

“Living with God”

Woods Memorial Presbyterian Church

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Scripture: Luke 2:41-52

“What was Mary thinking?” I can’t help asking myself when I hear this story, even though I’ve read the commentaries which say you’re not supposed to ask that kind of question of this particular text. This story about how a 12-year old Jesus remained behind in the Temple after his parents left Jerusalem, which appears only in Luke’s Gospel, is a text which the major commentaries all advise interpreting strictly Christologically, that is, strictly for what it teaches us about the nature of Christ, never psychologically. They recommend this approach because it is pretty clear from the text itself that it was not originally written by Luke, but was actually borrowed by him from a source who was unfamiliar with the miraculous birth stories which Luke knew. Although Luke edited this text into his own, it was not originally written to teach us about how Mary faired in parenting Jesus after the shepherds returned to their fields. Accordingly, the commentators argue that it would be unreasonable for us to wonder after reading this text if Mary somehow forgot about the portents of stars and angels after twelve short years, as the text makes it seem that she has. Similarly, we are not supposed to judge her for leaving the crowds in Jerusalem without her twelve year old son within sight at all times, or be shocked that she could have dared to lose the Son of God given to her by God to raise. Instead, we’re supposed to focus on what this text teaches us about the nature of Jesus. Luke wanted to establish that Jesus knew who his real Father was, and that he was prematurely wise and unquestionably faithful as a child. Long before he was baptized, he knew the business to which his Father had called him, and was eager to undertake it. That’s the point of the story, at least according to the commentaries. Luke was attempting to respond to believers’ natural curiosity about what Jesus was like as a child, by offering definitive proof that Jesus was consistent throughout his lifetime in his self-identification, his teaching, and his commitment to God.

Luke was not the only early Christian writer who tried to do this. Although his Gospel was the only canonical text to incorporate a story about Jesus’ childhood, there were lots of other childhood stories floating around those first few decades after Jesus’ ascension, in gospels that did not make the cut to become part of the Bible. The *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* in particular is filled with fantastic tales of the young Jesus working miracles, from his bringing a flock of clay birds to life, to his stretching the length of a short board to help Joseph with a carpentry project, and many others. (See *Inf. of Thomas* 2:1-7; 13: 1-4). These stories did not make it into the Bible because they are more fabrication than fact. But even they attempt to establish the same point that Luke was making, that Jesus always had the power to do amazing things because he was always fully God and fully human at the same time. He did not become that way, he was born that way, and lived out his life in keeping with that identity and calling.

The fact that this text affirms such a fundamental Christological message is one of the reasons the Lectionary assigned the story to today, the Sunday after Christmas. Even though it may seem kind of weird from a chronological standpoint for us to go from welcoming the baby in swaddling clothes on Thursday night, to talking about Jesus as a preteen today, only to return to Jesus as a child next week for Epiphany, it actually makes great sense theologically to assign this story to today because it completes a sequence of Christological “aha” moments in the Gospels about the beginning of Jesus’ life. First we hear the story of Jesus’ parents coming to

recognize him as the Son of God. (Luke 1; Matt. 1). Then we get “the least of these” in society, the shepherds, being given the Good News about Jesus’ identity. (Luke 2: 8-19). Then we get the prophets, Simeon and Anna, representing the wise among the faith community, proclaiming the truth. (Luke 2:15-40). The Gentile’s “aha” moment captured in Matthew’s story of the magi, (Matt. 2:1-12), gets saved for next Sunday on Epiphany, so that leaves only Jesus himself to name the truth of his own identity, which he effectively does in word and deed in today’s text. “Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” Jesus told his parents in the Temple, making it perfectly clear that he wasn’t talking about Joseph. (Luke 2:49). Jesus knew who he was and what he was called to do. His proclamation in the Temple was kind of like his confirmation, his moment to affirm himself publicly what his parents had already affirmed about him twelve years earlier when they first encountered the angel Gabriel and agreed to be a part of God’s plan for salvation for the world.

