

“In My Father’s House”

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We are in the sixth day of Christmas, as I shared in the welcome when we came in. We are still surrounded with these celebratory signs in our worship service here. Some of you don’t perhaps celebrate the twelve days of Christmas. We do in our house. We don’t give gifts each of the twelve days, but we definitely want to have our decorations up at least until the twelfth day of Christmas - and then I try to get them down by February. [Laughter.] We love that extended season.

In my family we have a Christmas time again. We are right in the middle of Christmas time again. I’m a pastor. I was ordained in 1998. My father was a pastor, so getting together on Christmas Day was not a feasible thing to do in my family. So we would gather the week after and that tradition continues in my family, as our relatives are here and come from afar to celebrate with us. So this season for us - for me - is this festival, pilgrimage time and as we in America do not generally go to a place like the Temple in Jerusalem, we tend to go to our family. We go back to home, or wherever our family are gathered, or friends are near, and we are in the midst of this story in the Lectionary passage today.

We see a family who is traveling to celebrate. They are coming together. They are caravanning with probably a number of folks who they know from their town of Nazareth - and we see this glimpse of the continuation of the Christmas story. It is an interesting story. It is one that parents have trouble identifying with.

It’s a glimpse literarily - if this interests you - this is called a Hero’s Story. So, there are three moments in time in Luke’s story to carry us from his birth into his ministry. The first is the virgin birth with the angels’ singing. This is the second. It’s this little moment when he is twelve years old. And, then, the next we hear is John the Baptist baptizing him. This follows a similar pattern. It is a way of giving us a sense of the trajectory of where Jesus’ life was going.

We see this, too, in the same way, in Samuel’s story. We read a little bit this morning of Hannah. Hannah was barren and could not have a child. She went to the Temple and prayed. She offered, if she was allowed to have a child, “I will dedicate him to your service,” and she bore Eli, who was dedicated to the service. And, we read today about how Hannah would go every year - she would make a new robe for him to serve in the Temple, and Eli the priest would pray for her and for her husband, asking the blessing that they would have many children, and they did.

That story – that piece - is right before the call of Eli. You might remember the story. Eli is a young boy, about twelve years old, and he is woken up in the middle of the night and he thinks that it is the Priest calling him. So he [the priest] goes and says, “Eli. I am here.”

Eli says, “I didn’t call on you,” and then he goes back to bed. This happens a few times and Eli eventually explains to him, “Maybe this is God calling you. Why don’t you go and answer: ‘Here I am. I am listening. Please speak.’”

So, that is an example of Samuel's story. In Samuel we see this specific birth story - how he was dedicated to the Temple, and then we see him at twelve years old, how God is making him a prophet at this young age, and then, later, we hear about him becoming a judge over Israel, and about his anointing of the first King Saul.

In the same way, Luke is giving us a sense - he has collected pieces of Jesus' story and he shares this story. The question would be: In what way is this a hero's story? What does this reveal to us about Jesus? Because so far it sounds like a story about how awful it is to raise a Divine child. [Laughter.]

The nightmare of losing a child is one that we as parents are not even interested in entertaining or imagining. It is not a joyous thing to imagine. I remember I used to teach a sixth grade camp when I was working at Calvin Crest. I have shared with you before. And, the sixth graders would come up and we had a program: this volunteer program - a neat program - with a group of people who would come up with horses and they would present a program to the kids called "hug a tree." The purpose of this program - its entire purpose - was to convince the kids that if they ever got lost in the forest was to hug a tree and stay there, because the challenge of finding kids, is you don't know how far they have wandered away. If they would just stay put, then you could find them in a short amount of time.

We had a child, during the summer, who was one of the young kids. He had come up with his family, when his older siblings were going to stay for the week, and we figured out mid-afternoon that nobody could find this child. I think he was probably about 6 years old.

