear his words: “Thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John” (Luke 1:13). Hence, in this scene, the sanctuary and the family or the home become linked together, forming an interwoven whole as the story proceeds. But this experience is only the beginning. Bound into this bundle, John’s birth makes the family of Zacharias and Elisabeth complete.

We can imagine that when Zacharias and Elisabeth are married, wonderful expectations abound for them. Friends, neighbors, and family members see in them rich possibilities: children and grandchildren. But then one long year passes another, and no children come. I suspect that Elisabeth especially faces many questions such as “What is wrong with me?” Certainly her neighbors would have been asking, “I wonder what’s wrong with her? What has she done to earn the Lord’s disfavor?” For, as we know, barrenness is often seen in her society as a sign of God’s disfavor. Then comes the moment when all changes. Elisabeth’s words are, “He [the Lord] looked on me, to take away my reproach” (Luke 1:25). One senses worlds of meaning in her words. Moreover, we feel the gracious healing hand of the Lord in two words that Luke pens: “Elisabeth conceived” (Luke 1:24). In sum, we feel the hand of the Lord moving his majestic work forward—in the home.

The themes of home and family continue in a setting almost exactly sixty-five miles north of the temple. Recalling the layer of holiness that lies across Luke’s text because he features Zacharias in the sanctuary, we now come to what we call the “Annuncia-

tion,” the scene in which the angel Gabriel finds Mary in her home.

How do we know that he finds her there? The text reads, “The angel came in unto her” (Luke 1:28). The Greek text actually repeats a participle and says, “coming inside toward her.” Thus the angel comes into a place where Mary feels secure and private. She is frightened because of that intrusion, hence the angel says to her, “Fear not, Mary” (Luke 1:30). The angel’s message has to do with a child, a child who will begin her family and become a part of her home. The story of this encounter illustrates that a home can become a place of revelation and a place of God’s miracles.

Mary also responds to the news from the angel about her distant cousin’s pregnancy. She learns from the angel that Elisabeth is now almost six months along, “behold, thy cousin Elisabeth, she hath also conceived a son” (Luke 1:36), and she senses the imperative in the angel’s words to go visit her cousin. Significantly, by Mary’s coming to Elisabeth’s home, we find that the two homes now become physically connected.

The scene next switches to the home of Elisabeth and Zacharias in what people have come to call the “Visitation.” Both women are watched by God. Certainly God looks out for Mary as she leaves her own home and goes to the place near Jerusalem where Elisabeth lives. When these two women come together at Elisabeth’s home, it is as though the Spirit cannot withhold and descends richly upon them, and we hear the first of Elisabeth’s welcoming words, “Blessed art thou among women” (Luke 1:42). The babe leaps in her womb, underscoring that the infant is “filled with the Holy Ghost from his mother’s womb” (D&C

84:27; see also Luke 1:15), which also testifies of Elisabeth's goodness and worthiness before the Lord.

Remarkably, through inspiration, Elisabeth becomes the first witness of the virgin birth. We hear her words: "There shall be a performance of those things which are told her [Mary] from the Lord" (Luke 1:45). She knows by inspiration that something special is happening to her young cousin. Elisabeth therefore becomes the herald of the mother of God's Son, as her son will serve as herald of Christ. All of this occurs at Elisabeth's home. In addition, other special Spirit-driven events occur inside her home: Mary gives voice to her inspired song, "The Magnificat" (Luke 1:46–55); Zacharias' mouth is miraculously opened in their home after John's birth (Luke 1:64); Zacharias sings his inspired song, "Benedictus," in their home (Luke 1:68–79). One conclusion is that their home has become a spiritual powerhouse, much like the temple.

One added note: the secret of the ages, who the mother of the Son of God will be, has now first been entrusted to two women. As far as we are aware, no one else on earth yet knows.

Here I shift gears to look at Mary as Jesus' mortal mother and to suggest that hints lie inside the text which talk about the strength and the normality of her home life with the young Savior. Many readers of the Gospels notice that Joseph is missing from the scenes of Jesus' ministry. The usual conclusion—correct in my view—is that Joseph has passed away. But his influence remains in an interesting passage. In Mark 6:3, Jesus is called by acquaintances "the carpenter." It becomes apparent from this little aside that Joseph has taught Jesus his trade. Joseph's skills as an artisan—an ability to work with wood, stone, and metal—

has been passed to Jesus.<sup>1</sup> In addition, he has taught Jesus how to work.