As Disciples of Christ, we should know the Christological truths this text conveys about Jesus’ faithfulness, and his own understanding of his relationship with God. But even knowing this, when I read this story, I still can’t help thinking about Mary. The original author of this text may not have known about Jesus’ miraculous birth, about the angels, shepherds, and all the holy hoopla, but we do. We just celebrated this wondrous event three days ago. Consequently, even though, as a parent, my heart aches in sympathy with Mary for the nightmarish three days of frantic worry Jesus put her through, the disciple in me still wants to ask her two questions: “How on earth could you lose the Son of God like that, you who were given miracle upon miracle to convince you of God’s presence with you?” And “Did you really think that life would go on normally with God living with you each and every day?” I mean just think about it. If you gave birth to the son of God, wouldn’t you be just a tad overprotective about him? I know I would be. And wouldn’t you be very curious about what he would do and follow him around everywhere just to see what would happen? I think most of us would. Leaving God incarnate behind that way just doesn’t make sense.

We cannot know, of course, what Mary really thought about Jesus as a child from this text. The NRSV says she “treasured” the whole Temple experience in her heart, which sounds to me like an overly-positive translation given both the trauma of the event and the original Greek itself, which simply says that she “carried” the experience with her. But in any case, I think that the fact that the text seems to invite us to ask these kinds of questions of Mary is actually a good thing, notwithstanding what the commentaries say, because in thinking about how Mary behaved in the years after the first Christmas morn, we are forced to examine the nature of our own ongoing relationship with Christ post-Christmas as well. Like Mary, we have experienced the miracle of the stable and the star; we have heard the heavenly host and the promises of Gabriel. We know that the little babe in the manger was indeed Love Incarnate, Emmanuel, God-with-us. We also know what Mary at this point in the story does not, which is that the story which began with such an astonishing miracle ends with an even bigger one, with the resurrection of Christ and the redemption of the world. So we do not have to wonder about the identity of Christ; he is our teacher and savior, our ultimate truth and our greatest hope. Or to put it another way, we have more than enough knowledge about who and what Christ was to justify our hanging onto him and his every word tightly either like overprotective parents or the most devout disciples.

But knowing these things is not the same as having an “aha” moment about these truths in our hearts. Sometimes, oftentimes, we can name these truths, and even celebrate them, but

still go back to our ordinary lives afterwards as if nothing significant has changed or should change. We can pack up our holiday paraphernalia, as Joseph and Mary did, round the corner into the New Year, leaving Bethlehem and Jerusalem behind, and not realize for a long time that we haven't actually taken Emmanuel with us on our journey into the New Year. In effect, we too can lose Jesus because when it comes to practicing faithful discipleship, knowing the doctrine about the nature of Christ in the abstract just isn't enough. We need our Christology and our psychology to intersect. Before we can take Christ with us into the New Year, we have to feel what it means for each of us on a personal level that Christ was fully human and fully God.

Christmas goes a long way toward helping us feel the implications of the fully human part because it is a holiday specifically created to celebrate the Incarnation. On Christmas Eve we recognize that God took on human form and joined us in the trenches so that we would know that we are not condemned for our brokenness, we are loved in spite of it. The fact that God chose to become as a vulnerable, powerless baby, born into poverty and political turmoil, instead of into privilege, power and wealth, tells us in no uncertain terms that the one who came and walked among us was Love Incarnate, not Judgment Incarnate. This is our Christmas gift: we don't have to be shiny, successful, perfect people to receive God's love. We don't have to explain to God how hard life can be and what sadness or rage or fear feels like, and how we worry about the future. God already knows because Jesus lived it. Can't you feel then, the difference Jesus' humanity makes to each of us? In response to the prophet's cry: "Comfort o comfort my people!" we have received comfort beyond our imagining. God is *with us*. Really. We are not alone, we are not unloved, we are not beyond redemption. Hallelujah!

But the amazing feeling of affirmation which this news brings is not the end of the Christmas story. If we really believe in this remarkable gift we have been given, then we also must embrace the consequences which come from accepting it. As today's text suggests, that requires our thinking about the implications not just of the "with us" part of the Emmanuel equation, but also the "God" part of the equation as well. Claiming Christ cannot be simply about seeking affirmation and warm fuzzies when the one who came to live as one of us was none other than Almighty God, our wise and powerful Creator. The greatest authority of the universe did not come in Jesus just to comfort us; God also came to call us and guide us out of our destructive ways and into new ways of being that will change us and our world for the better. When we welcome Christ into our homes and hearts, therefore, we must do so trusting that God knows better than we do what is truly good; and we must do so willing to be reshaped and redirected into newer and better versions of ourselves, even if we feel as though who we are is pretty darn good.

