

27 December 2015 (First Sunday After Christmas)
Lafayette Presbyterian Church
“To Dispel the World’s Darkness”
Luke 2:41-52

As many of us may have experienced, it doesn’t take long for children to grow up. Of course, at the time they are two or three years old, parents are wondering why it is taking so long for their children to grow up. And children are always quick to inform adults that they are not six years old, but six and a half, or six and three quarters. Those additional months make all the difference in the world. Time plays tricks on us. Experiences in the moment can feel as though they are unfolding in slow motion. It is only after years have gone by that we wonder where they went. It can seem like only yesterday that our children were infants and toddlers, starting their first day of school or developing a mind and a will of their own. But it is also in looking back that we gain a perspective on who our children really are, what kind of people they are and were born to be—and for that matter, who we are as adults and parents. We recall particular moments that stand out as significant in our children’s lives, moments that we realize with the perspective of time were signs of things to come. The child who falls in love with airplanes at age two, or who demonstrates an extraordinary gift for music at age four—parents remember these things, and look back on them with renewed insight and love for the people God entrusted them to raise.

As Jesus grew up, I think Mary found herself looking back on significant moments in his life, and realizing with increasing clarity the son she and Joseph had been given to raise to manhood. The recollection of these significant moments fills Chapter 2 of Luke’s Gospel. At the time of Jesus’s birth, when the shepherds ran from the fields to the place where Jesus lay in the manger, they related to Mary and Joseph their extraordinary vision of the great light and the angels singing and the description of God’s promised Messiah as they tended their sheep in the night. That they wasted no time in looking for Jesus, and that they were excited and joyful like little kids as they shared their story, must have made a tremendous impact on Mary—Luke writes that she “treasured all these words, and pondered them in her heart.” But the visit and experience of the shepherds at Jesus’s birth was not the only episode Mary treasured in her heart. She would also remember a frightening episode that took place in Jerusalem after Passover one year when Jesus was 12 years old. It was an episode that would explain a lot in days to come.

The account of Jesus wandering off to the temple to spend not just hours, but days, in the company of great teachers, completely oblivious to anyone or anything else or to the passage of time, rings true of so many 12 year olds. At that age they often bore in to a subject that fascinates them and at some point have to be reminded by those who love them to come up for air. In that respect, Jesus demonstrated qualities typical of most bright children his age. But there was a different quality about Jesus that set him apart from other intelligent children, and that was his wisdom. Judging from the religious teachers’ astonishment and probably also delight at his understanding and at his answers to their questions, I wonder whether Jesus was not the only one who lost track of time.

Luke's account of this experience is told, not from Jesus's perspective, but from that of his parents. That particular Passover, like any family on a major road trip, Mary and Joseph had a lot of logistical details to attend to. Traveling on foot from Nazareth to Jerusalem and back again took three days each way—the distance is almost 70 miles. And so, picturing the normal post-Passover chaos of everyone crowding onto the roads at once to leave town, anyone who has ever been in charge of children can likely identify with the Aramaic equivalent of, “I thought he was with you; well, I thought he was with you” exchange, that at some point must have taken place between Mary and Joseph. What is more, we should realize that Jesus's family was one-third of the way home before they figured out that he wasn't with them. It took another whole day to backtrack to Jerusalem, followed by more days of searching throughout the city for their wayward child.

And where do you suppose they might have looked first? Perhaps at the homes of friends and relatives with whom they had stayed? Perhaps in marketplaces or shops where someone may have seen a child fitting Jesus's description? Today, we might get an Amber Alert on our phone, or the police might be called in to search for the missing child. And I imagine that, like most parents, after three days of searching Mary and Joseph were beginning to assume the worst.

