

"The Work of Christmas"
A Sermon for Providence Baptist Church
Hendersonville, North Carolina
12/27/2009

Text: Luke 2:41-52 (KJV):

⁴¹Now his parents went to Jerusalem every year at the feast of the passover. ⁴²And when he was twelve years old, they went up to Jerusalem after the custom of the feast. ⁴³And when they had fulfilled the days, as they returned, the child Jesus tarried behind in Jerusalem; and Joseph and his mother knew not of it. ⁴⁴But they, supposing him to have been in the company, went a day's journey; and they sought him among their kinsfolk and acquaintance. ⁴⁵And when they found him not, they turned back again to Jerusalem, seeking him. ⁴⁶And it came to pass, that after three days they found him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the doctors, both hearing them, and asking them questions. ⁴⁷And all that heard him were astonished at his understanding and answers. ⁴⁸And when they saw him, they were amazed: and his mother said unto him, Son, why hast thou thus dealt with us? behold, thy father and I have sought thee sorrowing. ⁴⁹And he said unto them, How is it that ye sought me? wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business? ⁵⁰And they understood not the saying which he spake unto them. ⁵¹And he went down with them, and came to Nazareth, and was subject unto them: but his mother kept all these sayings in her heart. ⁵²And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man.

Text Luke 2:41-52 (MSG)

They Found Him in the Temple

⁴¹⁻⁴⁵Every year Jesus' parents traveled to Jerusalem for the Feast of Passover. When he was twelve years old, they went up as they always did for the Feast. When it was over and they left for home, the child Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents didn't know it. Thinking he was somewhere in the company of pilgrims, they journeyed for a whole day and then began looking for him among relatives and neighbors. When they didn't find him, they went back to Jerusalem looking for him. ⁴⁶⁻⁴⁸The next day they found him in the Temple seated among the teachers, listening to them and asking questions. The teachers were all quite taken with him, impressed with the sharpness of his answers. But his parents were not impressed; they were upset and hurt. His mother said, "Young man, why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been half out of our minds looking for you." ⁴⁹⁻⁵⁰He said, "Why were you looking for me? Didn't you know that I had to be here, dealing with the things of my Father?" But they had no idea what he was talking about. ⁵¹⁻⁵²So he went back to Nazareth with them, and lived obediently with them. His mother held these things dearly, deep within herself. And Jesus matured, growing up in both body and spirit, blessed by both God and people.

General end: To encourage the members of the congregation to consider each one's place in continuing the "work of Christmas" [Howard Thurman's phrase], as we follow One who stated "Didn't you know that I had to be here, dealing with the things of my Father?" [MSG]

Specific intent: To challenge members to realize the important daily, yet often hidden, ways in which we carry out the still-in-progress "work of Christmas" as we follow Christ, walking in faith and discipleship.

Proposition: As the story of the adolescent Jesus in the Temple reminds us, Jesus Christ calls his followers to carry on the still-in-progress "work of Christmas" each day when we encounter persons around us who need to know of God's love for them in personal, practical, hopeful, and respectful ways.

Whew! Christmas is over! Time to take down the tree, pack up the decorations, take back the too-small sweater from Aunt Mabel, and head back to work. But, **is it over or just beginning?** In today's Gospel lesson, we see a rare glimpse of Jesus after his birth stories, and before the start of his public ministry. This story resonates with me, because Jacob is 12. He amazes me with his intellect and his heart for others. His questions and insights often cause me to see things in a different way. He is growing so fast. I have to look up at him now, and it seems only yesterday that I could scoop him into my lap one-handed!

This story from Luke illustrates Jesus' growth in many ways. Indeed, this story of Jesus and his parents at the Temple is the ONLY such glimpse in the biblical record. There are stories in other literature, notably the second century C.E. apocryphal *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, but they seem too fantastic to believe. The boy Jesus there is seen as a magician, forming birds out of clay, and bringing them to life as he tosses them into the air. [Cited by Clendenin, DB. "Plunge Yourself Into Obscurity: The Hidden Years of the Boy Jesus," found online at <http://www.journeywithjesus.net/>. Accessed 12/26/09].

