

Living with the Incarnation

Luke 2:41-51

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Our text is a familiar one. I remember it from my days in Sunday school. You probably do too. Of the post-Advent Christmas readings it is the most familiar. Listen for the Word of God:

Now every year (Jesus') parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them, and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." He said to them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" But they did not understand what he said to them. Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.

One of the things that makes preaching challenging is that every time you approach a text you are a different person and you are a different person in a different context than the last time, and so the given — the biblical text — provides a mirror for new reflection. This is especially true of a text like our New Testament reading.

In the post-"Home Alone" culture of which we are a part, many among us can identify with the scene. A family is traveling for the holidays. They are preparing for the return trip to Nazareth after spending Passover in Jerusalem. The entourage is complicated, and the mother, who of course is in charge of details, checks and rechecks the parcels, the animals, the children, counting noses and consulting her list. One of the children, Jesus, has not actually been seen, but of course he's here somewhere — he's the good one, the one who can always be counted on to be responsive and obedient and — most important, to be where he's supposed to be, when he's supposed to be there. Time is passing, everything else is accounted for, and the father, who of course is in charge of timeliness, is eager to get out of Jerusalem before the traffic ... and so they set off. But the mother continues to be plagued with a gnawing question. "Do we have everything?" They reach the city limits of Jerusalem and head out into the desert. "I know we have forgotten something," she says. They stop for lunch beside an olive grove. "What could it be?" she ponders; "All of the children are here, of

course.” And she checks her list once more. But then, when they stop for the night, she realizes that the unthinkable in fact is happening, and with terror and remorse she screams the name of her firstborn son: Jesus.

When I was a child, my identification in this text was with Jesus — Jesus the young boy, Jesus the overachieving first child of the family, Jesus the devout student of the law for whom temple vigilance came as a priority over participation in family life. It fed right into my early adolescent rebellion (and I loved it). Jesus is twelve and tells his parents to let him do his own thing (and I relished his assertiveness). Jesus has priorities of his own (and I was inspired by his independence). Jesus finds respect and affection outside the family circle: with the elders, the leaders of the Jewish religion, not just in Nazareth, but in Jerusalem, the temple itself. I, the future minister, identified there as well.

And so I am always amused and amazed when I read this text now, as an adult, for my vantage point has changed dramatically. Now I read this story not in identification with Jesus, the adolescent wizard in the law, but rather in identification with Mary and Joseph, the distraught parents who search frantically for their son ... who are desperate to know where he is ... and who, upon finding him, are more angry than understanding. In other words, to paraphrase the Apostle Paul, when I was a child I read this text like a child, and now that I am a mother, I read this text like a *mother*.

Last Tuesday evening, at 7:30 and again at 11:00, we rehearsed the memory of Jesus’ birth. The shepherds arrived. The angels sang. But the shepherds go away a mere twenty verses into chapter 2 of the Gospel of Luke. In the 32 verses that remain, Luke gives us a brief snapshot of Jesus’ naming at eight days and then a mini-gospel narrative about Jesus’ presentation at the temple when he was four weeks old. But then suddenly the gospel video is put on fast forward, and the “baby” is twelve years old, going to Jerusalem once more with his family. What happened between four weeks and twelve years? We don’t know.

There is a lot we don’t know about Jesus’ life. We don’t know if Jesus had colic or diaper rash, if he walked on time or got his teeth on schedule. We know nothing of his first words or how old he was when he learned to read and write. We don’t know if he liked lentils or remembered to brush his teeth without being told.

There is a lot we don’t know about Jesus’ life, for it was not Luke’s intention to write a biography. Luke’s purpose is not to give us a graphic description of Jesus’ childhood. Rather, Luke’s purpose is to tell us that even in his childhood Jesus was the Christ. This story is told not to provide information about human events but rather to allow Luke to add another literary stone to his gospel mosaic which proclaimed to the early church — and still proclaims to us today — that Jesus Christ was Lord — is Lord — and always will be Lord, Messiah, the Christ, Immanuel, the Incarnation, God in our very midst.

And so in this text we see Mary and Joseph struggling with the downside of the Annunciation. They are having to deal with the consequences of being the ones chosen to parent the Christ, to pioneer for us all the problem of living with the Incarnation.

You would think, after all that happened earlier in the story, that Mary and Joseph wouldn’t be surprised by much of anything. But, in fact, Mary and Joseph are surprised. It’s as though none of that earlier stuff — the shepherds, the angels — had ever happened. They don’t seem to have the slightest notion that Jesus is different from the other boys growing up in Nazareth. And they panic.

Most parents reach a panic point much earlier ... usually right after arriving home from the hospital when, surrounded by gifts and instruction booklets, they look at their screaming infant, throw up their hands in terror, and say "Now what?" For, as most of us who have been through it realize, having the baby is just the beginning. What really counts is the next twenty or thirty years.

