

Sunday December 30th, 2012

Christmas I

1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26 and Luke 2:41-52

“Why Have You Done this?”

Have you ever noticed the times when a four-year-old’s voice is louder than a hundred adult voices, and can somehow cut through the thickest din of noise? Several years ago, a man returned from a business trip just when a storm hit with crashing thunder, and severe lightening. As he entered his bedroom at about 2:00 A.M., he found his two children huddled up in bed with his wife, apparently scared of the storm.

He reluctantly resigned himself to sleeping in the guest room. The next day he spoke to his children, and explained that it was okay to sleep with Mom when the storm was bad, but when he was expected home, he did not want them to sleep with Mom. They agreed that that was okay. After his next trip a few weeks later, this same man’s wife, and children, went to pick him up at the airport.

The man’s plane was late, and so a large crowd of people had gathered waiting for the delayed passengers. As the father entered the waiting area, his four-year-old son saw him and came running to greet him. As he ran, he shouted in a great voice, “Hi Dad! I’ve got some good news!” As the father waved back, he shouted, “What is the good news?” The young lad replied, “Nobody slept with Mommy while you were away this time!”

As you can imagine, the very noisy airport became very quiet as everyone in the waiting area looked at the boy, then at the dad, and then scanned the area to find his poor, embarrassed mother. I am sure that the mother and dad looked back on this years later, and had a great laugh, but at the time it was likely one of the most uncomfortable moments in their lives.

The young boy though, cannot be blamed for causing the embarrassment. His statement to his father was entirely correct, and was a matter of pride to the young boy who wanted to show he had respected his father’s wishes. He was, in fact, doing the will of his father. The embarrassment comes when the rest of the world looks in on this scene. The other people in the waiting area were not privileged to the back story.

Without this back story, they would have jumped to conclusions about what was going on in this household. Even from our perspective, we laugh at the story, because we have all the facts; but if we had been in that terminal on that fateful day, we too might have been shocked by the boy’s declaration. The point is that families, all families in fact, have inside information. We all have, in our families, a context that is unknown to the world.

Families have ways of speaking to each other, a history, specific goals, and a myriad of interactions that no one else, but God himself, knows about. The same goes without saying, for Jesus. On this earth, he was part of a family group. He had a mother named Mary; an earthly father named Joseph, and almost certainly by this point, other siblings. In this family group, there would have been, just like with our families, inside information: stories, history, jokes, tragedies, struggles; all things that only they knew about.

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And just like in our families, this shared experience was one of the things that bonded them together. There were also expectations that grew out of this shared experience. All of us, who have even a cursory knowledge of family life, realize what tremendous investment children represent. Parents pour all their resources into raising their offspring, and in fact, if we didn't, we would be charged as criminals for neglecting our kids.

We have just passed through a few days, in which a good part of our society, was making every effort possible to indulge our children; often at great expense. However, all this investment does carry with it a certain level of expectation.

In response to this investment, parents expect obedience, respect, social interaction, and Lord willing; some love. I have heard many a parent complain that their children simply don't give them the respect, or attention, they believe they deserve. One of the great tragedies that all of us hear about frequently, are how elderly parents are abandoned, or neglected by their adult children.

For those fans of the Simpson's, a great example of this is how Homer treats his father, Grandpa Simpson. Episodes picture the poor old man being left behind, dumped casually at the senior's home, having his reminiscences ignored, and his gifts, rare as they are, are cheapened by the family's response to them. It may be a funny portrayal, but we all realize there is some truth lurking behind it all.

"The Cat's in the Cradle" the old song goes. In Jesus' day there were very high expectations. Children were a defense against financial disaster as one aged. In Jesus' day, children were expected to care for their aging parents. Actually, it was the son that was responsible, as the eldest son would remain in the parental home as the heir apparent, raising his own children, while caring for his parents.

My Chinese friends that I met while in Toronto told me it is the same in many parts of China, where the son is to care for parents. The one child policy though, has upset this expectation considerably, as those with daughters, fear abandonment as they age. These daughters will be expected to help care for their in-laws. This responsibility of the eldest son is portrayed with deep emotion, when Jesus is on the cross, and turns the care of his mother over to his disciple John.

So, with all this in our minds, we approach our gospel lesson for today. It is a story rarely contemplated or preached on. It is a story we frequently tell and quickly move on to Jesus' adulthood. However, I think we need to pay very close attention to this story for a few reasons. First, Luke thought it important enough to include in his writing. Second, with the exception of apocryphal writings, or writings not in the bible, this is the only time we see Jesus between being an infant, and being a grown man.

Another reason we should pay attention, is that this is also the first recorded incidence when Jesus actually speaks. Although he has most certainly been saying plenty to his family and friends as he grew up, these are his first words we are privileged to read.

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Finally, this story is significant, because it is a transition; a transition from infant narrative, to the narrative of Christ's ministry, and it is this transition we really need to focus on.

The story is straight forward enough. Mary, Joseph, and Jesus, and likely other children and relatives: had made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the Passover. The scriptures tell us, that this pilgrimage was a usual occurrence for the family. It was time of celebration, of family, and of worship, not unlike what we just experienced to some extent with Christmas.

On the journey home, Mary and Joseph had not seen Jesus, but they assumed he was traveling with others in the group heading to Nazareth. It was a very logical assumption. They thought that Jesus was probably walking with a cousin, or a friend.

However, when evening approached, and the group prepared to camp for the night, and Jesus was expected for his evening meal; he was a no show. Mary and Joseph reacted like all parents would, and became very afraid. As they moved among their relatives, and friends searching for him, their anxiety would have increased exponentially. I am sure that all kinds of terrible thoughts would have crept into their minds.

