



THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF NEW CANAAN

SERMON – December 27, 2009

“What Child Is This?”

The Reverend Dr. David L. Bartlett

Luke 2:41-52

The Boy Jesus in the Temple

⁴¹Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. ⁴²And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. ⁴³When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. ⁴⁴Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. ⁴⁵When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. ⁴⁶After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. ⁴⁷And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. ⁴⁸When his parents^a saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, “Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.” ⁴⁹He said to them, “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?”^b ⁵⁰But they did not understand what he said to them. ⁵¹Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart. ⁵²And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years,^c and in the divine and human favor.

I

Our children surprise us.

There are good surprises and not so good surprises. Joseph and Mary were surprised that Jesus was not with the company of townsfolk traveling home from Jerusalem to Nazareth. They had assumed that he was hanging around with his friends elsewhere in the home town delegation. But when supper came and he was nowhere in sight they were scared and annoyed as all of us would be. This was not a good surprise.

^a Gk *they*

^b Or *be about my Father's interests?*

^c Or *in stature*

Three days later – I hadn't noticed that detail until this week – three days later they finally find him holding forth in the temple asking questions of the gathered clergy and theologians in residence. What amazes me in reading the story is not just that Jesus had kept the conversation going for three days but that when Joseph and Mary get home and Mary thinks back on the whole four days of panic and surprise, Luke says Mary “treasured all these things in her heart.” (The text also says that from then on he obeyed them in everything, which makes me suspect that they weren't just telling him how much they treasured him all the way home.)

Jonah Bartlett's being an associate minister at the Congregational Church of New Canaan has been a really nice surprise for his parents. We were a little surprised when he decided to go to seminary. Then we were pleased when he went to Union Seminary in Virginia and learned how to think theologically and then we were pleased when he went to Yale Divinity School and learned how to think like a pastor.

And we were thrilled when he was invited to serve at this church that we've known in various ways for almost twenty years, with such a strong staff and such an affirming congregation.

This morning was going to be the first time that we had heard him preach here from this pulpit, and then came the not so good surprise, as Christmas began to fade last Friday, Jonah began to fade, too, and by Friday night he was just plain ill.

Now he and I had talked about the sermon he was working on, and what you will hear in the next few minutes is a genuinely cooperative sermon. Lots of his ideas; lots of my words, and, as we always pray – the guidance of God's Holy Spirit.

II

As we thought about it together, it seemed that the tension Joseph and Mary feel when they deal with this

precocious twelve year old is a lot like the tension all of us feel when we deal with children – first of all with God's child, but then with our own children or the young friends that we love as well.

Start with God's child. What Mary and Joseph feel is a kind of tension between the Jesus who's familiar and the Jesus who pushes them – who's edgier, trickier, less easily contained.

Jonah tells much better than I can do of a time when he and his brother, both in middle school, went to a convention of Star Trek fans. The speaker for the occasion was Patrick Stewart who was familiar to the audience because he played the captain, Jean-Luc Picard, in the TV series *Star Trek, the Next Generation*. As long as Patrick Stewart was answering questions about his space ship, or the plots of particular episodes, or the most annoying features of particular Star Trek villains, the audience loved him.

What they did not love was any hint of the other Patrick Stewart, Sir Patrick Stewart of the Royal Shakespeare Company, a prince of the stage and the star of dramas that transcended even the magic of the Star Ship *Enterprise*.

As Jonah reminds us it had been more than eleven years since Mary had heard anything from an angel. The shepherds were all back on the hillside. Mary and Joseph had other children, and there was not that much time to think back on the glories of the first Christmas, what with chores to be done, and synagogue school and the bustle of the carpenter shop.

When Jesus went missing in Jerusalem the Jesus they missed was Jesus-Bar-Joseph; the carpenter's boy. Brother to his siblings and friend to his friends and usually obedient child to his parents.