In the very same verse, Mark 6:3, Jesus is also called “the son of Mary.” This name honors her, implying a strong, honorable mother. People in their community knew her as an honorable woman. And thus they placed her name on her Son when they talked about Him as “the son of Mary.”<sup>2</sup>

A further important detail arises out of Luke 4. The Nazareth townspeople are surprised at the powers that reside in this young man who has grown up in their midst. They have recently heard of the miracles that he performed down at Capernaum (Luke 4:23). Such a detail tells us that Jesus grows up in a normal home where, as a boy in his society, he learns to pray and to read and to work. Clearly, his mother and his adoptive father raised him in a strong, clean, devoted environment.

Jesus' healings now come into view. More often than not, his healings carry an immediate impact into someone's home. We start with Luke chapter 5, wherein Jesus meets a man “full of leprosy” and heals him (see Luke 5:12–14). Because of his disease, this man is exiled from home and friends. He is never clean. He can never shake hands with anyone. He can never go into anyone's home. He is distant from all and has to keep his distance from all. When Jesus heals him, he literally brings him back to his home. It is warming to think that this man, who has been off by himself all these years and estranged from family members, now is reunited with them.

Luke chapter 6 reports a story about a man with a withered right hand whom Jesus heals in a synagogue. Again, this man is unclean, for he is left to perform all tasks for himself with his left hand, including bodily functions and eating. He is not a person

whom anyone will invite to dinner in a home. Why? Because he brings uncleanness with him, and everything he touches is rendered unclean. Healing him heals his relationship with his family, and with his friends beyond them.

In Nain, a town in Galilee, Jesus approaches a funeral procession as it comes out of the town and stops it. There he finds that the only son of a widow has died (see Luke 7:11–16). This woman's only claim to help, to income and support, comes from this son. But now death has taken him from her. To be sure, she still has her dowry, but she has no legal claim on anyone else for support. In addition, this young man has died without posterity; he is not yet married. So she is completely alone. By raising her son from the dead, Jesus gives back to the widow her child and future grandchildren so that her physical needs will now be met and her name will live on among her descendants, into eternity.<sup>3</sup>

The Gadarene demoniac is a man who lives in tombs, wears no clothes, and screams. People have tried to tie him up, but he breaks the cords. He is a total embarrassment to his family. Jesus now comes across the lake to the east side, into Gentile territory. This man is a Gentile, not a Jew. After encountering the man, Jesus heals him (see Luke 8:26–39). In the aftermath, the man begs Jesus to allow him to follow Him. And Jesus says, no. These are his words—“Return to thine own house” (Luke 8:39). We can only imagine what it is like for his family to receive him back. Furthermore, Jesus places him in a spot where, over time, not only do people learn about this man's healing, but they come to respect the power behind his healing. Their first response, of course, after seeing what Jesus has done, is to ask Jesus to leave. They are frightened by what has happened and are frightened

by the enormous power required to control this man (see Luke 8:37). But over time, this man will show that he has regained his normalcy. Then, when Jesus sends the seventy into Gentile territory and some come back to that town, the seed is already planted and a harvest of souls will occur. People will respond to the message that the seventy bring.

Of course, Jesus' healing the woman with the issue of blood will have an impact on her family (see Luke 8:43–48). Because she has been unclean for twelve years, she cannot go to the synagogue or to the temple. She renders everything in her house unclean in a ritual way. A person cannot accept a loaf of bread or a jug of milk from her, because she renders it unclean. At the moment of her cleansing, things change for her and for her family.

The same thing happens with Jairus' twelve-year-old daughter (see Luke 8:41–42, 49–56). By giving life to this young girl about to step into adulthood, the only child of Jairus and his wife, Jesus gives back to them their future and their family. I want to add a further note. We remember that, when Jesus arrives at the home, it is already filled with well-meaning neighbors and friends and family members who have already begun to mourn and, in accordance with custom, to wail. The noise is so loud in the home that Jesus does what any good leader should in preparing for a spiritual experience—He invites the noise to leave. He sends all those people outside, thereby creating a space of quiet and calm and peace wherein he can call down the power of God and raise this young girl from the dead.