What if he has been kidnapped? What if he is injured somewhere along the road, and no one saw him? What if he offended a Roman soldier, or a religious authority, and had been arrested? Their imaginations would have run rampant. Theories about where he was, and what happened to him, would have been offered by anxious relatives and friends. If this had happened today, Mary and Joseph would have called the police, and maybe an Amber alert would have been issued.

Mary and Joseph did the only thing they could do; they retraced their steps back to Jerusalem. For three days they searched for him. On a side note; I think the three days is significant, as we remember the three days in the tomb. After three days they found him where? In the temple; but he wasn't just hanging out. Mary and Joseph find him in deep conversation with the religious teachers.

Luke tells us that the religious teachers were utterly amazed at his understanding, and his answers to questions. You cannot blame the religious teachers for what happened, by the way. The nature of Judaism at that time was that there was a whole culture developed around rabbinical teaching, where young boys were encouraged to seek biblical knowledge.

In the Old Testament we read how young Samuel was dedicated to the temple, and to God, and traditionally many a young boy or young man spent their time at the temple learning. There was a twist in this story, because in this case, it is clear that Jesus was the one teaching.

The scolding that Mary gives Jesus is completely understandable. For three days they had been frantic. They had been anxious and fearful; imagining the worst. They would be relieved to find him, but livid for what Jesus put them through.

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Here is that thing called family expectation, raising its head. Mary and Joseph expected Jesus not to cause them undo worry, and to respect them by staying near them. If it were us, we might suggest that such behaviour is what is causing us to have grey hair. I heard a delightful story; at least it seems delightful now, from one of my parishioners in Quebec who is now in his eighties.

When he was a young boy, his mother took him on a shopping expedition to Eaton's in downtown Montreal. The store was an old-style department store, with different levels housing different departments. At some point, the young boy wandered away from his mom, and proceeded to climb out on the ledge on the fifth floor through an open window. Terrifying, and his mother always claimed such a stunt aged her significantly, even though she lived well into her nineties.

Life was hard enough for Mary and Joseph, without having to spend three days searching for a wayward son. I should point out also, that Jesus is not yet thirteen, and therefore not had his bar mitzvah, and therefore not considered an adult in Jewish society. He is still considered a child. Jesus' answer to them, again his first recorded words in scripture, seems at first to dismiss their concerns as not very significant.

"But why did you need to search? You should have known that I would be in my Father's house." Now I don't know about your kids, but if mine went missing, the church may be the last place I'd search for them. Kids, when seeking some freedoms don't head to church normally. They might head to the mall, the arcade, or some other place of amusement, but the church?

Jesus' words, which might seem somewhat cryptic at first, amounts to him saying, "You of all people have the inside knowledge of who I am, and what I am all about. Where else would I be, except in the place where God's action and will is played out?" I should also point out it is interesting that Luke makes a real point of recording these significant moments in the temple.

The Gospel of Luke begins with Zechariah's vision in the temple, Simeon and Anna prophecy about Jesus is in the temple, and the birth narrative ends in today's passage once again in the temple. Then Luke ties it all together with Jesus' trial back at the temple.

Luke tells us that Mary and Joseph did not know what he meant by such a comment. But it is Jesus' answer for putting Mary and Joseph through all of this. The passage ends with saying that Jesus went back with them to Nazareth and was obedient to them growing in both height and wisdom. Mary is also recorded as storing up all these things in her heart, and likely she became the source of some of these events to Luke; especially the birth.

This little, and often overlooked story, is all about expectations. Actually, I should say a clash of expectations, and I think even more significantly a clash of identities. Luke introduces a very significant theme in this passage. It is the theme of Jesus' obedience to his Heavenly Father, supersedes any ties he has to his earthly family.

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This passage hints strongly at another incident that three of the Gospel's record. It happens in Mark 3:31-35, Matthew 12:46-50 and in Luke 8:19-21. In all three cases the words of the passage are almost identical. The story tells of a time when Mary and Jesus' brothers come to see him, but they cannot get close to him. Word gets to Jesus that his family is there to see him and Jesus responds, "My mother and my brothers are all those who hear the message of God and obey it."

I think Mary and the brothers assumed they could access Jesus whenever they wanted; after all they were family. There was an expectation. Jesus is not being uncaring to his earthly family; he is simply reaffirming what he said, when he was a boy of 12 years old in the temple. The relationship that matters most to him is the one he has with his Heavenly Father. In the language of the streets, Jesus answers the question, "Who's your Daddy?" by pointing heavenward.

The story in Luke 2 is a fore shadow of Jesus accepting his destiny, and his place in God's plan. It is also the moment when, as significant as Mary and Joseph's part in the great drama of the incarnation was, it takes a back seat now to the greater mission of Christ. The brief birth narratives that we just celebrated are over. The festivities of lights, decorations, feast and gifts is to be set aside for the harder journey; the journey to Calvary.

We can understand if Mary and Joseph would have desired Jesus to stay a little boy. Who among us hasn't expressed that our children grow up far too quickly? It is inevitable, that our own children begin to make a life for themselves that does not focus on us. Just like we have to, Mary and Joseph had to begin to let go, but it wasn't easy for them, as the three records of the incident about the family's visit to Jesus indicates.

As much as we want to, we cannot linger at the manger. It is not the end of the story, or even the point of the story. The hard stuff lies ahead. Are we ready for it? Are we prepared to become the mother, brothers or sisters of Jesus by doing his will? Because if we refuse to move on to the cross and what it represents, then Jesus' birth has no meaning for us, and really no power.

Just as Jesus grew in height and wisdom, we too must let our faith grow tall, and our hearts and minds become filled with the wisdom of God.