Christmas Fund Sermon

Luke 2:41-52

By Rev. Dr. Elyse Berry

Peace be with you all, my kin in Christ! Although we are still technically in Christmastide, our lectionary moves us up a bit in Jesus’ life to when he was twelve. It is the only story we get from this period of Jesus’ life in the canonical gospels, but there is quite a bit going on in this story, so let’s dig in.

First of all, I have to admit that when re-reading this familiar story—while knowing I would be preaching on it—I found myself drawn to defend or make sense of everyone involved. *Well, Jesus appears to be disobedient because….but really he’s just…* or … *Well, technically back in that time it would’ve been the norm for the parents to rightly assume Jesus is with the rest of the folks going back home so his family is reasonably upset…*

When I pause for even a moment though, I can see that I’m trying to make everyone in this story “right” or “make sense” somehow—to calm down any dissonance or confusion or conflict I feel inside myself trying to understand this situation. And this situation being where the Word Made Flesh is dwelling among us as a pre-teen who caused his parents great heartache and anxiety. Where the ever discerning and wise Mary and Joseph do not understand their son, even after he tries to explain himself to them.

Palestinian poet Naomi Shihab Nye has a brilliant poem called “I Feel Sorry for Jesus,” where she articulates how people commodify Jesus and fit him into their own box, potentially distorting everything Jesus was about. She writes:

“People blame terrible pieties on Jesus. They want to be his special pet.
Jesus deserves better.”

But apparently, it is not just a human dynamic to want to find the version of God we were already looking for. In ancient biographies, this was a literary technique to prove or communicate to the listener that yes, this really is the one you’ve been looking for. See? They’ve had it “right” all along. This is in contrast to today, where what makes so many stories compelling is the growth journey, the arc, the triumphs and struggles of the main character. But whether I see this text as Jesus knowing more than we do as a twelve-year-old because he *is* the Messiah or this is just an event of normal human and family development, I wonder what else I could be missing if this is where most of my energy is taken up. Am I getting lost in their family dynamics or is there more there we have yet to uncover? Later in Shihab Nye’s poem she says,

 “See? I’m talking like I know.
It’s dangerous talking for Jesus.
You get carried away almost immediately.”

To help us sift through this, let’s look to feminist theologian Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, who examines this passage through the ways Luke’s ambiguous Greek phrasing can be translated. Jesus’ response to his parents could be translated as, “Did you not know that I had to be at my Father’s house?” Another is, “Did you not know that I had to be about the business affairs of my Father?” Or a third option is, “Did you not know that I had to be among the household or relatives of my Father?” As Schussler Fiorenza explains for this last translation, “Whereas the parents of Jesus had searched among their relatives and acquaintances, Jesus is among those belonging to the household of God. Such a translation brings out the contrast between Jesus’ biological family and his “true” family.”

We see Jesus stressing the importance of this broader understanding of family, and the tone here is similar to Mark 3, when Jesus says, “Whoever does the will of God is my sibling and parent.” The family of God goes beyond blood and culture. It is made through the free choice to be a disciple. Quite radical. And this is so important for the larger message of the Gospel that is a stance against hierarchy, patriarchy, militarism, us versus them, and so on. Jesus preached a message of radical inclusivity and consistently rebuked his followers any time they tried to one up each other, find out who was more “important,” or micromanage Jesus’ healing powers or time based off of who *they* thought was worthy.

But back to twelve-year-old Jesus. I wonder what it felt like to be misunderstood by his parents. I certainly remember that feeling. I wonder what it was like for him to be excited to share what he had learned and how he felt affirmed by those in the Temple, only to be met with a whirlwind of emotions from Mary and Joseph—understandably so. To have experienced his own agency in a new way, while at the same time having to reckon with the repercussions of his choices even if he didn’t mean to hurt anyone. Though Luke takes time to note that Mary and Jospeh didn’t understand Jesus’ point about who is considered family or why he was where he was, it seems Jesus might have missed *their* point on what it means to be family, to be in intimate, daily-life, relationships. Relationships that are not co-dependent or power-over, but ones where there is accountability and communication. Both these ways of loving and being part of God’s beloved community are valid, true, real, “right,” dare I say. And the writer of Luke does seem to cover all of his bases at the end of this story by saying how Jesus was obedient to Mary and Joseph thereafter—matching the traditional messiah narrative—and how he “increased in wisdom and in years and in divine and human favor.”

