

The St. Andrew's Pulpit

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The Promise of Christmas

And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years,
and in divine and human favour. – *Luke 2:41-52*

I probably shouldn't say this, and I would appreciate it if you wouldn't spread it around, but I actually hate Christmas Day. Hate might be too strong a word, but I do dislike Christmas Day quite heartily! Don't get me wrong. I love Advent. I love the sense of anticipation, the excitement, the fascination. I love the carols, and I love that it draws the community together around shared symbols and traditions. I love to fantasize about what strange delights are behind all that colourful paper and fancy ribbon. I love to think about seeing my family and getting together with my family once again. I love to think about the food, the turkey, the stuffing, the pudding. I love to sing the carols and light the candles and hear the stories of Christmas.

I love that world because it is not a real one. It is a fantasy world where the baby is perfect and no crying he makes, where peace on earth is paid more than lip service, where the whole world seems united around compassion for the poor, where even soldiers on the battlefield can set aside their animosity for a short time to kick around a soccer ball. The world of Advent is a world in which we there is no more war, or terrorism, or disagreement, or loneliness, in which everyone is happy and thankful and surrounded by loving friends and family. I love that world because it is a fantasy world. And that is also why I dread Christmas so much, because on Christmas Day the fantasy ends and reality sets in. By ten o'clock on Christmas morning, all the presents have turned out to be just another sweater or pair of socks, there's been the first strained silence over the Christmas Morning Wife Saver, the first dishes to wash, the first news of death and destruction from somewhere. The magic has gone once more.

And then on the first Sunday of Christmas we tell the stories of Jesus after he was born: the story of how Herod, threatened by the prospect of a rival king of the Jews, slaughters all the male infants under two, the story of how the holy family flees to Egypt and spends the next months and years as refugees, and this story that we heard this morning, of Jesus as a teenager. Yes, even

the holy family had to endure the frustrations of a boy going through puberty!

Every adult male Jew within fifteen miles of Jerusalem was obligated to go to the temple for Passover. Nazareth was farther away than that, but the story goes that both Joseph and Mary went every year, a sign that they were unusually devoted Jews. At the age of twelve, a Jewish boy becomes a man, and so at that age, Jesus starts going with them. During Passover, it was customary for the leading elders and teachers, members of the Great Council, to meet in public in the Temple to discuss, in the presence of all who would listen, questions of law and faith. The story suggests that Jesus was captivated by those discussions. He listened to them and asked questions, the normal Jewish way of students learning from their teachers. In all of this, Jesus sounds like a normal, perhaps somewhat precocious, but still normal, adolescent boy.

When Passover was over, and it was time to go home, there was a group from Nazareth that would have traveled together. The practice was for the women and children to set out first because they traveled more slowly, and then the men would start later, and catch up by evening. Because Jesus was twelve, barely a man, but still a child, there might have been confusion about which group he was traveling with. Mary may have thought that Jesus was with the men. Joseph may have thought he was with the women and children. It is only that evening when the two groups meet up that they realize he is not with either group.

You can imagine what a sleepless, anxious night Mary and Joseph spent waiting for the sun to rise so that they could rush back to Jerusalem and find him. You can imagine Mary and Joseph fretting about where Jesus was sleeping, what he was feeling. After three days, it says, three frantic and anxious days, they finally found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening and asking them questions.

And then there is this very human, very characteristic mix of anger and relief with which Mary and Joseph greet their wayward son: “Child, why have you treated us like this? Look your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.” Or, in more colloquial language: “What the blazes were you thinking? Did you intend to put us through hell?” And if Jesus was a modern, typical teenager, you can just imagine Jesus rolling his eyes, as he responds, “What’s the big deal? Didn’t you know that I must be in my Father’s house?”

Jesus wasn't a modern teenager, and he certainly wasn't typical, so please forgive me if I read more into this story than I should, but I don't think I am exaggerating when I suggest that statement verges on being rude. Imagine you are Joseph and Jesus called the temple, his Father's house. It certainly sounds like he is rejecting the authority of his human father by appealing to his heavenly Father. Later on in his ministry, at least as Matthew tells it, he will instruct his followers that they are to call no human person Father, or rabbi, or teacher, because they have only one Father in heaven, only one teacher, only one rabbi. These stories include is a rejection of the usual respect that would have been shown to fathers and other authority figures in a patriarchal society. Jesus was not a proponent of that kind of family values.