I turn to another story wherein concern for family lies just out of sight. But if we think about it, the family stands in full view. The first few verses of Luke 5 tell us of Peter's unusual



experience on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. The account concludes with the call of Peter and his brother, Andrew, as well as their partners, James and John, who follow Jesus as disciples (see Luke 5:1–11). The report opens with a crowd that is following Jesus. He has come down to the seashore, and there is no easy way that he can talk to everybody unless he can put some small distance between Himself and them. He sees Peter in his boat and basically asks, “May I get into your boat and talk to these people?” Jesus climbs in, sits down and, from a few feet offshore, addresses the whole crowd. At the end of this little sermon, Jesus turns to Peter and asks, “How is fishing?” Peter answers, “Really lousy. We fished all night and didn’t catch a thing.” We know that Peter has been sitting and listening to this whole sermon while cleaning his nets. Jesus then says, “Row over there and throw out your nets.” We also know that somebody besides Peter is in the boat, for a series of plural pronouns stands in the account (see Luke 5:5–7). It could be his brother Andrew. Not only are they listening to what Jesus is saying in the boat, but a few days before they are standing in their own home and watching as Jesus raises Peter’s mother-in-law from illness. So they are inclined to do as Jesus suggests. They throw out the net, and it fills with fish. Then they call to their partners, who come with their boat, and they load the fish into both boats, almost sinking them by the end of this experience.

Lest we think this haul is a small catch of fish, I turn our minds to the fact that, in 1986, when the Sea of Galilee was especially low, some people found a fishing boat from the right era just off the northwest shore in the mud of the lake. The discoverers were smart. They sensed what they had and actually found a way to enclose it, lift it out of the mud, and put it into

a chemical bath to preserve it. You can still see the boat in a museum in the nearby town. The boat measures 24.5 feet in length, 7.5 feet wide, and 4.5 feet deep. This boat will hold a lot of fish before it is driven to the bottom of the lake.<sup>4</sup> The fish that Peter and his brother catch and load into the two boats make up a huge amount.

So where does family come into all of this? Actually, they are close by. Jesus' subsequent act of asking these men to follow Him will take the breadwinners out of the midst of their families. After all, they fish for a living. And, it seems to me, one can correctly ask the question, "What about their families as they become full-time disciples?" The answer rests in the fish. A person might say, "Yes, but in twenty-four hours the fish will begin to spoil. The families cannot eat all of them in that much time, and they cannot sell them in that much time. There just aren't enough people in the town to buy all those fish." Strabo, an ancient geographer who died less than ten years before Jesus began his ministry, notes that just down the coast from Capernaum, about four and a half miles, lies a notable town that came to be known as Magdala, the hometown of Mary Magdalene. In this town there is a fish salting industry where, if family members will row their boats, they can have all those fish preserved.<sup>5</sup> The families will now have many months' supply of food, plus they have enough fish that they can sell and make money to meet other needs. Hence, within the miracle of the fish, just before he calls these men to be his disciples, Jesus leaves the source of support for their families. He does not leave them bereft.

I turn attention to another set of accounts that occur later in Luke's Gospel. We start with the scene of Jesus as a guest at a dinner hosted by Martha in her home and joined by Mary, her

sister. This story occurs at the end of chapter 10 (Luke 10:38–42). A number of patterns come together in this report. I draw two into sight. One of them has to do with the setting of a home, and the other has to do with prayer. A person may ask, “Where does prayer appear in this story?” It shows up in Martha’s importuning Jesus to say something to Mary so that she helps with the meal. That sort of importuning stands very close to prayer: begging the Lord for help, asking Him for his assistance.

Now we step into chapter 11. Here the first thirteen verses have to do with prayer. At first, we find the Lord’s Prayer. Then we find a number of other sayings of Jesus that have to do with how one should pray. Finally Jesus talks about home. Luke introduces the subject of home in an interesting way. He reports that many observe Jesus casting out a demon that has rendered the victim dumb or unable to speak (see Luke 11:14). Some are amazed at the miracle, but others in the crowd say, “I bet he is casting demons out by the chief of demons, Beelzebul.” Then follows a conversation about this idea. In it, Jesus responds that a kingdom divided cannot stand, that a house divided against a house cannot stand (see Luke 11:15–20). Therefore, the house is very much a part of what Jesus is talking about.

