



“On the Other Side of Christmas”

Luke 2:41-52; Colossians 3:12-17; Jeremiah 31:31-34

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First Sunday after Christmas

Christmas 2009 is now a memory. The anticipation, preparation and excitement of the season are over. We are now on the other side of Christmas. The rush has slowed to a crawl in this quiet week between holidays. Not much work will be done until the New Year dawns. Friends and neighbors are gone for the holidays.

It's an odd week for the church. We call it "Low Sunday." The crowds that crowded churches on Christmas are gone – many until Easter. Pews are empty, energy is low, and ministers who plan wisely are taking a Sunday off.

It's the first Sunday after Christmas. In the church calendar, the Christmas season begins on December 25 and ends twelve days later on January 6. So, on this First Sunday after Christmas, the church is still decorated and we sing carols, but it doesn't seem the same on this side of Christmas.

It's an awkward Sunday in the church. We stand between the great feast of Christmas and the secular feast of the New Year. And, the Scripture Lessons assigned to this Sunday are decidedly not Christmas-y.

If you recall, the Lectionary is organized around a three-year cycle of reading centering in the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. This is Year C, the year of Luke. Christmas Day is behind us and the Luke moves on quickly – as do all the Gospel writers. It makes for awkward sermons as we officially continue to celebrate Christmas.

Year A, the year of Matthew, assigns Matthew's story of King Herod's Slaughter of the Innocents for this Sunday. You may remember that awful story. Herod, having heard the rumors of the birth of new king and quite true to his character, ordered that all the children in Bethlehem be killed. He wanted no pretenders to his throne. It's a terrible story and hardly fits into the Christmas Spirit still alive this week.

One year, I was in town but took this Sunday off. I assigned a new associate the sermon for the day. It was Year A and he preached from the story of the Slaughter of the Innocents. The sermon was as gruesome as the story and his conclusion – God only knows how he arrived at this conclusion – his conclusion was that all of us killed the babies in Bethlehem. The sermon was not well received by a congregation still basking in the glow of Christmas Eve candlelight.

Today's lesson is a much more pleasant story – though a challenge for this Sunday on the other side of Christmas. But then, it never hurts to expose ourselves to the biblical stories. When we pay attention or live ourselves into them, they always contribute to our spiritual formation. And, perhaps, this old story offers wise counsel for a new year.

The gospel writer Luke doesn't linger at the manger in Bethlehem. Like all the New Testament authors, he is more interested in the mission of the child than his birth. Luke moves quickly to Jesus' ministry but does add the only story about the childhood of Jesus in the Bible.

The story indicates that Jesus grew up in a pious Jewish family that kept the law and participated in the worship of the people of Israel. The point, it seems, is that Jesus' life from beginning to end was lived in solidarity and continuity with the Hebrew people. If so, the schism between Judaism and Christianity is tragic.

When Jesus was twelve years old, he accompanied his family to Jerusalem for Passover. Passover was a national holiday and, when possible, celebrated in Jerusalem. Passover was also, then as now, a family celebration. Some of Jesus' relatives accompanied his family to Jerusalem. Passover back then was a community event too. Friends and family from villages all across the land formed caravans of pilgrims and headed off for the capital city.

Jesus' family joined friends and family from Nazareth and set off on the six-day journey to Jerusalem. As the pilgrims made final ascent up into Jerusalem and the Temple, they sang a group of joyous Psalms called the "Psalms of Ascent." It was one of the highlights of the year – sort of like Christmas is to us. Eighteen years later, Jesus made the same Passover pilgrimage with his disciples. It was his final journey to the city.

For nearly a week, they sang, ate, worshipped and enjoyed time with friends old and new. When it was over the caravan from Nazareth gathered and headed home. Joseph and Mary assumed Jesus was with some of his siblings and cousins somewhere in the caravan. At the end of the day, as they prepared for supper and sleeping, they looked for Jesus and couldn't find him anywhere. He wasn't with his aunts and uncles. He wasn't with village friends. He was not in the caravan.

In a panic, they headed back toward Jerusalem. They walked all night filled with fear and anxiety, hoping the worst hadn't happened. It's one of every parent's worst nightmares.

When our daughter was eight, she spent the summer at her aunt and uncle's in order to participate in a community softball league. She and her cousin, Jimmy, became best buddies. Toward the end of the summer, we went to see her play her last game and bring her home.

The team celebrated the end of the season with a picnic after the game. When it was time to leave, we loaded up our two cars and headed home. It was a twenty-minute drive. The drivers of each car assumed Karen and Jimmy were in the other car. When we arrived home, we discovered they were in neither car.