And so this first Sunday of Christmas takes us, in less than a week, from a cute baby Jesus, to a rebellious, adolescent Jesus. This is the only story we have of Jesus between his birth and his adulthood, but adolescence is made up of many moments like this. Jesus doesn't sound like an easy child to raise. His independence, his brilliance, his passionate interest, the very things that would make him great later on, were the things that would have made it hard to be his mother and his father. This story doesn't offer any easy answers to parents struggling with rebellious children today, but it does offer some hope and some guidance. It offers the hope that their children will find a healing path, and it suggests that sometimes, it is precisely at the point of their rebellion that their greatest contribution will be made.

After the romance of Christmas Eve, we land with a thud squarely back in reality, and reality is kind of depressing. As Anne of Green Gables might have put it, "reality is so unromantic." On Christmas Day, I often get hit with what I call the post-Christmas blahs. I guess I spend so long looking for Messiahs under trees that I get quite depressed when they don't show up. The world goes on as it always has, despite the birth of the saviour. Peace on earth still seems a long way away. This year, I have been so looking forward to welcoming my granddaughter Sadie, and she is pretty neat, when she's asleep. But every now and then she wakes up, looks me in the eye for about three seconds, and then fills her diaper and starts to scream! That's life, I guess. That's reality.

But the promise of Christmas is that Jesus Christ entered into that reality, becoming fully human, and that the full reality of human nature, even in adolescence, was vital to the work he was to do. The promise of Christmas is precisely the thing that depresses me about it, the fact that it returns me to

reality, for it is in reality that we learn what it means to worship God and to live out our discipleship, it is in reality that we see the face of the babe who came to live and suffer and die. It is in reality that we struggle with the forces of evil and learn to depend on the grace of God. As much as I enjoy the sweet anticipation of the Advent season, the return to reality that happens on Christmas Day is the real promise of Christmas, for as much as these mountain-top experiences of fantasy and celebration are important and healthy, it is in the valleys of everyday existence that we must really live, and it is in the valleys of everyday existence that Jesus Christ accompanies us.

A week or so ago, I arrived at my office one morning to discover a strange message on my voice mail. Someone had left a bit of a rant about our nativity scene that had been featured on the Calgary news. She called it blasphemous and a mockery. The only problem was that we hadn't put up a nativity scene, and there had been no news feature. Eventually, I discovered that Red Deer Lake United Church (which is in the extreme South end of Calgary) had

gotten some publicity for a nativity scene that they had commissioned from a Calgary artist. The scene features a Holy Family dressed as modern migrants, shepherds portrayed as marginalized youth, an angel carrying traditional Jewish symbols, and most dramatically, three magi portrayed as modern wise people:



Roberta Bondar who brings the gift of knowledge, songwriter/musician Michael Franti who brings the gift of music, and indigenous leader Perry Bellegarde who brings the gift of a blanket's warmth and wisdom. I appreciate the way in which the artist, Larry Stilwell, brought the Christmas story into the reality of the 20th century, and although I didn't agree at all with the caller's accusations of mockery and blasphemy, I was glad that she brought that church's effort to my attention. It actually reinforced some conversations I have been having about the importance of the arts as a way of provoking new ways of seeing, and how important the arts are to the mission of the church. But that's reality, isn't it, that Jesus' good news comes to us in the midst of confusion about the difference between Red Deer and Red Deer Lake, about how one person's inspiration

can be another's blasphemy, about the challenge of communicating the good news of Jesus' birth into our reality in a world where that good news is so often misunderstood.

The promise of God is a challenge to go into the world with hope, to deal with reality as the arena of God's interest, to live in the midst of suffering and turmoil and ambiguity and confusion, and there to learn what it means to be a child of grace. The promise of Christmas is a lesson and a challenge I need to hear anew every Christmas morning, when I wish I could stay in the land of stars and angels and Messiahs in bright paper. As we turn from the season of Advent, into the season of Christmas, I need to remember the promise of Christ. As we go forward into the challenges and opportunities of a New Year, may God grant us all the courage to hear that promise, to learn that lesson and to accept that challenge. Let us pray:

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Holy God, you offer us new life in the baby at Bethlehem,
but we confess that we have made something trivial,
something sentimental, out of Christmas.
Your light comes into the world,
and we see only the pretty lights on trees.
You shine in the darkness,
but we turn away from the darkness of our world,
and miss you.
Your Word is made flesh,
but we would like something nicer, more spiritual,
than the humanity of God with us in the flesh.
Forgive us, God: strengthen us with the hope
that cannot be packed away with the Christmas ornaments;
May we who have beheld this glory hold it in our hearts forever.
Amen.

Assurance of Grace:

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Fear not, I bring you tidings of great joy for all people!
Christ, our Saviour, is born.
As Jesus enters fully into our lives, we are forgiven.
Thanks be to God.