

Christmas II, Year B

January 4, 2015

Merry Christmas!

We're still in the Christmas season on this the eleventh day and second Sunday of Christmas. In our Gospel readings for Christmas so far, we have heard the famous birth story with Mary, Jesus, and Joseph, and the angels and shepherds. We have heard the theological anthem from John about the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us. And today, we have three options for Gospel readings. The two we did not read are from Matthew. They anticipate the Feast of the Epiphany coming on January 6th and tell some part of the story of the Wise Men coming to see Jesus. The Gospel we chose to read instead may seem out of place versus all the stories about Jesus' birth and infancy that we associate with Christmastide.

In fact, this story may seem out of place in other ways, too. This story about the adolescent Jesus in the Temple is the only story we have in the canonical gospels about Jesus between his first few years of life and his appearance as an adult at his baptism. It is a little glimpse of what his life was like, his relationship with his parents, his faith in God, his understanding of his identity, and ultimately what it means for us hundreds of years later. This story is a bridge from Christmas to the Epiphany season, when we focus on God's revelation of Christ to the world.

I have always liked this particular story because I am curious about the life of Jesus. What was his childhood like? I mean after the miracles of the Annunciation and all the angels at his Nativity, how do you follow that in a normal childhood? You may have seen the cute cartoon of Mary trying to give a toddler age Jesus a bath. He is standing on the water in the tub and Mary says to Jesus, "You will get into that water, young man." I doubt it was like that, of course. But if you are like me, you're curious.

Our curiosity will not be well served through this little story. We can observe and maybe speculate a bit. But the story was added to Luke's Gospel more to remind us who Jesus is in the sense of his unique relationship to God rather than provide much detail about what his childhood was like. Perhaps we will learn those details in heaven.

What we do know starts with the verse before the Gospel today. In verse 40, it states:

"The child (Jesus) grew big and strong and full of wisdom; and God's favor was upon him."

Jesus was one of those children we all notice in life. Attractive, athletic, articulate—some children have special gifts from the first that seem natural, something they were born with; and Jesus (as we might assume based on what

came before in the story) was one of those children. Confident, a natural leader, and precociously devout. Based on this scene, we can imagine Jesus studying the Jewish Scriptures voraciously from a young age.

Jesus' parents, we are told, were good examples of being devout. They came to Jerusalem every year for Passover. They did what the Law required and made the joyful pilgrimage to the Holy City to pray and celebrate and worship the God of their ancestors. Jesus apparently had been making that trip with them since his first days when his parents presented Jesus in the Temple as a baby. This was an important part of his identity as a Jewish child living in Palestine in the 1<sup>st</sup> century.

So far, so good. Attractive young boy growing into adolescence. Faithful parents caring for him with the foreknowledge that he is special in some mysterious, divine way, in addition to his obvious external gifts. These are common aspects of a hero story that might have been told back in that day.

Then this trip, maybe the twelfth of his life, and something strange, something memorable happens. Jesus gets left behind. Now before I say too much, the commentator I consulted cautioned preachers not to speculate too much about this part of the story. Cultural expectations were different then—there were no helicopter parents. We don't know how Mary and Joseph missed that Jesus was not with their group. And as the commentator stated, that is not the central point of the story.

Here is what I will say—life is often messy. Some of us look to our faith and the Bible to give us answers and a sense of order and stability in our own chaotic lives. That's understandable and not necessarily bad. But if we do study our faith and the Bible, what we will often find are stories not unlike the chaos we experience in our own life. Mary is pregnant before marriage. In Matthew's version, Jesus' parents have to flee a violent tyrant and live in exile in Egypt. And now Jesus is left behind in the big city and that's not discovered by his parents for a day. They begin looking for him and do not find him for three more days. In today's world, that would have made the local evening news and maybe even cable.

So the stories of the Bible and the stories of Jesus are often messy, just like the stories of our lives. Truth is usually not revealed with trumpets and fireworks. No, what we learn about God is often in the midst of our messes—unexpected pregnancies, lost children, tyrannical violence, displaced people. For people of faith, the key is God being revealed even—or maybe especially-- in the middle of our life's messes.

That is what happened with Mary and Joseph as they found Jesus. Mary's words sound like something my mother would have said to me, "Why have you treated us like this?" Jesus response, sounding more like the rabbi he would become as an adult, sounds inappropriate in the mouth of a twelve year old, "Why did you search for me? Did you not know I was bound to be in my Father's house?" My mother would have jerked me up and shaken me if I had said that to her after all that. It is good to remember and imagine what our human responses might be

in this messiness. But our faith requires that we look deeper for what this story is really about.

On this second Sunday of Christmas, the church gives us this story to remind us that Jesus is both one of us and totally unique. In addition to his special gifts as a tall, strong, wise beyond his years, and well favored child and young man; Jesus understood himself to be the Son of God even at this young age. That revelation about Jesus informs us that he is more than a special person that we can learn from through his example and his teaching. Jesus is revealed as the Son of God, even at this young age; and his life on earth lets us know that God has brought heaven near to our messy lives and that in our human darkness, divine light shines. That is the good news of Christmas!

The stories of God revealed in the midst of our often messy lives continues this Tuesday with the Feast of the Epiphany and then through the rest of the season following. Next Sunday, we will find out more about God's light being revealed in the midst of our messiness as we hear the story of Jesus' baptism. Part of that light being revealed to us will be Bishop Wimberley's visit. He will be our episcopal visitor and preacher next week. More light will shine around and through us as we baptize Olivia Canby, and dedicate the icon of the Baptism of our Lord written by Br. Kenneth, and even as we have our parish annual meeting. All these big and mundane things in our lives have meaning because God revealed himself to us in Jesus and made clear that God is connected to us in love even in the midst of our messy lives today. What great good news.

Merry Christmas!