So we called up the sheriff, who came up and he led us in a rescue to go and search for this child. We searched all over camp and then we took our staff of about 60 people - this was before cell phones, so we had no means of communicating with each other, except for the few spare radios we had. The sheriff organized us into parties to go fanning out into the forest and, about an hour later, a very triumphant 20-year-old staff person came back with this child in his arms. The child was filthy, but smiling and happy, and it was the celebration of the found child. It is not a pleasant thing to imagine what this would have been for the parents.

But, what happened? Why does Luke share with us this story? There are two features that point to who Jesus was and who he was going to become. The first - once they find him - was Jesus in the Temple talking with the leaders - the teachers - asking questions, and they marvel at his insight and his answers.

So, the first piece that it shows us is that Jesus is not like the other twelve-year-old children. He has an insight that is special. He has an ability to understand the law that is unique. He is still a child. He is still growing, but something is different about him.

The second piece of it revolves around this exchange between Mary and Jesus. Mary says to him, "Why have you done this to us? We have been searching *forever* for you," and his response actually feels pretty familiar. It is one where he says, "I didn't do anything wrong." He was bewildered. "Why didn't you know where to look for me? Wouldn't it be obvious that I would be in my Father's house?"

As we look through the scholarly exchange digging into this, we look at this question: What did Mary understand, because Mary didn't anticipate this. Jesus assumed they would know. It just seemed right to him. It seemed like the thing that you would do. I would go to the house of God to my Father's house.

When I reflect on this, I think about how hard it is to get into Mary's head, because we see the story from the outside after we have heard it all of our lives - after we have heard it to completion. We take for granted that when the angels came and shared with the shepherds, "Behold a child is born, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Prince of Peace, Everlasting Father," that they understood what that meant. But, when Mary was given the word that she was going to bear "the son of God," she didn't know what *we* knew - what "the son of God meant." They were still figuring this out.

King David was called "a son of God" because he was chosen by God, and because he loved God and served God. Mary didn't not yet understand what it meant that Jesus was "the son of God," so she pondered it. She stored these things away and she became this one who experienced the birth of Christ, his growing up, his ministry - and gave testimony of it into the early Church, as it is recorded in Acts - when Luke could learn from her about these things.

So the people of Jesus' day, with this twelve-year-old, didn't know what we need. They were still learning what it meant that Jesus was the son of God - it was still being revealed.

Another piece I appreciate, in the midst of this hero's story, is the fact that he went to the Temple of God: "Did you not know I would be in my Father's house?"

We are gathered today in our Sanctuary. It is a place where we gather and worship. It is a place that we have meaning in. It is different than what Jesus went to. Something changed in the Old Testament. The Temple of God was the place where God resided. There was an inner "Holy of Holies" where only those who had practiced ceremonies of cleanliness would go in. But upon Jesus death, Scripture records that the curtain was torn that separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the world.

At Pentecost, the Spirit came and indwelt with those who were there. In Baptism today with Lukas, we celebrated the promise that God's Spirit comes and dwells within us. We no longer have to go on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, to go to the place where God dwells. God is close to us. God is within us - though we may be broken, though it may be difficult for us to recognize, though many things may distract us from it - God is closer to us than our own breath. God is present with us wherever we go.

So for us, the house of God doesn't have the same meaning it had for Jesus - as Jesus went to be in the house of his Father. But still, we humans have a relationship with place - place matters to us. *This* Sanctuary means something to us, as a congregation. On Christmas Eve, a few days ago, we lit our candles and we raised them in song. Here in this Sanctuary, we baptized Lukas and many children before him; we ordained Elders and Deacons; some of you were married in this Sanctuary. In this Sanctuary we have gathered - week after week - called together to be the family of God. And, in this place, it isn't a place where God is especially present to us, but perhaps it is a place where we are especially aware of God's presence.

So in the midst of this festival season, in this sixth day of Christmas, as many are gathered in traveling, we have found ourselves here in this place - in our house of God - and we are participating in an echo of what Jesus, our Lord, did coming to this place - this place of meaning, this place of grounding - and that is a *good* thing. It is a *good* gift of God to us, to have a place with memory, where we can gather and bring our hearts.

Amen.