In case you are missing our deep-sea theology creatures that we’ve been learning about throughout Advent, I have one more in relation to this last line from Luke. In April of this year, from 4.500 feet below the surface, a new species of bivalve was found in the South China Sea. Named Acharax haimaensis, this creature is what is called a “homebuilder,” where their bodies make their own shells. So when the creature grows, their shell grows with them. This is in contrast to the hermit crabs you might find on a beach boardwalk, for example, who have to find a new shell once they’ve outgrown their old one.

When I look at today’s reading from this perspective, I see a Jesus who is like this homebuilder bivalve—a person growing in age, in faith, and in understanding of what and in whom his home is. As Jesus is coming of age, he is doing the work of expanding his vision so that he may embody it and truly live into that message before he goes to preach it. As he is expanding, so is God, and so is his community. It’s a beautiful thought. And sometimes it happens that way in our lives too.

Other times, though, it can feel more chaotic and not on a timeline of our choosing. I often feel more like the hermit crab, who is running around in nothing more than a birthday suit trying to find a new home-shell before I get gobbled up by something bigger than me! It’s vulnerable out there in these waters of life.

But that’s the real meaning of “the deep,” isn’t it? The Hebrew word for the deep out of which creation was born in Genesis is *tohu v’vohu,* or formless void. I don’t know about you, but I sometimes feel this formless void here even still, even in my own life. I also notice how often I try to make it different than what it is. Clean up the chaos, fill the vacuum, as best as I can—perhaps even similar to how this sermon started. But then I wonder how I might be missing God there, too? How might I be missing myself? Missing my community?

As Jewish writer Mx. Mones writes, “An essential human feature and *flaw* is the urge to eliminate ambiguity — to desperately package *tohu* into form — into something structured, clear, and contained…It’s so much more excruciating and confusing to attempt to hold so many things at once. If only anyone, anything, any “side” was one hundred percent just, righteous, and infallible. Tragically, that is a physical impossibility. Justice, righteousness, reality, and grief, are messy, multidimensional things. But I assure you, there is immense divinity in such things.” Writing as a non-binary person, they go on to illuminate that the word ‘Hebrews’ actually comes from the root עָבַר (*avar*), which means “to cross over, to overflow, to go beyond.”

*Tohu. Avar.* This un-wielding, formless, outpouring, ever-overflowing, Spirit of God. We, the Beloved Community, who are made in the image of such a God. This Beloved Community that goes beyond blood and kin and birthplace. That crosses over political lines and systemic structures long set-in place. This Beloved Community that is also messy, confusing, and doesn’t get it “right” all the time. This Beloved Community that doesn’t understand it the first time around either, even when explained in real time by the messiah. This Beloved Community that says, “where else would I be? Of course I am here with you, my beloveds. Seek me and you will find me.”

Perhaps this is why we come together from across the various voids and depths of our own lives, whether those voids be empty or chaotic or an expansive space that is full of potential and longing, with plenty of room to share. And once we come together, how might we go beyond what we thought possible, or what categories we or society has imposed on us, or beyond who we thought would be a part of us, or what we thought was expected, or what “we’ve always done?” Where we will be called to go? And how will we respond?

Whatever your answers—or journeys in response—to such questions may be, my prayer for you is that the depth and breadth of our expansive God be with you, be with you in your ministries, be with you in the new year to come. And may you feel accompanied by the Church within and beyond these walls as you do. Amen.

**Sources:**

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