In a similar way, the real question of Christmas is not "How are we going to celebrate the birth?" but rather "How are we going to live with the Incarnation?" After the Advent candles are lit and the tinsel of Christmas is behind us, we are faced with the hard question of this Sunday between Christmas Eve and Epiphany, "What do we do now that we have proclaimed that God is living in our very midst? Now what? How *are* we going to live with the Incarnation?"

It's not easy. Let's look again at how Mary handles it. Her son is missing. They are a day's journey from Jerusalem and turn back and search the capital for him. After three days, they find him, sitting among the elders in the temple with not a care in the world. Mary explodes in anger. She doesn't understand. She doesn't understand why he didn't go back to Nazareth with the family. She doesn't understand why he returned to the temple. She doesn't understand why he didn't at least tell them his plans. She doesn't understand why he seems so bright, so wise, so full of understanding beyond his years. And she lets him have it. "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." The word she uses is found only three other times in the New Testament, each time in Luke/Acts. It means worried, anxious, in mental anguish, frantic. It's a word that has to do with life and death issues.

She is a distraught woman. She is a distraught mother whose twelve-year-old son has been missing for several days. Moreover, Mary is a distraught Jewish mother whose son has learned well that one of the commandments is "Honor thy father and thy mother," and she has no explanation for this sudden change in his behavior. And she explodes, in anger, just as you or I might do. "Why have you done this? Why did you do this to me? Your father and I are worried about you." Mary is not making a mild inquiry. She is not using her best nondirective empathy skills to draw out her son and help him express his true feelings. Mary has forgotten her Parent Effectiveness Training. She's lost it totally. She's hysterical, and she wants an explanation, NOW.

But Jesus replies, calmly, coolly, on a completely different level, without even a lame excuse about meaning to tell them or forgetting to let them know. "Why were you searching for me?" he asks. "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" ("Don't you understand? Come on, Ma, surely you haven't forgotten all those prophecies and angel choirs.")

For Jesus, it's a matter of priority. To be more specific, it's a matter of vocation. "... I must," says Jesus, "be in my Father's house." "I must be about the work my Father has given me to do." It is the Greek word *dei* which expresses obligation, purpose, vocation. "I must," he says again in chapter 4, "preach, the good news of the kingdom of God ... for I was sent for this purpose." "The Son of Man must," he says in chapter 9, "suffer many things ... be killed ... and on the third day be raised." "Behold," he says in chapter 13, "I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow and the third day must finish my course...."

Jesus was born to a ministry, yes, even conceived to a ministry, says Luke, and here he acknowledges it himself for the first time: in Jerusalem, in the temple, at the time

of Passover ... in the same place and at the same time of the year that his ministry ends ... on a cross, which it was his vocation to bear, a cross on which it was his vocation to die.

But, says Luke, Jesus' parents, Mary and Joseph, humble folk of Nazareth, pious Jews, good people of their day ... "did not understand what he said to them." They are good people. They've tried hard. But the Son of God is in their midst, living in their very home, and they just don't understand.

It's pretty easy to listen to angel choirs. When it comes right down to it, it's generally pretty easy to give birth, even perhaps in a stable with shepherds and exotic foreigners trooping in to see the baby. It's not real then. Bringing the Son of God to life, being the midwife for the Incarnation is simple at first, but it gets tougher as the days and years go on. And here we see the first crack in the porcelain of human presuppositions about what it means to have God with us, in our midst, what it means to be living with the Incarnation.

And that is probably why Luke put this story at the end of his introductory two chapters. For he writes not to share the details of a family crisis or to show us how Mary and Joseph handle the conflicts of life with a preadolescent. Rather he writes to share with the Church, believers from the earliest times right down to the present, the notion that understanding Jesus isn't easy. Not for Mary and Joseph. Not for anyone. Several times during his ministry, Jesus predicts that he will be rejected, betrayed, and given over for crucifixion. Several times he tries to get his disciples to understand. But they never understand.

And neither do we. We prefer to enjoy the tinsel and trappings of Christmas and then move on to other things. We prefer to avoid the hard question of this Sunday in between, this Sunday that sneaks in and catches us between parties and asks a question we would rather not deal with. "What *do we do* now that we have proclaimed that God is living with us? What does it mean to proclaim that we, the Church of Jesus Christ, are once more living with the Incarnation?"

Perhaps the answer is in the asking. For it is not a question we can answer individually. It is a question to the Church, to the community of believers. Perhaps the answer is already with us ... in the story.

When we leave Mary and Joseph at the end of chapter 2, they don't understand, but they hang in. They ponder. They don't comprehend what their son is doing, but they don't give up. They don't know what to expect, but they do know that whatever happens it will be the Father's business that their son is about. And, we are told, Jesus goes home to Nazareth. He hangs in too. It's the first of many gracious acts of hanging in with people who don't have a clue, who simply do not and cannot understand. The rest of the Gospel of Luke is full of these stories. They are stories of the Church. They are stories of us and all Christians everywhere. They are stories of gracious hanging in despite the obvious deficiency that always shows up on our side of the relationship. And that's the Good News.

Let us go forth from here ... telling the good news — Jesus Christ is Born! and Living With Us (Even Though We Don't Understand)!