

December 26, 2021
The First Sunday of Christmas
Year C
Luke 2:41-52
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

And Lived Among Us

Well, that went fast! It seems like just yesterday he was a baby. It seems like just two nights about that I put the little figurine in the manger in our nativity scene here at Emmanuel. Baby Jesus, the little Lord Jesus, asleep on the hay, surrounded by Mary his mother, and Joseph his earthly father, and the angel, gazing on the sight in joy and wonders, and the shepherd, and, of course, the sheep, all of whom had finished their journey to Bethlehem and have played their part in the holy night.

How quickly they grow up. Isn't that what people say? Isn't that what you have probably said when, perhaps at a family Christmas gathering, you've seen a child that you hadn't seen in a long time, maybe months, maybe since last year, and you've seen them look different the babe in arms now walking, the one who could only babble and cry now talking, the toddler now a precocious preschooler, the preschooler with his or her head now buried in a chapter book, the child now as tall as the adults. I'm sure that at some point you've noted the transformation in the children in your own lives and thought, "It seems like just yesterday when you were a baby, when you were small, and now, just look at you!"

But of course, for us, it doesn't just seem like just yesterday. It was. It was just yesterday, when we were remembering Jesus as a baby in a manger and we were all celebrating his birth day.

I'm well known in my family for emphasizing that Christmas is a twelve-day season. The song, "Twelve Days of Christmas" is not just a song designed to drive people crazy with all of the strange Christmas gifts to remember and its repetitive tune, "Five Golden Rings", it's a way of learning the church year. There are in fact,

twelve days of Christmas. Today is, in fact, the second day of Christmas. It also has the distinction of being the First Sunday of Christmas. The two Sundays that fall during the Twelve Days of Christmas are known as the First Sunday of Christmas and the Second Sunday of Christmas, called more casually Christmas 1 and Christmas 2. The idea behind these two Sundays that fall during the Christmas season is that they continue, the celebration of Christ's birth for the church. The fact that God came to live with us, to be one of us, to experience the world as we do, and to save the world through that incarnation, through that taking on of flesh, is too grand and glorious an idea only to celebrate for one day, or perhaps a night and a day. So, Twelve Days of Christmas and most years, depending on how the calendar falls, two Sundays of Christmas.

There's just one problem. There are only three gospel stories about the birth of Jesus. There's the most familiar story from the gospel of Luke, the story that is read in church every Christmas Eve, the story with the full inn and the birth in the stable and Jesus being wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger, the story with the angels and the shepherds, the story that our nativity scenes in our church and in many of our homes is based on.

Then there is the story from the gospel of Matthew. But the focus of that story is on Joseph, in a moral dilemma, struggling to decide what to do about his fiancée, who, has apparently cheated on him. In that story, Joseph has a dream of an angel, who tells him that he can and should marry Mary, that her child is holy, a fulfillment of the promises made in scripture. Joseph, of course, does marry Mary, but the only mention of the actual birth of Jesus in the gospel of Matthew is this, "When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but

had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.” (Matthew 1:24-25).

We get the story of the wise men from the east visiting the young Jesus from the gospel of Matthew, but that story is saved for Epiphany, January 6th. Which means that the gospel of Matthew does not have much for us for the First and Second Sundays of Christmas.

The only other “Christmas story” in the gospels is the theological reflection on the incarnation, the coming of God to take on human flesh and human reality, that we find in chapter one of the gospel of John, which we have read on Christmas Eve and on Christmas Day, “The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.”

So, what else is left for us for these Sundays, not after Christmas, for Christmas is not over, but of Christmas, when we are still celebrating the birth of Jesus?

For our gospel reading for today, we get the only story of Jesus’ childhood that is found in the Bible, after his infancy. And he’s a big kid now, twelve years old, an adolescent, doing what feels like a very adolescent thing.

He and Mary and Joseph traveled to Jerusalem with others friends and family members from their town of Nazareth, in order to celebrate the Passover. And when it was time for them to return, Jesus gave them the dodge and stayed in Jerusalem.

Have you ever seen Home Alone? Do you remember the chaos of the large family leaving the house trying to make their plane? How no one knew exactly where anyone was and how they were all relying on each other to make sure everyone else was there, how a neighbor’s child got counted as Kevin, and how Kevin was left behind.

Well, I don’t picture Mary and Joseph’s trip back to Nazareth being quite that chaotic. I picture it as more festive, a large group of family and friends, traveling

together, talking, laughing, maybe singing, with kids running everywhere, and maybe off in their own group, telling their own stories and playing their own games.

If you ever seen Home Alone, do you remember the moment when Kevin's mother realized that he was missing, that he was not on the plane, that she was somewhere over the Atlantic Ocean and her son, her baby had been left behind, forgotten, and was home alone?

