

“That Boy Child of Mary”

Luke 2: 41-52

December 27, 2020

A Sermon Preached by Reverend Debbie S. Osterhoudt

The angels have disappeared into the night sky, their song lingering in the air. The shepherds have returned to the countryside and keeping watch over their sheep by night. The wise men from far away nations have departed Bethlehem and returned their home by another way, avoiding an encounter with those in power who would destroy life and the newborn child of Mary and Joseph. Mary and Joseph have gathered up their newborn son and returned to Nazareth. The routine of daily living has resumed and the hard work of parenting has begun. This morning we jump forward twelve years from that magical night in Bethlehem when God’s presence came into the world through the birth of a baby. Jesus is now on the threshold of those teenage years. The only biblical account we have of Jesus as a boy is found in Luke’s gospel, the second chapter.

Let’s listen.

Prayer for Understanding

One of my favorite Christmas movies is “Home Alone”. It was produced in 1990 and it is the story begins in the home of the McAllister family as they prepare to travel with their children and extended family to Paris for Christmas vacation. Eight year old Kevin’s behavior is nasty the night before they are to go to the airport, as everyone is dashing around packing and trying to get ready to depart on a fabulous vacation. Exasperated, Kevin’s mother finally sends him off to the upstairs room in the attic and the pull out couch sleeper. During the night the power goes off, so when the family awakens in the morning, they are late leaving for the airport. The airport taxis arrive to pick them up and in a chaotic state they all pile into the vans. They arrive at the airport and their gate as the plane is about to pull away from the gate. They make it – the adults sitting in first class and the children in coach. When they arrive in Paris, they realize that Kevin was left behind, home alone. The rest of the movie revolves around the family trying desperately to return home to Kevin (I don’t know why they didn’t call him or a neighbor and the movie is set in the dark ages before cell phones; but let’s not spoil the story line!) . And Kevin is caught up in a home invasion by two con men and surviving on his own. Kevin’s parents are frantic, and Kevin is calmly and cleverly coping with life home alone. I am reminded of this movie when reading this story of Jesus as a twelve year old boy.

Mary and Joseph have taken their family to Jerusalem in order to celebrate the Jewish festival of Passover in the Temple. Their entire family journeyed together in a caravan of sorts. So when they get ready to return home, it is not

until they have been on the road three days that they realize Jesus is not with them. Frantic, they return to Jerusalem and find Jesus sitting in the Temple among the elders discussing theology. I can imagine the ensuing conversation between parents and child to go something like this: “Jesus, what in the world are you doing? Do you have any idea how worried and anxious and frightened your father and I have been? Why would you be so impetuous and disrespectful? When we get you home, you are grounded until you are 21!” As parents we can understand their fear, their anxiety, their anger, their relief at finding their son, the depth of their love, their consternation as they try to discipline Jesus and raise him to be obedient and respectful.

Why would Luke include this story in his narrative about the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ when none of the other gospel narratives record stories of Jesus as a youth? It appears to be a transition story, between the birth of Jesus and the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. It is also the first time Jesus actually speaks. This story is full of clues as to who Jesus is, what his ministry will look like, who will be his family, and how we might navigate our own transition times.

Who is Jesus? Jesus is a boy like any other boy. He is born into a Jewish family who celebrate the Jewish holidays and are invested in raising their children within the faith family. He acts impetuously, seemingly oblivious of the impact his actions will have on other people. We are not told why Jesus stays behind. But we are told at his birth and now again that he is a child like no other child. When his parents question him, after discovering him in the Temple, he asks them:

“Why were you searching for me? Of course I must be in my Father’s house.” He is differentiating himself from his nuclear family; his purpose in life is beyond his life with them. One of the toughest things we do as parents is let our children go and develop to become the people God has created them to be. At some point we want them to fly from the nest, but in so doing it creates, at least it did for this mother, fear and anxiety. If we try to cling to them, then it creates conflict in the relationship. For Mary and Joseph this letting go of their son must have been particularly difficult. Jesus is reminding them that they need to let him go in order that he might fulfill God’s purpose in the world. And they probably did not understand all that it meant for him to be called the Messiah and the necessity for him to be in “his Father’s house.”

What does this transitional story say about Jesus’ ministry? This little story foreshadows much of what will follow in Luke’s narrative. The seeds to Jesus’ ministry begin here in the Temple, listening and learning from Jewish religious leaders, debating with them, and challenging them. He will begin his public ministry in chapter four in the synagogue and he will end his public ministry overturning the money changers tables outside the Temple saying, “My house shall be a house of prayer; but you have made it a den of robbers.” His Father’s house is his house as well. In fact, discussions of the Jewish law will characterize Jesus’ ministry from the beginning. And the people’s response: they are astonished and amazed. Amazed at his teachings and astonished at the miracles he performs.

When Jesus leaves his nuclear family and Mary and Joseph go in search of him, they discover him in the Temple, happily relating to an even further extended circle of people. Jesus will widen the boundaries of this circle beyond even the house of Israel, offering the good news of God' love and grace to all the people. Enlarging the family boundaries. Including all who call on his name. Rich, poor. Jew, Gentile. Old, young. Male, female. The young Jesus tells us in his own words what he will be about in extending God's family to all people.

As Jesus continues to grow in years and wisdom, Mary and Joseph will also grow and adapt. Today's story is a transition story, rooted in Jewish tradition and faith, but also foreshadowing the coming ministry of Jesus as the Christ. How do we navigate our own transition times?

Let go. Trust God to guide us. When I was in seminary, I had a very wise professor of practical theology and pastoral care. He described the transitions of life this way: It is like a trapeze artist in the circus. At some point they have to let go of one bar and fly through the air before grabbing hold of the next bar. Transitions are like flying through the air. You let go of one thing, but you are unsure of what will be there for you to grab hold of in the future. And it is frightening. It creates anxiety for us as individuals, but also for churches going through transition. Let go. Trust God.

During his own transition, Jesus stayed connected to his Father in heaven. He was grounded in the teachings of the Temple; he worshipped there, he surrounded himself with people of faith in the community of faith. Eventually,

after he calls the disciples to follow him, he will recognize his need for other people to share the good news. He won't try to go it alone. And Jesus was always self giving; not absorbed with self. In all he said and in all his behavior, he pointed to God's love and grace. After this experience Jesus returns with his parents to Nazareth and we are told he was obedient to them. He was concerned for their well being. During transitions it is always easiest to become obsessed with self. But it isn't about us, it is about being witnesses to and for God and living for a purpose greater than ourselves. Transitions are frightening, but they are the times when we learn our greatest lessons.

There is an urban legend about a violin maestro Itzhak Perlman who came onto stage one night to play a concert. At one point, there was a loud twang, as one of the violin strings broke. The orchestra stopped. He paused – maybe he was flying through the air and not sure where we would land or what bar he would grab – he paused and closed his eyes for a moment, and then nodded to the conductor to continue. Perlman played with passion and purity using the remaining 3 strings. He modulated and adapted and recomposed the piece on the spot to render what was lost by the broken string. When he finished, the audience leapt to their feet. Perlman said in a reverent tone: “You know, sometimes it is the artist's task to adapt and discover a new way of making music.”