

Second Sunday of Christmas
January 4, 2009
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During the Christmas season we sang the carol, "What child is this, who, laid to rest, on Mary's lap is sleeping?" During the Advent season we heard John the Baptist testify, "He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me." Later John would identify Jesus as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." Soon in the Epiphany season we will hear stories that confirm Jesus is the Messiah, the One sent from God.

The Revised Common Lectionary offers us a choice of three different Gospel readings on this Second Sunday in the Christmas season. First is the story in Matthew of how Joseph is warned in a dream to take Jesus and his mother and flee into Egypt until the death of Herod. There is Matthew's story about the coming of three men from the East asking "Where is the child who has been born King of the Jews?" When they find Jesus they pay him homage by offering gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Finally we have Luke's account of the boy Jesus in the Temple talking with the teachers and listening to them.

This particular story is unique forming in my mind, a nice bridge between the story of Jesus' birth and the beginning of his public ministry. Luke has already told us that on the eighth day he was presented at the Temple to be circumcised and given the name Jesus. In the Gospel this morning we find the Holy Family making an annual pilgrimage to the Temple to participate in Passover.

Families and friends journeying from Nazareth to Jerusalem and back again would travel together to look out for one another. Luke notes that Jesus was twelve years old when his parents observed the Passover festival by traveling to Jerusalem.

The Law instructed Jewish males to attend three pilgrimages a year - Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles. By the age of twelve Jesus would have traveled with his parents and participated in the Passover observance. When the festival was over his parents joined their group to begin the journey back to Nazareth. They assumed that Jesus was among his relatives perhaps traveling with his cousins. When he did not appear at the end of the first day Mary and Joseph concluded he must have remained in Jerusalem. So, retracing their steps they went to find him.

Finally after searching for three days they found him sitting in the temple listening to the teachers and asking questions. If I were Jesus' father, he would be grounded for life. Can you imagine the anguish his parents suffered while trying to find him? But what a great excuse he had, he was not out carousing with his friends, he was not off trying to make it with some girl, he was in the Temple talking to the teachers. What better excuse can there possibly be?

We grab on to this story because we want to know more about the life of Jesus. We want to know what he was like, was he always that special baby who we sing in a carol did not cry? Was he a goody two shoes, always doing what his mother told him to do? Did he really learn his father's trade as a carpenter? What sort of things did he build with Joseph as his mentor? Did he run and play with the other children in the village? Did he fall and scrap his knee, tell a little fib every now and then? Was he the perfect child we imagine or was he really human?

I think we get a little glimpse of who Jesus was in this story. When his parents found him, his mother rebuked him for the anguish he caused them, "Child, why did you treat us like this? Look your father and I have been searching for you with great anxiety."

In the first spoken words of Jesus, he responds, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" When I first heard this response it seemed rather flip to me, typical twelve year old know it all, showing off for the Temple leaders. In fact at the time he lived, twelve was considered the age of adulthood and talking to the teachers in the Temple would indeed be his life's work.

But, I think there is more to this story. Luke is moving Jesus out of his mother's arms into the world, in particular to Jerusalem where his Gospel will end. Jesus is moving beyond the authority of his earthly family to a larger authority who will draw him back to the Temple where Jesus will claim his own authority causing the religious leaders to conspire against him.

Oh, it is easier to keep Jesus in the cradle. We all enjoy the innocence of babies. We find great hope and comfort in the stories of Jesus' birth. Luke now moves Jesus out of the shelter of his mother's arms into a world filled with need, with greed, with powerful people who oppose him and desperate people who turn to him for life. Jesus will move out of Nazareth to Jerusalem where he will upset the tables of the money changers. upset the temple leaders and ultimately the dominating powers of his world. Jesus will challenge the people of his day, as he challenges us, to look at the world around us and not be satisfied with status quo. Jesus will give sight to the blind,

heal the sick, cause the lame to walk and the deaf to hear. He will challenge the injustice of a system that discriminates against anyone for any reason. He will question authority and offer a higher authority whose intention for all of creation is that we live in peace, in hope and in faith.

We began our worship this morning with this prayer, "O God who wonderfully created and yet more wonderfully restored, the dignity of human nature: Grant that we may share in the divine life of him who humbled himself to share our humanity....."

This collect reminds us, it is all there. When we look at the baby in a manger we are looking at the Creator who has acted in a way to wonderful for words. Wonderfully created and more wonderfully restored.

We human beings who God created to be in fellowship with God have again walked in paths of our own choosing and gotten in serious trouble. But, like our brothers and sisters of old, we hold on to the covenant promise, "I will be their God and they will be my people." As we heard this morning God speaks through a prophet, "I am going to bring them from the farthest parts of the earth....a great company they shall return here.... for I have become a father to Israel...He who scattered Israel will gather them as a shepherd keeps a flock."

The psalmist knows it too and sings, "Happy are the people whose strength is in you! whose hearts are set on the pilgrim's way."

In their willfulness God's people wander though many waste places. But God brings them back, back to the cradle, back to the place where God acts to right the wrongs and set all creation free. Listen to the words of the apostle Paul in his letter to the Ephesians, "God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved." There is music in these words for our ears. Don't try to analysis Paul just allow the phrase to roll over you like a melody. Paul prays that the people of his churches and we today might be enlightened and know the hope to which God has called us. That we might come to know the wondrous love of God that has been revealed in Jesus Christ our Lord.

As the Beloved of God, we are called to be servants of God. Servants committed to working to bring peace, harmony, justice and healing to all of God's creation. Servants who Jesus taught to pray, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven...." O God, make us instruments of your love, your justice, your peace.

Amen