What was so hard about finding Jesus in the temple was that the Jesus they found was more complicated than the Jesus they lost. Now when he talked about his “father's business” he didn't just mean the carpenter's shop, he meant the business of his father God: Scripture, and questions and eternal puzzles and strange promises.

A couple of weeks ago I preached about the claim

that Jesus is really God with us and really a human being, too. I think this story presents a somewhat different claim. Jesus is always really the familiar Jesus and always new and surprising, as well.

And both of those are gifts. All of us want and need the familiar Jesus, the comfortable Jesus, the “Jesus loves me” Jesus. But all of us want and need the transcendent Jesus, the challenging Jesus, the Jesus who keeps moving us beyond ourselves toward the Kingdom and presence of God.

In Luke's Gospel the next time we'll see Jesus in Nazareth we have a similar scene. Jesus comes to the synagogue. Now it's not his parents but his friends and neighbors. At first they love to hear the boy preach – look at that, one of our own. Familiar Jesus.

But then he says: “By the way I'm not just one of your own – the God I serve reaches out beyond Nazareth to do justice all through Israel and then through all the world.” And they say, “Go away; we want that old Jesus back; the comfortable one.”

All through Luke's Gospel we get the tension. Familiar Jesus says “Love your neighbor” and the pushy Jesus says, “By the way that despised Samaritan – he's your neighbor.” Familiar Jesus says “God forgives that annoying sinner who wanders into the far country,” and pushy Jesus says: “By the way, you forgive her, you forgive him, too.”

The story of the twelve year old boy in the temple reminds us of what at Christmastime we sometimes forget. We celebrate the good news that Jesus has come to dwell among us. But when he comes, he isn't always easy.

III

When our children come home for Christmas it isn't always easy, either. Come to think of it when they come home for supper it isn't always easy.

Jonah helped me think about why this is so. The story in Luke's Gospel helps me think about why this is so. We like what's comfortable and familiar. We like decorating the tree the same way every year; we have the same Christmas meal; if we don't sing our favorite carol at the Christmas Eve service we feel cheated.

What if something new breaks into the familiar, beloved and comfortable holiday? A carol we don't love; a vegetarian at the Christmas feast; a daughter-in-law or son-in-law who – you won't believe this – opens gifts on Christmas Eve.

What if the son or daughter who comes home isn't quite the son or daughter who we saw last summer, or last Christmas, or earlier this week? What if she keeps breaking out of the bonds of the familiar to be edgier, trickier? What if he asks us questions for which we have no easy answers?

What if they look a little bit like Jesus in the temple, pushing all us Mary and Josephs toward the majesty and mystery of God?

My friend Henry Palmer was the fifth child of Walter and Elizabeth Palmer. I am told on good authority that Walter Palmer was one of the most brilliant gastroenterologists of his generation. Of the Palmer children four were boys and one was a girl and all five were physicians. At Sloane Kettering; at the University of Chicago; at University of California San Francisco. And Henry. Who decided that it did not matter as much what he discovered as whom he served, what he published as whom he helped. So off he went to Africa, to a community hospital, that would never get him on anybody's list of the ten most distinguished clinicians in this field or that.

And some days Walter and Elizabeth were a little bit annoyed. And some days Walter and Elizabeth realized that they had been praying with that child all those years, and bringing him to church and to youth group and that in the end what they had most to love about him... was not just what they had given him but what God had given them.

IV

There it is, the familiar Jesus and the surprising one.

The way in which that familiar baby also becomes the challenging twelve year old, showing us the love of God and the majesty of God, too. The way in which our children grow with us and then grow beyond us, because though of course they are our children, they were God's children first.

Now maybe we can begin to understand why the story ends the way it does. When all this was over, and Jesus had returned to his more obedient mode, Mary treasured all these things in her heart.

It's been a busy Christmas; it always is for people like us. And tomorrow begins a busy week. But just now, and for a little while, before the carols fade and before life presses in too hard: treasure these things; treasure your children; treasure Mary's child. **Amen.**