

The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush
December 27, 2009
Luke 2:41-52
“Manger and Temple”

Two days ago Jesus was born. Today he is twelve years old. And you thought the children in your life were growing up fast! The story of Jesus staying behind in the temple is special because it's the only official glimpse we have of Jesus' life between the time of his birth and the beginning of his public ministry. Lots of sermons have been preached on this passage describing it as a type of “little boy lost” story. Preachers tell anecdotes about children getting separated from their parents inside big department stores – what it felt like to search for them and what it was like to hug them when they were found – and then draw comparisons between that and Mary and Joseph's experience with Jesus. While there may be some truth to that comparison, the best analogy for this passage is not about parents who misplaced their toddlers, but rather with parents whose children are going through puberty – kids who are getting their driving permits or going out on their first dates.

Within the Jewish context, being twelve years old meant you were entering adulthood. Jesus would have had a bar mitzvah and from that point on would have been seen as an adult, expected to attend worship in the synagogue, to make the pilgrimages to the temple, and to begin taking up his father's business. So when Mary finds Jesus in the temple and begins questioning him, she is talking less like a mother chiding her boy who wandered away in Giant Eagle and more like a mother worrying when her son took the car out for a drive without permission.

Now, you must admit there is something comforting about getting this glimpse into the home life of Jesus and seeing that, even there, things were complicated at times. Our Church artwork and stained glass windows invariably show the Holy Family in clean robes and frozen poses of perfection. We forget that Joseph and Mary were not wealthy – one was covered in sawdust from his carpentry work, the other, a young woman, was trying to run a household. And both of them struggled with understanding their precocious son. The good news is this: God could have come to earth in a thousand different ways, but choose to do so through a human family – and in that act ended up blessing all of our complicated, messy, trying-to-make-sense-of-it-all families as well. The manger and the home are two parts of God's incarnation equation.

But there's a third part in this equation, namely the temple or, in our context, the church. From his earliest days, Jesus' life was shaped by his Jewish faith. He was taken to the temple before he could walk, dedicated and blessed there by the temple priests. In the incident we read about today, he traveled from Nazareth with his family to the temple in Jerusalem for the Passover festival, and later returned obediently with his parents, as required in the Fifth Commandment. The manger, the home, and the house of worship were the third fundamental components of Jesus' life: the wonder of God becoming flesh, the mundane simplicity of Jesus' earthly home, and the coalescing of those two realities into a life of worship, witness and sacrificial love poured out for all the world.

Let's talk for a moment about this equation of manger, home, and worship. I'll begin by saying how grateful I am to all of you who have gathered here for worship on this Sunday after Christmas. I am also mindful that many who were in attendance here for Christmas Eve have not returned today, and that all across America, pastors and church leaders worry about the future of mainline congregations. Lots of people question the necessity of attending church, insisting that you can be a good Christian without belonging to a church. Others claim that church is irrelevant and simply a waste of time. But in the first place, that flies in the face of the concrete example of Jesus' own life – a life spent worshiping in the temple and synagogue. Secondly, such beliefs contradict the foundation of faith itself. Sure, by not going to church, you have more time on Sunday mornings; you don't have to put things in the offering plate or volunteer to help or serve on committees or pray for people you don't know or listen to sermons you didn't write or interact with people you wouldn't include on your own guest list. But those same things are what make up our Christian faith: setting apart time for God, prayer, stewardship, service, keeping promises, honoring your responsibilities, and living in a common life with folks like you and unlike you – because that is what it means to follow God. We don't write the faith script for life; God did that – when? When Christ was born in a family, lived at home in Nazareth, and worshiped in the temple.

So again, let me say how grateful I am for all of you that are here this morning. And I'd like to say some things that I hope you will pass on to those who might be absent today. I want to express how blessed I am for the opportunity to serve with you and the staff as pastor of this wonderful congregation. The level of commitment, the passion for justice, and the generosity of spirit present in this church humble me on a daily basis. On behalf of my family, to whom you have also shown great love and hospitality, I thank you.

In the past year, the financial troubles of our nation also presented a grave challenge for East Liberty Presbyterian Church. The Session has been committed to reducing our budget's dependence on our endowment; for if we spend too much of our bequests and savings, we risk not being able to keep this beautiful facility open for ministry. We are working hard on finalizing next year's budget. It contains significant cuts in our property budget and over a quarter million dollars in reductions in our personnel budget from what we paid in 2009. While the building will be cared for and ministry programs will be maintained, these cuts have reduced us to bare bones levels of housekeeping, maintenance, and administrative support.

Three things are needed now. First, we will continue to stress the importance of pledging. An additional \$40,000 is needed this year to prevent additional program cuts in January, so it is important that every friend and member commit financial support for our church. Second, we have made significant strides toward moving the church ministry from being staff-driven to being volunteer-based. We have wonderful volunteers that do all our landscape work in spring, summer and fall. We have volunteers that teach Sunday School and make music for us, that prepare the communion elements, help in the office on Sunday morning, or sit at the front desk and answer the phone during the week. We have volunteers that do great mission work for Open Hands

housing ministry, and for the first time in a long-time, we had a potluck Thanksgiving meal that was a tremendous success. We will continue to build on this pattern of volunteerism in 2010, so reflect on how you can give an hour or two a week or month for the common ministry of ELPC.

Third, given all the changes in East Liberty, we have asked consultants to come in and guide us in discussions about the strategic direction of our church. Not to tell us how to budget our money or improve our lighting, but to listen as together we seek to discern God's will for ELPC in the coming years. 2010 marks the 75th anniversary of this sanctuary's dedication, and our church's 200th anniversary will be in 2019. I ask you to commit to prayer, conversation, and to listening as we trust in God to use this strategic process to guide us into a future that is faithful and just and welcoming to all.

Now maybe those prior comments seem unusual for a sermon, but in truth they are not. The continuum of Christ always goes from manger to home to temple. For us, that means that faith moves from the miracle of our birth through the relationships that nurture us and on to the communities in which we worship, pray, and seek to live as children of God. To a doubting world, we respond to their questions with familiar words of conviction: "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house – in this place where God's Spirit guides and supports and binds us together in love?"

The newborn Christ-child from Friday was encountered today as a twelve-year old youth. Next week we will remember the visit of the Magi to the infant Christ while the following week we will focus on the baptism of the young man Jesus beginning his public ministry. This scriptural time travel reflects the ongoing movement of faith between birth, family life, and worship life. Manger to home to temple. Those are the places where our lives find their meaning, so, of course, those are the exact places where God in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit comes to be with us. Welcome then to this, the Lord's house – a place where promises are made, responsibilities are taken up, prayers are spoken, laughter and tears are shared, a future is envisioned, and by grace a common life is lived out to the glory of God.¹ Invite others to come join you here. Believe me, it is where you are meant to be.

AMEN

¹ Cf. Kimberly Richter, *Journal for Preachers*, Lent 1996, p. 6.