

1st Sunday after Christmas
Luke 2:41-52
December 26&27, 2009
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It looks like Christmas is over. It's time to take down the Christmas tree, and turn off the light displays. It's time to find a place to store our new toys and gadgets. It's time to hurry to the store to check out all the after-Christmas sales. I'm sure there are all kinds of bargains on wrapping paper, toys, and sweaters. After all, it's time to make room for Valentine's Day candy, lawn and garden seed, and spring apparel. Even today's gospel reading seems to be telling us that it's time to hurry along. The night of Jesus' birth, complete with straw-filled manger, glorious angel choirs, and puzzled shepherds, is already a distant memory as we encounter this story of Jesus who is now twelve years old. Soon Jesus will be a grown man, ready to begin his ministry. So there you have it. Christmas is over.

Well...not so fast. Today's Gospel reading actually gives us an interesting perspective for this first Sunday after Christmas and we would do well to not rush past it. It comes at the end of the so-called "Infancy Narrative" which makes up the first two chapters of Luke's gospel. We heard parts of this narrative during the Advent season, and on Christmas Eve. The material in these chapters is found only in Luke's gospel. It includes stories of the births of both Jesus and John the Baptist, accounts of prophecy and fulfillment, and beautiful songs from the lips of Elizabeth and Mary. After the story of Jesus' birth at the beginning of chapter two we find the story of Jesus being presented in the temple on the eighth day after his birth, after which Mary and Joseph take their newborn son to Nazareth. From there we fast forward twelve years to the only story about Jesus' childhood that we have in the Gospels. Here at the conclusion of the Infancy Narrative is this story of Jesus as a boy in the temple.

At first glance, this seems like a story of parents who weren't really paying attention to their child. Or a story of a boy who is testing the limits of his parents' authority. Or a story of

an amazing child prodigy. But to think of the story in these ways would be to miss out on something more significant. It would be to miss out on what this story tells us about Jesus. It would be to miss out on a part of the story that is just beginning to unfold, a story that maybe we don't fully understand, but one that is quite simply amazing.

What strikes me most about today's gospel is how Mary and Joseph are unable to understand what their twelve year old son is telling them. After they return to Jerusalem and finally find Jesus, they ask him why he has treated him this way. They tell him they have been searching with great anxiety, as any good parent would. Then Jesus responds, telling them they really had nothing to worry about. They should have known he would be in his Father's house, that is, the temple. But upon hearing this, Mary and Joseph do not understand what he is telling them.

And *this* is what strikes me. After all that Mary and Joseph have seen and heard, as described by Luke in the first two chapters of his gospel, I think they *should have* understood. Recall the amazing things that have happened: a visit from the angel Gabriel, two unexpected pregnancies, a visit from shepherds who reported seeing angels, a prophecy at the presentation. They have been told on more than one occasion that their child will be special. He will be the Son of God, the Messiah, a light to the Gentiles. Have they not seen some amazing things taking place? Have they not heard what people have been telling them? Don't they understand that this child who stayed behind in the temple is in fact right where he belongs?

Of course this is pretty easy for us to say. We know more than Mary and Joseph did at the time. We know the rest of the story. We know what is going to happen to Jesus, and how significant he will be. We have four gospels that tell us who Jesus was, what he did, and what he said, all told in such a way as to let us know *why* this matters. We know about Jesus' ministry, his healing and teaching, his challenging the status quo. We know about the cross, Jesus'

suffering, death, and resurrection. We *know* all this from the Gospels. But do we *understand* it? Can we fully understand who Jesus is? Or are we more like Mary and Joseph, unable to understand Jesus?

Ever since the earliest days of the church, we have tried to understand who Jesus is. For hundreds of years we have spoken of Jesus as both human and divine. But what does that really *mean*? Luke gives us some clues in today's gospel. On one hand Jesus is shown to be human, just like us. Jesus has earthly parents, a human characteristic. He is obedient to those parents, something that would normally be expected of any child. Jesus goes to the temple, something Jewish boys would normally do at that age. Jesus listens and asks questions, a very human endeavor. But Jesus is also shown to be divine, like God. He has a heavenly Father whom he also obeys. Jesus shows an amazing level of understanding for a twelve year old as he sits with the teachers in the temple. Jesus says he must be in his Father's house, and he isn't talking Joseph's house in Nazareth. Jesus is *both* human and divine. But do we really understand what this means?

What it means for us is that God is with us. God came in human form, through human parents, to a human setting, yet he was still God. We don't fully understand how and why all this happened. After all, scholars and theologians have been trying to figure this out since the beginning of the church. What we *can* understand is that Jesus walked on this earth as a human being. He experienced pleasure and pain, happiness and anger, joy and sadness. He knew what it was like to be hungry, thirsty, and exhausted. Through the life of Jesus, God experienced what we experience.

And why does this all matter? It matters because, as someone put it in our Men's Bible Study last Saturday, the world seems like it is in worse condition now than it ever has been in his lifetime. We could argue whether or not that is really the case, but we can't argue the fact that

the world is indeed a broken place, and at times it seems like a completely hopeless place. Wars rage, dictators oppress, nations are divided, weapons are stockpiled. Difficult economic times have taken a toll on people's lives, resulting in poverty, homelessness, hunger, and unemployment. The burden of fear, addiction, anxiety, or loneliness weighs on people's lives. The exploitation of the earth's resources are leading us down an unknown path. The injustices of racism and classism hold people back. Disease, cancer, and death are all very real. The world may or may not be worse than it has ever been, but it is certainly does seem that way.

This is all the more reason why it matters that God became vulnerable and came to us in human form. God knows we live in a broken world. God knows what we as human beings are experiencing, and this gives us reason to hope. This is why today's story matters. Today's story of Jesus in the temple is part of a larger story, and were it not for this *big* story, we would have no hope. And this is the *big story*: The boy who stayed behind in the temple will one day preach, teach, and heal. This boy will also one day come back to Jerusalem, not to study in the temple, but to go all the way to the cross. This boy will then rise again, and death itself will be defeated, and someday he will come again and the brokenness of this world will be no more. *This is the big story*, the story of God's saving power for us.

It is a story that we do not fully understand. Like Mary and Joseph we don't quite get why Jesus has to be in his Father's house. We don't quite get why God came to us as a human being. We don't quite get why God would save us through a cross. But this is how God works, in ways that we do not fully understand.

So what is our response? We can respond like the teachers who were with Jesus in the temple, with amazement. We can be amazed at this child, we can be amazed at this new thing that God is doing. Like Mary we can treasure these things in our heart. We can stand and wonder, even if we do not understand. Maybe *right now* is a time when we can stop and be

amazed, to treasure these things in our hearts, now that the hustle and bustle leading up to Christmas is over. The pressures of shopping, decorating, wrapping, cooking, and cleaning are all over. But Christmas itself is not yet over. There is still time to let God amaze you. Let God amaze you, with this child, with this story, this *big* story. Let God amaze you, not just now because the season of Christmas will be over in a few days, but for the whole year.

And out of that amazement we respond as we did in our Psalm—praise and exalt God! Or as the writer of Colossians encourages us to do—sing hymns and songs to God, giving thanks to God! Or in the words of our next hymn—Rejoice! Now is the time for rejoicing, because we have hope. God is with us! We live in a broken world, in which all is not well, but God is with us, and God promises to one day make all things right. We know this from the story that has just begun. Let God amaze you with this story and rejoice, because we know how this story will end. We rejoice because this story is for all of us.

Amen

T: Mary and Joseph did not understand Jesus

S: We do not understand Jesus

T: Jesus amazed the teachers

S: God amazes us