

“Christmas Stories”

Valley Presbyterian Church – December 27, 2009

First Sunday after Christmas

Psalm 148

Rev. John Wahl

Luke 2:41-52

Over the years, we find out that Christmas stories are not just about newborn babies, but about children of all ages. We see that Christmas stories teach us about all kinds of gifts, far beyond those that are purchased and wrapped, given and received. We see that Christmas stories are not just about one night in Bethlehem long ago, but about customs and rituals that develop within families and communities over time.

During his childhood, Jesus would travel each year with his family and others from his hometown to Jerusalem for the Passover celebration. It would take about four days each way to travel the hundred-and-fifty mile roundtrip. This annual event became a routine part of Jesus’ religious heritage. Just like our children might grow accustomed to a trip to Grandma’s for Thanksgiving, Jesus must have grown to expect these family visits to the Temple and comfortable being there with his family – as if it was a home away from home.

The initial problem in this story – Jesus inadvertently getting left behind – we can understand well enough. When kids get older – and, at twelve, Jesus was nearing what in Jewish culture was considered manhood – they are given more latitude and freedom. His parents might have thought he preferred to be with his friends or cousins rather than with them. And so, they begin their journey home and walk for a day before realizing that he is gone. It would have taken another day to retrace their steps to Jerusalem, then finding him on the third. Thus, the first problem in this story is solved, even if not in the time frame we would have liked; and not without the fear and anxiety that strikes whenever a child is missing. The twelve year-old Jesus was lost, but he is found. While not intentional, readers can’t help but recognize the foreshadowing to another time when Jesus – while in Jerusalem for the Passover – would be lost from the world for three days between crucifixion and resurrection. Even as a child, death and rebirth frames his life.

But, there is a second problem, one that – in this story – does not find such an easy resolution. When asked why he would cause his parents such anxiety, Jesus tells his mother in response that he needed to be in his Father’s house. “Why were you searching for me?” Jesus says, defining Mary’s distress as her problem, and not his.¹ Mary did not understand this, even though Jesus acts as if she should. She did not know why her son would consider somewhere else as the place where he belonged, but Luke tells us that they returned to Nazareth and Mary took these things into her heart and Jesus listened to and obeyed his parents.

Although my kids have not reached the age of twelve, I can resonate with the lessons of this story. First, I realize that while they might come into the world through us, our children do not come from us.² Instead, they are from God, and therefore they do not belong to us: they are not responsible for meeting our standards or fulfilling our dreams. Our job as parents – as all our jobs could be described – is to be good and faithful stewards of what God has given us. It is not our job to do everything perfectly; it is not our job to choose a future for our children; but it is our job to allow God to make them fruitful.

Ultimately, all children will find another home; they will realize that their gifts and passions are not necessarily those of their parents. They may be drummer boys, or soccer players, or musicians, or advocates for the poor, or healers of the sick, or keepers of history. As parents, we might have opportunity to expose our children to these various activities, but we cannot set a schedule as to when they will discover their passion. Many of us likely cannot recall exactly when we discovered our own gifts, or we remember that it took a long time, and a few wrong turns, before finding the right path.

Children need to learn, but we need not be our only teachers. Christians proclaim that Jesus lived his life without sin – and so his staying behind must not have been a ploy intended simply to worry his earthly parents; nor could it have been directed against the will of his heavenly parent. Jesus stayed behind for the very reason he said: because he needed to be in his Father’s house. As all growing children do, he needed to experience a measure of independence in order to discover his own identity. He needed to learn from his elders the wisdom of life’s teachings – those

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, vol. 1

² Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet* as referenced by Peter Woods, “Learning from our Children”

kinds of things that can't be learned at home under the watchful eye of your parents. These teachings often take place on some kind of journey – in the experience and telling of stories of birth and death and rebirth.

The story that I'd like to read to you this morning is called "Christmas Moccasins" by Native American author Ray Buckley. Like the biblical story about the twelve year-old Jesus, this is a story about a growing boy and a journey that has gone bad. It is a story about rituals and gift-giving: all of which leads to receiving the greatest gift – the gift of grace and redemption.

Read "Christmas Moccasins" by Ray Buckley.

Apart from Luke's story about Jesus being left behind in the Temple, the Bible provides no record of the life of Jesus between infancy and the age of thirty. Thus, a full ninety percent of his life is a mystery to us. For the most part, we are left to fill in the blanks with what we do know about his family and culture and their rituals and traditions.

We know that he traveled to the Temple in Jerusalem with his family each year to celebrate the Passover. We know that for young Jesus, this was not just a vacation, but an opportunity to listen to the teachers and ask questions and even amaze them with his own insights. We presume that he must have heard from these teachers the rich history of the Hebrew people; the power of God which had been revealed to them through the generations; the words of the priests and prophets who longed for the coming messiah.

Jesus knew that he was at his Father's house. And though he journeyed back home to Nazareth and continued to honor his parents, I imagine he did so with a new freedom. It must have been like the freedom that the boy and his grandmother felt when they returned home after giving the gift of the moccasins. It was a freedom that allowed them to once again walk in the woods without fear and anxiety; a freedom seemingly like what Mary experienced after they returned home. Both the grandmother and Mary, the mother of Jesus, seem to be cleansed and reborn – they discover freedom not in a new place, but in their home which they have worked to redeem. They may not understand everything, the whys and the hows, but they can live a life in peace – knowing that their life – and the lives of those they love – are in God's hands.

All of these Christmas stories seem to be about gifts – unwrapped and priceless gifts – that are given so that the greater gift can flow freely from God. The drummer boy offers the gift of music to the holy family and realizes that he had something to give all along. The grandmother spends months making ornate moccasins because she seeks to be a peacemaker and open the gates of God’s grace. Jesus receives the gifts of wisdom and understanding from the Temple priests and, as a result, Mary realizes that she does not need to fully understand. Just because her son has discovered the place where he belongs does not mean that Jesus will leave her. Their relationship will continue. Even though he was lost, he has been found. Through it all, she has been given the freedom to figure out who she is: in relation to her child and in relation to her God.

And so, at whatever age or stage in life, we must work out who we are, not by birth, but by God’s grace. The most important discovery we can make is to find that our identity is bound up with the one whom Jesus called "Father." Equally as important, when our children demonstrate that sense of holiness and awe which speaks of God, the best gift we can give them is to "lose" them to its embrace. They are, after all, only loaned to us.³ Because we receive them as a gift, as a gift they must also be given. AMEN.

³ Peter Storey, "Stirrings of Divinity"