

January 3, 2010
Calvary Presbyterian Church
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1Samuel 2: 12-20, and 26
Luke 2: 41-52

The lesson for this morning is the only story in the whole Bible about Jesus' childhood. Remember that Luke is the one who begins his Gospel by telling us that it is his intention "to write an *orderly* account—(How very Presbyterian of him to know we would like things arranged 'decently and in order'!)—so that you might know the truth" (Luke 1:3). So Luke believes that for us to understand the life and death of the Messiah, the truth of this whole story—we need this glimpse of Jesus as a child. It's a picture of a family of observant Jews, making the appropriate religious pilgrimage along with their friends and neighbors to celebrate the Passover in Jerusalem. It says that they did this every year—making the point that Jesus' life was continually influenced by his family, his synagogue, and the temple.

Many of you who have just returned from your holiday travels, or said good-bye to your annual visitors will probably relate to this story of a family following their holiday tradition yet again. Needing to do the same thing they did last year, and the year before that, and expecting to be doing the same thing next year as well. And yet, every year has its own story. Remember the year we had to cancel church on the last Sunday before Christmas? Remember how we planned to sing carols on the corner that night and there was so much snow we couldn't get here? Remember the year that Mama danced across Western Plaza after we went to see the *King and I*? Remember the year when Jesus got lost in Jerusalem? Listen to this remembrance of Jesus' childhood from the end of Chapter 2, beginning at verse 41.

What Child Is This?

Both my daughters told me they planned to take down their Christmas trees today. The kids are ready to go back to school and Christmas is done for another year. The gift giving frenzy is over, what else is there to do but put it all away and use those gift-cards to get what you really wanted at the after-Christmas sales? The Passover feast that brought Jesus and his family to Jerusalem was an eight-day festival, and they stayed to observe every day of it. Christmas is a twelve-day festival and I need to observe every day of it. This is only the tenth day of Christmas—I'm expecting to see those ten lords a leaping sometime this afternoon—although I do sort of think they will be on a football field somewhere and not in my living room. I don't think we allow ourselves enough time to celebrate, especially in the church. Why are we so anxious to say it is over and move on into the New Year? The days are still so short. The darkness is still threatening. We need to celebrate our conviction that the light has come into the world with the birth of this child—to sing "Joy to the World" over and over again; to wish each other a Merry Christmas and really mean it.

Our God has chosen to be so intimately **with** us, that God was actually willing to be born into our world like an ordinary human child, knowing that children are often cold and wet and

hungry. If we pause to think seriously about the story, we have to be as amazed as those shepherds who first heard the news from the angels singing in the night sky. Immanuel has come---that is the Hebrew word that literally translates the phrase, “God with us.” In the ancient world where folk tales always depicted those other gods as forces opposed to humans, warring with each other and demanding service from human beings, this was an amazing concept. It still is. Our God has come to be with us, not against us. Alleluia, Glory to God in the Highest!

It’s not that I don’t remember what happens next. I know the rest of the story. I expect to follow a grown up Jesus all the way to Jerusalem—again this year. I have noticed that the world we live in is full of war and terrorists and snowstorms and mudslides and mental illness and insurance cancellations and ugly divorces even after the Prince of Peace has arrived.

But, I need to linger here, next to the manger, by the light of the star for just a little longer—to bask in the quiet, to listen for the angel’s song, to hear the baby laugh, to imagine the potential, to be amazed. Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace, and good will to all! We need to take this time to treasure all these things and ponder them in our hearts just like Mary did. It’s these days after that give us the time to wonder. The gospel writer, too, wants us to linger over the story of the beginnings just a little longer.

This is a story that all parents can understand. We’ve all felt the panic of a momentarily missing child. I always thought these must have been very irresponsible parents who actually left town without their son—isn’t that the outlandish premise of those *Home Alone* movies? But I read recently that such caravans would probably have traveled in gender-segregated groups with the women and children traveling together and the men following. There would have been an inherent ambivalence about which group a 12-year-old boy might have been with. However it happened, Mary and Joseph go looking for him. They find him in the Temple—well, not exactly **in** the Temple. Joseph couldn’t have gotten into the Temple itself because he wasn’t a Levite, and Mary couldn’t even have gotten to the inner court, so they must have found him somewhere on the outskirts of the Temple Mount, surrounded by teachers—a word that the gospels don’t often use. And his mother, in a speech I seem to remember giving on more than one occasion, says, “Why have you treated us like this? Didn’t you know we would be out of our minds with worry!!”?

And then we get the first words that Jesus will speak in the gospel, “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” (Luke 2:49). The boy’s response is notoriously hard to translate—there is no “house” word in the Greek text. It reads more like, “I had to be at Dad’s.” Considering where they were when he said it, it makes sense to assume that’s what the phrase means, but the old King James translation said, “I must be about my father’s business.” Luke may well have intended that ambiguity in his choice of words. Was it here, in the Temple that Jesus, like Samuel before him, becomes aware of exactly how God was calling him to live his life? Is this a glimpse of Jesus subordinating all his other relationships to the priority of his relationship with God? Whatever it was that happened there, Luke tells us that the parents “did not understand what he said to them.” And they all went home to Nazareth to resume the normal stuff of life.