Next Jesus utters a saying about a strong man who sits in his palace, comfortable and secure. But when a stronger one comes, the stronger dispossesses the strong one and takes over the home (see Luke 11:21–22). We ask ourselves, what does all that mean? Then Jesus follows that example with a saying about an unclean devil that “walketh through dry places,” looking for a place to live after he is tossed out of his home. He comes back to the original place he was living, finds it “swept and garnished,” runs off, grabs seven of his terrible friends, brings them back,

invades the place, and they take up residence there. Jesus makes the point that the man's state is worse in the latter instance than it was before, clearly applying this scene to a person who is in trouble (see Luke 11:24–26).

At this point, let me back up and suggest an interesting sequence that flows out of this series of stories, starting with Mary and Martha, next with his teaching on prayer, then his broad discussion about Satan's kingdom and devils and evil influences. Commentators, including Elder James E. Talmage, have noticed the story of the strong one in the house and the stronger one who pushes him out. They see Satan in the strong one and Jesus in the stronger.<sup>6</sup>

Let me suggest to you that a series of teachings about the home falls out of these stories. First, home becomes and is rightly a place of prayer. Martha's beseeching Jesus for help is an illustration of that. Second, the home is a place of unity, which Martha's temporarily is not. In Jesus' words, the divided home falls, the divided home fails. Third, the home invaded by evil, by the strong one, can only be cleansed by inviting in the stronger one. In effect, the home becomes the place where the struggle between good and evil occurs.

In light of these three points, let us make a general observation. We can leave our homes as they are. But if evil is present, we run a serious risk. Through prayer, we can invite in the stronger one. The Savior, when invited, can come and displace the strong one, the devil, and keep him at bay. We see that, somehow, lying amidst the banter of Jesus with his opponents and rising within his sayings to them, the home stands in close proximity to the world of evil, so close that this world both forms an inimical and crippling intrusion into the home and must be overcome

and separated from it. In effect, without a conquering effort, evil can make its permanent camp within a person's home. The story of the wandering spirit illustrates the point most graphically: it pines for its lost home and, when opportunity arises with help, pushes its way back inside, thus disrupting the home's sacred and tranquil character. In my view, these stories are to be seen as a whole, fitting tightly together and illustrating Jesus' concern for a harmony in the home that rests on proper spiritual principles, as Jesus' words about Mary demonstrate: "One thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part" (Luke 10:42).

In sum, our review has taken us across a large aggregate of stories and sayings, events and small details that lie embedded in Luke's Gospel. Taken together, they underscore the enormous importance of family in the Savior's life and ministry. Much of what he says and does purposely carries an impact into someone's home. What happens inside family and home matters, in time and in eternity, as he tries to teach and demonstrate in his ministry. His Redemption, whose seeds are sown in events leading to his birth, grows complete in his life and ministry as he shows concern and compassion for homes and families.

## NOTES

1. The term translated "carpenter" (Greek *tektōn*) is the general term for a skilled artisan (Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, trans. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, rev. F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker, 2nd ed. [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979], s.v. "tektōn").
2. S. Kent Brown, *Mary and Elisabeth: Noble Daughters of God* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2002), 73–74.

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3. Eryl W. Davies, "Inheritance Rights and the Hebrew Levirate Marriage," *Vetus Testamentum* 21 (1981): 138–44, 257–68; James R. Baker, *Women's Rights in Old Testament Times* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 51, 134, 137, 140; Ze'ev Falk, *Hebrew Law in Biblical Times* (Provo, UT, and Winona Lake, IN: BYU Press and Eisenbrauns, 2001), 109–10, 153–55.
4. Shelley Wachsmann, *The Sea of Galilee Boat: An Extraordinary 2000-Year-Old Discovery* (New York: Plenum Press, 1995).
5. Strabo (64 BC–AD 21) writes, "At the place called Taricheae [Magdala] the lake supplies excellent fish for pickling" (*Geography* 16.2.45). Taricheae lay about four and one-half miles southwest of Capernaum and three miles north of Tiberias; also Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, 3 vols., rev. ed. by Geza Vermes, Fergus Millar, and Matthew Black (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1973–1987), 2:69–70, on Taricheae as a center for pickling. Significantly, the name *Taricheae* is related to the Greek term *tarichos*, which means "dried or salted fish" (Henry George Liddel and Robert Scott, eds., *A Greek-English Lexicon*, rev. ed. Henry Stuart Jones [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940], 1758).
6. James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1945), 268; Leon Morris, *Luke: An Introduction and Commentary*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 217.