In this story from Luke, Jesus is seen as a typical 12-year-old with his devout parents going to the Temple in Jerusalem to worship. On their return, perhaps Mary and Joseph each thought the other had given Jesus permission to travel with other friends from their village. Only after the first day's travel do they compare notes and realize Jesus is not in either group. If one allows another day for the return to Jerusalem, and a day for frantically searching the city, it is easy to understand how Jesus could be "missing" for three days.

When Mary confronts Jesus about this [read excerpts from Peterson's MSG rendering] his response is strange, and almost sounds as if he has one of those eye-rolling "Oh Mom" kinds of moments. What is going on here? Perhaps it is one of those moments that those who have 12-year-olds know that the youngster is beginning to show flashes of the maturity about which parents are so ambivalent. Jesus is 12 years old, soon to be "called to the Torah" as a son of the commandment" at age 13 – the point at which he is considered under Jewish law to be a man, able to be counted as part of the *minyán* – the quorum needed for synagogue worship. Jesus says he must be about his Father's business?

- What does Jesus mean by "My Father's business" [KJV]?
 - a. Look at Jesus' agenda in Luke 4:16-20 [MSG]: ¹⁶⁻²¹He came to Nazareth where he had been reared. As he always did on the Sabbath, he went to the meeting place. When he stood up to read, he was handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Unrolling the scroll, he found the place where it was written,

God's Spirit is on me;
he's chosen me to preach the Message of good news to
the poor,
Sent me to announce pardon to prisoners and
recovery of sight to the blind,
To set the burdened and battered free,
to announce, "This is God's year to act!"
He rolled up the scroll, handed it back to the assistant, and sat down. Every eye in the place was on him, intent. Then he started in, "You've just heard Scripture make history. It came true just now in this place."; cf. Isaiah 61:1-4, and Leviticus' Jubilee Code in ch. 25ff.
 - b. John's Gospel [9:4 KJV] – "I must work the works of him that sent me, while it is day: the night cometh, when no man can work."
 - c. Luke 7:18-23 [KJV]: ¹⁸John's disciples told him about all these things. Calling two of them, ¹⁹he sent them to the Lord to ask, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" ²⁰When the men came to Jesus, they said, "John the Baptist sent us to you to ask, 'Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?' " ²¹At that very time Jesus cured many who had diseases, sicknesses and evil spirits, and gave sight to many who were blind. ²²So he replied to the messengers, "Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. ²³Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me."

Jesus says that his followers will do greater works than he [John 14:11-14, MSG]:

¹¹⁻¹⁴"Believe me: I am in my Father and my Father is in me. If you can't believe that, believe what you see—these works. The person who trusts me will not only do what I'm doing but even greater things, because I, on my way to the Father, am giving you the same work to do that I've been doing. You can count on it. From now on, whatever you request along the lines of who I am and what I am doing, I'll do it. That's how the Father will be seen for who he is in the Son. I mean it. Whatever you request in this way, I'll do. "

- **How is this possible?** Look at [John 6:28-29 KJV]: – ²⁸Then said they unto him, What shall we do, that we might work the works of God? ²⁹Jesus answered and said unto them, This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent." In his IVP commentary on John, regarding this passage, Rodney A. Whitacre writes: "It is not many works that God requires but one work. And that work is to believe, to trust in Jesus as the one sent from God, as God's unique Son who offers God's grace. Jesus' work is to reveal the Father (cf. 4:34 NIV -- ³⁴"My food," said Jesus, "is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work.), and **our work is to receive that revelation and align our lives with it.**" [Emphasis added]. If we align our lives with the Son of God, He lives through us, and He gives grace and strength to accomplish His purposes.

What will our part of the continuing work of God look like? Howard Thurman gives us a glimpse in his meditation "The Work of Christmas":

*When the song of the angel is still,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their sheep,
The work of Christmas begins:
to find the lost,
to heal the broken,
to feed the hungry,
to release the prisoner,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among people,
to make music in the heart.*