C.S. Lewis described the impact of the Incarnation something like this. He said "Imagine that you have before you a great work, either a symphony or a novel. You have this great work and are quite happy with it as it is until someone comes to you and says, "I have a bit of manuscript that I found that is the central passage of that symphony, or the central chapter of that novel. The work is incomplete without it. This missing passage is really the center of the whole work." What do you do then? You could reject it because you like the work just fine as it is, but that isn't a very satisfying choice because now you know that the version you have, however good, is far less perfect and complete than it could have been and should have been. So really the only thing to do is to put the new piece of manuscript or music in the central position of your

work, and see what it does to the whole of the rest. If it constantly brings out new meanings from the rest of the work, if it adds depth and color to the familiar, makes you notice things you didn't notice before, and even changes the way the melody or plot seems to unfold, then you know that the man was right. That missing piece really was the center of the whole work. And the work is far better than you ever imagined it could be for having that piece restored to its center."¹

When we receive Christ into our lives as God Incarnate, the work which is our lives is inevitably transformed. Priorities shift, perspectives change, melodies are magnified and diminished. This can be unsettling at first. But if we truly understand who it is we have taken in, then we must put God and God's ways before everything else in our lives because there is no doubt that they were meant to be the center of the work of our lives. Jesus demonstrated how to do this in today's text. By remaining in the Temple, he put God before everything else, even the needs of his family. Notice he did not reject his family or their value completely. The text states expressly that after this incident he went home to live with his parents obediently. But in choosing to remain in the Temple initially, he embodied the very God-centered values that as an adult he commanded all of his disciples to practice.

If we follow Jesus' example in this way as his faithful disciples, we can be sure that we will not lose track of him in the year ahead no matter what life throws at us. But that "if," unfortunately, is a biggie because lots of us consciously or unconsciously leave this part of the Christmas message behind. Since many of God's claims stand in tension with our world's claims and ideals, it is just easier for us to try to wrap God around the edges of these desires and loyalties than for us to put God in the center and let the melodies of our lives rearrange. Rearranging the center takes work, and can cause some discomfort, especially when doing so requires displacing worthy claims that already live there. As bible scholar Alan Culpepper rightly observed "The hard[est] decisions are not between right and wrong, but those that call us to choose between options when both represent worthy claims."² The things that most of us would put at the top of our list of worthy claims, family, nation, particular political perspectives, security, home care, you name it, are not bad things. They are worthy claims. But worthy or not, we cannot give our greatest loyalty to any of these things *and* to God at the same time. If we are going to put God first, therefore, and keep Christ at the center of our lives, then as the New Year unfolds we must reexamine all of our loyalties and practices. We must examine our buying and spending in light of Christ, our politics in light of Christ, our relationships and allegiances in light of Christ, our goals and hopes in light of Christ. We must change our views and patterns in order to be in tune with the melody of the Gospel we've been given, because that's the only way we can be sure to engage the things that really matter in this life in the best and most perfect way.

Although these difficult choices and changes are challenging, they are not impossible for us to make, if we just remember who is asking this of us. The God who loved us enough to come and live with us, the God who loved us enough to give everything to save us, the God who tells us each and every day, "My beloved, you are not alone, I am with you," is the one who is

¹ Lewis, C.S., "*The Grand Miracle*" in *Watch for the Light: Readings for Advent and Christmas* (Farmington: Plough Pub. House, 2001), December 28th entry.

² Culpepper, R. Alan, "The Gospel of Luke" in *New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, Vo. IX, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 78.

calling us to change. Who could we possibly trust more to do the right thing by us? Who knows more about what is truly good? And so all we really have to do as we journey into the New Year is to keep our Christology in the forefront of our mind at all times. Or to put it another way, all we really have to do is to resolve to be “conscious” Christians in the New Year. According to psychologist M. Scott Peck, the literal derivation of the word “conscious” is “to know with.”³ In a purely psychological sense, that meaning doesn’t make a whole lot of sense. To know with what? But if we allow our psychology and Christology to intersect, then the word makes perfect sense. It’s not “with what” but “with whom.” We were made to know *with God*, that is made to make every decision, every hope, every action on our journey of faith jointly with God. As Christ set his eyes on God and never lost his Father for an instant throughout his entire life, so we are to keep our eyes fixed on Christ at all times, even after the holidays are over. He is our loving comforter; he is our wise guide. As angels and shepherds, prophets and parents have shown us, he is indeed *God-with-us*. Knowing this, why would we ever leave him behind?

³ Peck, M. Scott, The Road Less Traveled & Beyond: Spiritual Growth in an Age of Anxiety (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1997), 89-90.