Yet finally, after exhausting all other options, they went to the temple in Jerusalem, that huge, grand complex that constituted the center of religious life. Did Mary think to go there? Did someone suggest it to her and Joseph? Did they go there in desperation to pray for God's help, never thinking that they would actually find Jesus there? Whatever was going through their minds, it is clear from Luke's account that the temple was the last place Mary and Joseph were expecting to find Jesus—because, when they did find him, completely absorbed in the discipline of learning and probing the depths of the Scriptures, the text says that they were astonished, as astonished as the religious leaders and teachers were at Jesus's understanding. But Jesus, for his part, cannot figure out why his parents didn't think of the temple first. In his mind, shouldn't it have been obvious that his Father's house and his Father's interests were at the center of his life? This was a tense moment between Jesus and his parents.

Certainly there is much in this text with which parents can identify, and it is often cited to remind children of the importance of obedience, and to remind parents of the importance of their children's spiritual life. Indeed, the story does end with Jesus obediently returning to Nazareth with his parents, and with his family recognizing his wisdom, his righteousness before God, and his positive growth to manhood. But the story's chief relevance lies not in what it has to say about family life, but in what it reveals about God's plan to form the whole human family, through Jesus, into the Kingdom of God in order to dispel the world's darkness. The larger purpose to this story in Luke's Gospel is to foreshadow Jesus's emerging sense of mission and how he prepared himself at an early age to accomplish that mission—for Jesus is the pattern and template to which God calls each of us to live our lives in fulfillment of the Kingdom of God. And the purpose of the Kingdom of God, the community of redeemed humanity, is to dispel the world's darkness.

In the church's celebration of Christmas, we move with dazzling speed from the helpless infant to the twelve year old with a serious streak of independence. And that rapid liturgical movement is, I believe, designed to remind each of us of the need to grow up spiritually, lest we remain infants in the faith, lest we dwell too long upon the Christmas story and sentimentalize it into a tame version of ourselves, or lest we fail to recognize in Jesus our primary role model for living the faith. Luke's larger purpose behind including the story of Jesus in the temple was to spotlight why God wanted to be born in human flesh in the first place: to dispel the world's darkness by relieving humanity of its burden of sin and oppression. And the starting point for fulfilling that purpose was to learn and to love God's Law as the ultimate pattern for one's life—that's what Jesus was doing in the temple that day he wandered away from Mary and Joseph. He was learning and incorporating into his being God's blueprint for life in all its fullness. And long before he became a threat and a thorn in the flesh to the religious authorities, Jesus delighted and astonished them with his wisdom and his love of God's Law. Even as a pre-adolescent, Jesus was a shining light because he identified God as his Father to whom he felt ultimately accountable.

What, then, about us? How faithfully will we fulfill our role in the divine mission? In the end, will we be able to say that we worked to push light into darkness, that we allied ourselves with Christ to fulfill the Kingdom of God on earth and to dispel the world's darkness? At the age of twelve Jesus was already aware of the spiritual break he would need to make with his human family, because he knew to whom he was ultimately accountable. In that regard he was not unlike the boy Samuel whose parents, Hannah and Elkanah, had dedicated him to God's service under Eli the priest. Do we view our lives in the same way, as gifts committed and dedicated to God's ultimate redemptive purpose?

As followers and disciples of Christ, we have a sacred obligation to learn everything we can about God's Law and the new life in Christ. But as apostles sent forth by Christ, we also have a sacred vocation to further the mission Jesus demonstrated in his life, death, and resurrection. Having been reborn because of the light that came into the world in the birth of Jesus, we are, as the Apostle Paul expressed it to the Colossian Christians, "God's chosen ones, holy and beloved." We are thus called to forgive as we have been forgiven, to love as God loves, to be ruled by the peace of Christ, and to be thankful. That prescription wasn't Paul's invention, it derives its pattern from Jesus and its inspiration from the Holy Spirit, who lives in our hearts and drives us forth as lights into the world's darkness. For as Jesus the child would remind us, we have one Father to whom we are accountable, in whose house we live, and whose interests we are called to serve.



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