

## **Christmas 1 C 2021**

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

December 26, 2021

Luke 2:41-52

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

Welcome to the second day of Christmas. Sometimes known as Boxing Day because leftovers from the Christmas feast would be boxed up and taken to those who might not have had the good fortune to be at a feast on Christmas. Sort of a nineteenth century English name for the idea of charity for others, for remembering those who are forgotten. The tradition is much older than the term Boxing Day, and isn't necessarily restricted to the 26<sup>th</sup> day of December. But since long, long ago, generosity and charity toward others has been part of the Christmas season, whether you "box" up goodies on the 26<sup>th</sup> or do something else during the holidays.

So welcome to the second day of Christmas. And welcome to liturgical musical chairs. Normally, December 26<sup>th</sup> is Saint Stephen's Day. December 27<sup>th</sup> is Saint John's Day, normally. And normally, December 28<sup>th</sup> is Holy Innocents Day. Except on a Sunday. Today would be Saint Stephen's Day, but it's a Sunday. So in the Episcopal Church, everything moves down one day. So today is the First Sunday of Christmas, and then tomorrow is Stephen and Tuesday is John and Wednesday is Holy Innocents. So say the Episcopalians. But, No, No, No, say the Lutherans. Stephen can't be moved to John's day, or to the Holy Innocents. So John stays on Monday, Holy Innocents stays on Tuesday, and poor saint Stephen goes to the end of the line on Wednesday. Say the Lutherans. Liturgical musical chairs. But whether you go around the chairs clockwise or counter-clockwise depends on which church you are part of.

The gospel reading that is assigned to us is this enchanting story of Jesus being separated from his parents in Jerusalem. In the Christian Bible, this is the only story we have about Jesus between his infancy and his adulthood. The only official story. Lots of other things have been added by tradition and lore, and even by the Quran, the holy book of Islam, which was written six hundred years after the birth of Jesus. Everyone who has an interest in Jesus or Christianity would like to know where he was and what he was doing when he was ten years old or twenty-five years old. But officially, this is all we have.

So I would like to draw your attention to three messages for us in this story. There are surely more than three. But the first of three is that this story helps to establish the humanity of Jesus. The theological significance of Christmas, the birth of Jesus, is something that theologians call the Incarnation. God became flesh, God became human. That's the theological doctrine: incarnation. The emotional meaning is profound. There is a sense of God coming into our realm, a sense of accompaniment. God enters the human race to accompany us in our humanity. Within

the Christmas message, I think, is this good news that you are not alone, I am not alone, together you and I are not alone. God steps toward us. God is with us. Emmanuel.

The emotional meaning of the doctrine of incarnation is also that it makes God more approachable and understandable. And it demonstrates God's compassion for us. He is able to understand. He has walked in our shoes. So in this particular story from the gospels, we see Jesus very embedded in family. The family of his time, which was an extended family, a clan. Which is why it took a day for them to notice that he was missing. In the midst of this joyful holiday family reunion— in this case, Passover— Jesus was among his cousins and uncles and aunts. And that's why nobody noticed that he was missing for 24 hours. He is embedded in family.

The miracle of the story, the sort of supernatural thing, is how Jesus is impressing the teachers in the Temple. That's sort of the dramatic revelation in this story. And Jesus' uncanny reference to his father, meaning God the father. But these supernatural things are embedded in family. And this is an almost universal experience. Where is our child? A very unsettling and panicky question for parents. Is our child safe? A lot of us have been there, in these kinds of situations. So this story is like everything to do with Christmas and with incarnation. This part of God is embedded in a family, and not a perfect family. This part of God, which we call Son of God, using family language, is bound up in humanity as snugly as he was in those swaddling clothes on Christmas Eve.

So the first of three messages is the human-ness of Jesus. The presence of God in human flesh, with all of its messiness, anxieties, illnesses, vulnerabilities, and confusion. The human condition. The second of three message is related to the first. It's the Jewish-ness of Jesus. In the wake of Christmas Eve, Luke gives us three stories, three vignettes. The entirety of what we know about Jesus between his birth and his adult baptism in the Jordan River. And each of the three vignettes demonstrates the faithful Jewishness of Jesus. The first is his naming and circumcision on eighth day. Meaning proper Jewish practice. The second vignette is the presentation of Jesus in the temple and the ritual purification of his mother, Mary. Which is obedient to two Jewish laws, one concerning firstborn sons, and the other concerning mothers of newborns. And that second vignette concludes with Luke telling us that they had done everything required by the law of the Lord, and furthermore, I quote: *The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.* The third vignette, today's vignette, concerns another trip to Jerusalem. An annual trip to Jerusalem, Luke tells us, for Passover. Very, very observant Jews. Both in the letter and in the spirit of the Law of Moses. "Then he went down with them to Nazareth," our story says, "and was obedient to them." Literally the Ten Commandments. Honor your earthly father and your earthly mother. Obey your parents.

So in case you missed the flashing neon light message, Luke concludes this story with "*And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.*" Which echoes the words Luke used at the conclusion of the previous vignette: *The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.* All of which echoes our first reading

this morning. A story about the prophet Samuel. Who was also a miracle birth. Luke is very, very aware of *that*. But Luke is consciously echoing the book of Samuel, which said, *Now the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the Lord and with the people*. So Jesus is embedded in the human family, as well as in the Jewish religion.

Now this is important because Jesus was Jewish. To be human is to be born into a people. Japanese, Navajo, African, Slavic. A people with a language and traditions. And Jesus was born into the Jewish people. And there are important reasons why. Historically, the people who deny the humanity of Jesus also deny his Jewishness. Anti-Semitism, hatred of the Jews, is automatically a rejection of Jesus' humanity. To put it in plain terms, Anti-Semitism is literally heresy of the first order. Now this text was written before there was theological doctrine of incarnation, and long before the modern term "anti-semitism" was coined.

So the message of this gospel reading is that Jesus is fully human, and Jesus is fully Jewish. But also, in this very last story of Jesus' childhood and youth, Luke is very pointedly foreshadowing the death of Jesus on the cross. Which took place in Jerusalem at Passover. The journey from Galilee to Jerusalem and back was a long one. And that's why his parents took him as part of a big traveling group. But in the chapters which follow this one, Jesus will again leave Galilee and go to Jerusalem with his traveling group, but he will not be returning to Galilee. At least not in any ordinary sense. And once again, on the third day, his family will find him.

In the story of the *Magi* and the star, the gifts are gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Because myrrh is mentioned in the Passion According to Mark and in the Passion According to John, myrrh for the baby in Bethlehem is sometimes reckoned to be a foreshadowing of the passion of the death of Jesus. Perhaps. But there is little doubt that Luke has that in mind here. In the previous vignette, when Jesus was in the temple as an infant, Mary was warned: "*a sword will pierce your own soul too.*" Clues about what is to come. Clues that not everyone will experience the coming of Jesus as Good News.

So, these are the three messages for us. There are surely more. But three messages for us on December 26 from this particular story. (1) The full humanity of Jesus, (2) the full Jewishness of Jesus. (3) The inclusion of Holy Week and Easter into an otherwise Christmas story. This 12 year-old child is the Word of God, the good news for us, fixed firmly into the flesh of humanity. Amen.