Why do you suppose Luke decided to include this particular episode? Why do you suppose it is the only childhood story that we have? There has been a lot of speculation about Jesus’ life

before he came to be baptized by John in the River Jordan. In the second century there were several documents telling stories about the child Jesus reviving dead birds and taking revenge on malicious playmates with supernatural powers. The church never took any of them very seriously, but every now and then someone writes about them as if they were a brand new discovery. When I was in college, I read a lot of new age speculation about Jesus making a worldwide journey in his early years adding the wisdom of Eastern religions to his own understanding of the Hebrew faith. There is no evidence of that either in history or in what we hear Jesus teaching in the gospel record. Everything he will preach is firmly grounded in Hebrew scripture. We are naturally curious. We all want to know more, but this is the only glimpse that we get.

When families gather for the holidays, the conversation is often peppered with repeated exchanges. Every year I hear someone say, “Oh she’s the big sister she gets to be bossy!” And I remembered a bright pink poster that we hung on her bedroom wall when she was a toddler that said—“I’m a Leo, I’m bossy.” (It was the 60’s—Astrology was so much a part of the cultural vocabulary that we hardly noticed it.) But as I look back, I wonder if we bought that poster because she was already bossy, or if living with that poster told her we expected her to be bossy, or if being bossy is an inherent piece of being the eldest child. Glimpses from a childhood. What is it that matters?

I wondered all week about Hannah, and how she could have been so sure what God expected from her and from her first-born son. She was so sure, that she sent her very young son—the scripture says as soon as he was weaned—probably about three—off to live with the priest Eli at the Tabernacle; with beloved old Eli who had raised his own sons to be thieves and scoundrels. I wonder if her first thoughts on seeing him were anything like mine, “Oh my God, this fat, bald baby boy looks just like my father-in-law! —I wonder if he will grow up to be just like him?” And that was merely the first of so many questions swirling around in my head. First the urgent questions: Will I know what to do for this helpless child? How will this baby change our family? What if the dog doesn’t like babies? How will we ever afford to send him to college? And then we get to the really important questions. There is so much potential sleeping here in this cradle; will we do the right things for him? Will we know how to help him “to grow both in stature and in favor with God and with people”? That’s what the scripture tells us about both young Samuel and young Jesus (I Samuel 2:26, Luke 2:40). Or will this baby be lying on a psychoanalyst’s couch in thirty years trying to figure out what went wrong? When do we get that first clue about who our children will become? And if we were paying better attention, would we see it any sooner?

When did **Barack Obama’s** mother know how ambitious her young son was? Did she have any idea who he might grow up to be? Did **Saddam Hussein’s** mother recognize that he was a belligerent bully? Did the family around him know how brutal he was? Could they see it looking back on the family stories? When did **Michael Jackson’s** mother know something was going seriously awry with her youngest son? Could she see something that was different about him—different even from the rest of that household of precocious and musically gifted siblings? When did she first suspect that he might never be happy with who he was—no matter how rich and famous, always an outsider, always so out of step with the world around him that he could never find peace with himself? What did she know and when did she know it? Glimpses of

childhood. What matters? How should all the fragments be assembled to give us a sense of the “truth”?

Do you suppose that Luke ever said to Mary, “When did you know that your first born son was the Messiah?” In my imagination, I picture her sifting through a lifetime of memories of a beautiful baby and a growing child and wondering what mattered. Did she have any doubts about that conversation with the angel Gabriel? Exactly what was it those shepherds told her in Bethlehem? Or did she say, “Well, there was this one time when the family made the regular pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the Passover....”

Luke thought that story mattered to his “orderly account.” Some twenty years later Jesus’ spiritual family of disciples and friends would make the same trip for the same celebration of the festival Passover; the festival of deliverance, “when the lamb had to be sacrificed” (Luke 22:7). And that family will also leave without him. After three days some of them will go seeking him where they expect him to be; and discover that he isn’t there. The young Jesus’ very first words, “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I would be about my father’s business?” are echoed by angels in an empty tomb who say, “Why are you seeking the living among the dead? Didn’t he tell you...” (Luke 24:5-7).

When did we know? If we had great faith and infinite patience, we might have known at the very beginning when God said, “Let there be light!” If we were paying attention, we might have known when Moses had that odd conversation with the burning bush who said to him, “I am,” and “I will be with you.” Or, when the prophet said, “A Child has been born for us, a son given to us and authority rests upon his shoulders and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Is 9:6). Or surely when we heard the shepherds’ story about choirs of angels over Bethlehem bringing news of great joy to all people; or when Jesus healed the sick and the lame; or calmed the storm; or fed the 5,000 on the hillside above the lake in Galilee, or when he died on a cross outside of Jerusalem. But we didn’t. We didn’t understand at all. We missed all the signs until another Mary brought news about an empty tomb. And then we looked back and heard him say, “Why were you searching for me? Didn’t you already know where to find me?”

Joy to the World!
Merry Christmas!!