

Today's mass holds up the holy family as an ideal for family life, but everybody knows no family is perfect. Almost every family has someone divorced, someone unmarried, some child out of wedlock, someone who's gay, someone in jail, someone with strange in-laws, someone who left the church, and someone who is just so goofy you prefer not to talk about it.

The model families from the bible aren't so different from ours. Mary conceived Jesus when she was engaged, and Joseph was not the father. Further back is the family we meet in today's first reading: Abraham's.

God struck a covenant with Abraham. God said, "I will make your reward very great." Abraham, though, complained. "What good will your gifts be if I die childless?" God promised that Abraham's descendants would number as the stars of the sky. But Abraham and Sarah were not only childless, they were old. God delivered on this promise, but not right away. Sarah conceived her first child when she was 90 years old. Abraham was 99. I said a moment ago that biblical families weren't so different from ours, but this one was different. Abraham and Sarah gave their child a name meaning laughter and smiles: They called him Isaac.

God promised Abraham a long life, a child, and many descendants. In those days, that sounded great. Today, a lot of people think otherwise. In our culture, old age isn't valued as much as being young. Being pregnant isn't valued as much as being free. Having a lot of children isn't valued as much as saving money. Name any movie you went to this year, and I challenge you to find one actor playing a happily married person with children; in Hollywood married parents are losers. Being single and sexy is all that matters.

The Catholic Church thinks very highly of family life. We understand that some people divorce and some people have no children; our priests are not married. We still hold marriage and family life as an ideal. When a young couple marries, part of their consent in the Catholic Church is to accept children lovingly from God. If they are not interested in having children, they don't have what we understand marriage to be. Happily, most couples are anxious to share their love with kids.

The message from Abraham's story is that God loves families and gladly intervenes in human life. We all have families that need a little work. But God is willing to help if we are faithful to the covenant and if we have trust. If God can help a couple in their 90s to have their first child, maybe God can help our families too.