Perhaps it is easier to start describing this "work of Christmas" into which Jesus calls us by stating what it is NOT. **The "work of Christmas" is not something which happens with loud fanfare, or takes place all at once.** We know little if anything specifically about Jesus' life before the beginning of his ministry at age 30. A close reading of our passage for today indicates that there was much about Jesus' life that was routine for a person of his time, place, and culture. We know that his family was devout, and from other sources of that era we know that faith touched every part of a devout Jew's life. Not only on the Sabbath, but each and every day. Much of Jesus' life and early learning about God took place in daily encounters with his family and community. Imagine, if you will, the pressure which Mary and Joseph must have felt in parenting the One who the angel said would be the long-awaited Messiah. Adolescents are challenging, then and now. Yet character is built day by day, lesson by lesson. It cannot be learned quickly, but its lessons are deep and strong. Mary and Joseph left positive impressions. Their faith, lived out in obscurity, speaks to us even today. They were Jesus' first models of faith in God. **Who might look to us as a model of faith?**

What IS this 'work of Christmas' to which we are called? There are four attributes which seem obvious, at least:

- **It is personal** – Ron Hall and Denver Moore wrote a book a few years ago that is a 'must-read' entitled *Same Kind of Different as Me*. Ron is a millionaire art dealer. Denver is a homeless man. They come together in an unexpected way, and each come to realize that the other is a brother in Christ. In their new book *What Difference Do It Make?* Denver says that "**I remember a lotta times wishin' that, instead of givin' me money, somebody'd just ask me my name.**" [Found online at <http://jmm.aaa.net.au/articles/23091.htm> Accessed 12/26/2009] **Each person you or I encounter has a name and a story. If we give time to ask her/his name, and hear the story they tell, perhaps they will believe us when we speak of how God can transform our lives and theirs.**

It is practical – Some years ago, I heard Mary Cosby, co-founder of the Church of the Saviour in Washington, DC, speak on prayer. One of the most memorable points she made was that prayer should lead to action. She told the story of being in a ladies' prayer group one evening, when a fellow church member shared that she was in a financial crisis and needed a small amount of money to make her rent payment, which was due in a few days. Ms. Cosby said she led the group in prayer to take care of this financial need, and left feeling very up-beat about what the group had done, and the support that the group had been for this member. On returning home, she told her husband Gordon about what had occurred, and she said his quiet response was "**Did you take up a collection?**" Prayer must lead to practical action.

- **It is hopeful** – As followers of the crucified and risen Christ, we should aim to share the hope we find in Christ with those who need most to hear it. The first letter of Peter tells us [3:15-16, NIV]:

¹⁵But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, ¹⁶keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.

In the world in which we live, people need hope to survive, hope to endure, and hope to thrive. This lasting hope does not come from any economic measure, political program, or other human idea. It comes from the Good News of Jesus Christ and his love for them. When we meet them at their point of need, we need to do more than say "God bless you." Listen again to Denver Moore: "[T]here is no point telling people that Jesus loves them; what matters is who is going to stick around and show them Jesus?" [*Op. cit., loc. Cit.*].

- **It is respectful.** – Every person we see, **EVERY PERSON**, is created in God's image and worthy of respect. There may be persons who are invisible to us, but **NO ONE** is invisible to God. St. John Chrysostom, the "golden-mouthed" preacher of the fourth century reminds us: "For do not tell me that this or that man is a runaway slave, or a robber or thief, or laden with countless faults, or that he is a mendicant and abject, or of low value and worthy of no account; but consider that for his sake the Christ died" – [*Concerning Lowliness of Mind*, found online at <http://www.catholic.com/thisrock/2009/0901fea2sb1.asp>. Accessed 12/27/2009].

Just in case we need reminding, let us hear Jesus' words in Matthew 25:40 [MSG]: **Then the King will say, 'I'm telling the solemn truth: Whenever you did one of these things to someone overlooked or ignored, that was me—you did it to me.'** And then, to drive home his point he will say, [Matthew 25:45 MSG] : **'I'm telling the solemn truth: Whenever you failed to do one of these things to someone who was being overlooked or ignored, that was me—you failed to do it to me.'**

To put it most simply, Jesus Christ calls his followers to carry on the still-in-progress "work of Christmas" each day when we encounter persons around us who need to know of God's love for them in personal, practical, hopeful, and respectful ways.

If you feel God calling you to respond to his love for you in some way, whether:

- to follow Jesus in faith for the first time;
- to join with this congregation to work and serve and love our community and our world in Jesus' name;
- or to respond to his call to serve in a particular way that only you can;

then please come forward now or speak with me after the service. Our hymn of response is....