In a panic, Gloria and Jimmy's dad raced back to the park to find the children. Max tried to keep calm. Gloria was nearly overcome with fear, imagining all the bad things that happen to children all alone. She recalls praying all the way back to the park.

When they arrived, they found the park empty except for Jimmy and Karen playing together by a shed like nothing happened. "Where were you guys?" was all Karen said. That's what Gloria remembers. Karen remembers they figured out they were left behind and were scared but figured they might as well keep playing until somebody came for them. Her memory of the reunion is what she describes as "Mom's hysteria."

The gospel story has the same human drama and emotion. In the morning, when they arrived back in Jerusalem, they searched high and low for their lost son. He was nowhere to be found. At long last they looked for him in the Temple, and there he was in conversation with the rabbis and priests of the Temple.

Mary, no doubt a bit hysterical, projected her guilt on her son and blurted out, “Don’t you realize what you’ve done to your father and me? We’ve been looking everywhere for you. You scared us to death.”

Jesus, who’d ditched them and the caravan for some free time in the Temple, shot right back at his mom, “What’s wrong with you. You should have known I’d be here. You don’t understand me at all do you?” It’s not the last time Jesus gets smart with his mother, according to the rest of the story. And Luke adds that Joseph and Mary did not understand the boy.

Beneath the reassuring humanity of the story, the point seems to be not that Jesus was a little man instructing the teachers of Israel as often portrayed in popular versions of the story. And he certainly isn’t an adolescent version of God giving what-for to religious professionals.

It does seem clear that early on, Jesus had a deep curiosity about God and religion that neither his parents nor the village rabbi could satisfy. So he ditched the family and went to the Temple where, Luke tells us, he listened to the rabbis teach and asked them questions. Apparently he was a spiritual prodigy. The rabbis were impressed by his good questions.

It would also appear that from an early age, Jesus was radically committed to God and to God’s will for himself and the world. That radical form of commitment got Jesus in trouble his entire life. That commitment gave him a unique point of view and unusual perceptive power. He spent his adult life teaching others about God and God’s ways with the world while challenging everyone, including religious leaders, to get back to basics and above all else, love God completely.

That deep commitment to God, born early and developed by a lifetime of learning and listening, gave Jesus the moral power to confront evil powers, challenge civic corruption, and expose religious hypocrisy. From beginning to end, no one seemed to understand him.

There in the Temple, the boy was being prepared – heart, mind and soul – for a difficult journey that included misunderstanding, opposition and persecution. At the end, he had the moral courage to defy religious tyranny and to tell the representative of Roman imperial power he had no power on earth except that given him by God.

He also knew back in the Temple in Jerusalem that he’d crossed a boundary. He went home with Joseph and Mary, submitted himself to their authority and continued to listen, think and love God. He grew in wisdom and stature, Luke says, an altogether impressive young man.

So, what does all this mean on this side of Christmas and at the cusp of a new year?

Whatever else we say about any year, it is certain that much, maybe most, of 2010 is uncertain, filled with challenges and difficulties – perhaps even tragedy – along with joys, triumphs and good times.

The best way to face the unknown future is to be committed to our spiritual formation. A firmly grounded soul can handle whatever life has to offer. Here at the beginning of the year, we need to recommit ourselves to matters of the soul and heart.

That begins with a deepening commitment to God. Here and now we need to pay attention to God. That means, among other things, listening, worshipping and learning when this community gathers. God is here in Lessons, hymns, prayer, and the simple conversations of Coffee Hour, when, as we say, the worship continues. It means paying attention every other day of the week too. God is there in life, in people, events, and circumstances.

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We don't know the particulars of the coming year. What we do know, as this week's headlines reminded us, is that we live in a dangerous, often lethal, world. And never forget, the world is a contingent place in which our lives are caught up in a complicated web of relationships, events and consequences. Factors quite beyond us touch our lives without permission.

Jesus was born into a world of imperial and religious powers that eventually killed him. The justice system served the powerful, and the economic system had no moral center. Life was precarious at best. It usually is.

The Christian point of view is at once idealistic and realistic. We hope, dream and plan for the new year – and we should. But our hopes are tempered by sober reality. Evil is real, systemic and pervasive. The threads of that web of contingencies in which we live can snap at any moment. So we plan and hope for the best, but prepare our inner selves for whatever this year may hold.

We are equipped with the promise of Jeremiah 31, that God will make a new covenant cut into our hearts. God is committed to our hearts and souls and works powerfully there, if invited. The Epistle Lesson, Colossians 2, tells of the consequences of such a commitment. God builds character and values that can stand up the worst life has to offer – and that enhance the best we ever experience.

It's part of the process of faith. Jesus was in the Temple getting ready for life. We join him there in preparation for the New Year. God walks into 2010 with us – and we walk into the future together.

Amen

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