It is not a pretty picture. The movie is supposed to be a heartwarming comedy, and it pretty much is, but I think that any adult who has ever cared for a child, ever loved a child, can see in the expression on the mother's face in that movie, the horror, the panic, the bone deep need to get back to the child, to protect the child, to be reunited with the child. It's supposed to be a funny movie but that scene, that moment, is not funny at all.

And that is the expression that must have been on Mary's face, when she and Joseph, with dawning horror, realized that Jesus was not with them, not safe with the group of family and friends from his hometown, travelling back to his home, back to his father's carpentry shop, back to where things were safe and familiar; but lost, forgotten, left behind in the big city, where anything would happen to him.

Of course, they went back and of course they searched, everywhere they could to find their lost son, their lost child.

Sadly, I can imagine what that felt like, on a much smaller scale. On Halloween night, Cyrus and one of his friends went trick-or-treating with a large group of family and friends and neighbors, but when the large group got back, Cyrus and his friend were not with them. They had gotten lost, separated from the group, and no one knew where they were.

Now Cyrus is a pretty mature kid and he certainly looks older than he is, but on Halloween, he was only 10 years old and his friend was 11. They were out alone at night, out of our immediate neighborhood, on a night that we have always enjoyed for treats, but that is also known for tricks.

Of course, we jumped in our car the moment we found out that they were missing, and others jumped in their cars to go looking for them, while some remained at the house, in case they showed up there, and, I hope, prayed. We drove around the neighborhoods near where the boys had last been seen, searching and I have to tell you, it was one of the worst feelings I have ever had. There's nothing quite like not knowing where your young child is, to feeling like you have lost them.

We had to search for Cyrus for 20 minutes, and when we found him and his friend, they were perfectly fine, having a great time trick-or-treating. We had to deal with that horrible feeling for 20 minutes. Mary and Joseph had to deal with it for three days. It was three days before they found Jesus, clearly in the last place that they had thought to look. They found him in the Temple, among the scribes and the teachers of the law, listening to them and asking them questions, amazing them with his knowledge and wisdom.

Clearly, Jesus didn't know that he was lost.

Cyrus didn't either. When we found him, I gave him and his friend an earful, "How could they do something like this to us? How did they let themselves get separated from the group? Why didn't they come straight back home when they realized that they weren't with the other kids and adults that they had been trick-or-treating with?" They probably thought that I had lost my mind. I think I even cried, I was so upset, so relieved, so angry, so grateful that they were okay.

That experience and others like them with my children and other children who have been entrusted to my care over the years colors how I hear Mary's words in this gospel reading. There's nothing meek or mild about the way that I hear her words, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.' (Luke 2:48)

The text says that they were astonished when they found Jesus. I wonder if they were furious; as well as relieved, grateful, tearful at their reunion with their son.

But, of course, Jesus hadn't known that he was lost. He thought that he was found, right where he needed to be, safe in the Temple, just beginning, even as a child, to do what he had come in to the world to do, to help people know God better, to understand God's love, God's wisdom, God's grace. Jesus had been in the Temple, engaging in a question-and-answer session with the learned teachers of the law, asking them questions, challenging their interpretations, and teaching them a new wisdom that came from God's own heart.

Of course, that didn't make any sense to his panicked parents. They just knew that he had been lost and that now he was found. They took him home and kept him safe, and he was obedient to them. The gospel writer feels it necessary to tell us that Mary treasured these things in her heart. But I didn't need those words to tell me that Mary remembered; remembered the time when Jesus was missing in the big city for three days, remembered when he was lost, remembered when he was found. Any parent, anyone who has ever loved a child, would remember.

In some ways, this is a strange story for a Christmas story. But in other ways, it's a perfect Christmas story. Because it's a story about incarnation. God in Jesus Christ, was one of us. A kid, like our own kids, who did a very adolescent thing, not a deliberately bad thing, not a malicious thing, not a sinful thing, but an adolescent thing, something that scared his parents to death, without him realizing that it would. And, of course, Jesus used the freedom that he was exploring, that he had seized for himself, not to party in the big city, but explore his religion more fully, learning and teaching, until his parents finally found him. This is story about God, fully and truly human, young, a child, a son, part of a real family, a real community, trying to find his way in the world, and his parents, loving him and trying to protect him, to guide him.

This is a Christmas story because it is a story about Emmanuel. God with us, God one of us, and God living in the same world that we live in, with all of its blessings and its challenges.

Today is the Second Day of Christmas and it is also the First Sunday of Christmas. And today we continue to celebrate that the Word became flesh and lived among us. Thanks be to God. Merry Christmas.