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## A Slow Story

Luke 2:41-52

A sermon preached at Page Auditorium on December 27, 2015

by the Rev. Dr. Carol Gregg

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Sometimes it is interesting to reflect on what did not happen. Have you noticed? The gospel writers did not create a baby book for Jesus. Nowhere do we have recollections of when Jesus first crawled, what happened on his first birthday, the first tooth that fell out, or a picture of him in him proudly standing in first Little League uniform. Packed away somewhere I still have a physical baby book which my mother assembled with some notations and memorabilia from a perfectly ordinary childhood. I took pleasure in looking at that book occasionally.

Today we are accustomed to digital baby books by way of Facebook and other social media. Friends of mine post frequent pictures of their children in milestone, and decidedly *non*-milestone, circumstances. Recently, I saw that Abigayle lost her first tooth, Davis was photographed with Santa, Ben performed in the marching band, and Abby and TJ went out to dinner because their parents did not want to cook that night. I am grateful for these connections and updates, not only because I live at a distance from these families, but also because I know some of their extended families also live at a distance.

I am sympathetic with these Facebook posts in part because I did something similar when my son, William, was young. Because we did not live near his grandparents, I took video of him during the year, and inflicted the VHS tapes on his grandparents at Christmas time. A few years ago I converted the tapes to digital format and inflicted it on William. Of course, he found it a tad embarrassing.

What do we have of Jesus' childhood? Next to nothing. One short scene -- our scripture reading for this morning.

The people of Israel had waited a long time for the Messiah. Nearly 600 years from the time of when Isaiah wrote of a suffering servant. Around 1,000 years from the time of the covenant with David, when God promised that his descendants would rule forever. People had been waiting and watching a long time. At Christmas, we celebrate Jesus' miraculous arrival which was marked by the singing of the heavenly hosts and a star which pointed him out. A musical announcement on a heavenly loud speaker and a celestial spot light. Didn't word of this wondrous birth start to spread immediately? The shepherds went back to their fields. Didn't they tell the story to their neighbors and friends? The wise men likewise left and surely encountered many people on their travels. This is a long-awaited child announced with heavenly signs. Wouldn't you think that people would be coming to him, lingering nearby, waiting for Jesus to do something? Where were the ancient paparazzi trying to get the latest news on the development of the child, born king of the Jews?

What do we have from the gospel writers? From three of them, silence. Perhaps we should be grateful to Luke, that at least we have this story.

When he was 12 years old, Jesus and his parents travelled to Jerusalem for the Passover festival. This was an annual pilgrimage for the family, who likely traveled with a group of friends and neighbors from Nazareth. It is more than 60 miles between the two cities, so this trip would take several days by foot. Clearly this is a family that is investing deeply in their religious tradition. Jesus is being raised as a devout Jew.<sup>1</sup> When the festival concluded and the pilgrims headed for home in Nazareth, after a day of travel, Mary and Joseph realized that Jesus was not with them. Since helicopter parenting had not yet been invented and since they had every reason to think Jesus was in the group of travelers, Mary and Joseph cannot be accused of neglect. It was common for a large group of family and friends to travel together. As soon as the parents were aware of his absence, they searched for him for three days, and then found him in the Temple. Jesus was talking with the Temple teachers who were amazed by his understanding and his questions.

When Mary and Joseph finally find Jesus, Mary asks. “Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.” [Jesus] said to them, “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” (Luke 2:48-49)

In these, the first recorded words of Jesus, he identifies God as his Father. Jesus is bound by God’s call for he “must” be in his Father’s house. This claim of allegiance to God the Father, contrasts with the human father and mother who had been anxiously looking for him. The place where Jesus is truly at home is in the Temple, God’s house.

If you had never read the gospels before, how do you think the story would develop from this point on? Miraculous birth, silence, then in the Temple, Jesus engages in theological discussion as a 12-year old and proclaims, what to him is obvious, “I’m home, here in my Father’s house.” Wouldn’t you think this is the coming of age event and now the story is going to really get going? You might think he would tell his parents that he was going stay in Jerusalem from now on, because this would be his spiritual home. Or maybe he would try to convince his parents to move to Jerusalem so they could still be together.<sup>2</sup> Thirteen was the age of manhood so doesn’t it make sense that this should be the start of his ministry? Of course, this is God-in-flesh so age is not a factor. Then on the human side of things, since the average life span at the time was 30-35 years, he needed to get started. Maybe this story is going to get going now.

This scene in the Temple turns out not to be the start of Jesus’ ministry. Instead, he goes home with his parents to Nazareth and is obedient to them. Jesus descends back in to obscurity – for 18 years. The gospel writers fall silent again.

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<sup>1</sup> Fred Craddock, *Interpretation Commentary: Luke*, p. 41

<sup>2</sup> Matthew Henry *Commentary on the Whole Bible Vol 5; Luke 2*

One commentator describes Jesus' visit to the Temple as "a temporary unveiling of Jesus' relationship with his Father; it remained a 'secret epiphany', a momentary glimpse through a curtain into a private room."<sup>3</sup>

This conversation in the Temple is a glimpse, just a glimpse, of who Jesus is. It is a sighting with more than a decade of silence on either side of it.

Does it ever seem that God's revelation or God's work in the world or God's work in your life is slow?

We celebrate Christmas with wonderful fanfare and sing of "Peace on Earth", and yet peace has not come. We waited all of Advent to celebrate once again, to hear the good news of God-with-us, and now the angels have fallen quiet. With the exception of a very short conversation in the temple, the birth of Jesus is followed by a 30 year hiatus. Like his parents, we may be left wondering. "He was just here; now he is gone. Did we lose him? Did he leave us?"

Recently Pope Francis recognized a second miracle of Mother Teresa of Calcutta, which clears the way for her canonization.<sup>4</sup> As one who served the poor so faithfully, her sainthood has been expected and may come next year. Teresa is remarkable for many reasons, one of which is her generous service despite painful doubts. She had a series of mystical experiences in 1946 which lead her to believe God was calling to her serve the poorest of the poor.<sup>5</sup> These powerful experiences were followed by silence and then doubt. She wrote, "In my soul I feel just that terrible pain of loss, of God not wanting me — of God not being God — of God not existing."<sup>6</sup> Did God go silent? Did she lose Jesus?

While God's timing is, well, God's, from our human perspective, it often seems as if divine revelation is slow. In our moments of arrogance and impatience, we want answers to our prayers now and we want them in the affirmative. We want the full revelation of God's kingdom, not silence in response to our pleas for health, wholeness, justice, and peace.

In an era when religious certitude is all too common, perhaps it is important to notice what we don't know.

This passage in Luke, and the silence that surrounds it, calls us to humility in the face of mystery. We have the promise of God-with-us. We have a glimpse of who Jesus is. And beyond that there are questions. We know the rest of the gospel story for we can read it any time we wish, and yet we don't know how or when God will choose to work in our lives and our world. It is presumptuous for us to assume that we have full knowledge of God's way, God's will, or God's timing.

James Martin, in his book *Jesus: A Pilgrimage* describes his own impatience with God. He writes, "Once I was so frustrated about an unhealthy aspect of my personality that I knelt on the

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<sup>3</sup> I Howard Marshall, *Commentary on Luke*, p. 129-130

<sup>4</sup> New York Times, Dec 18, 2015, "Pope Francis Clears Mother Teresa's Path to Sainthood" by Swell Chan

<sup>5</sup> Mother Teresa of Calcutta Center, <http://www.motherteresa.org/layout.html>

<sup>6</sup> New York Times, Aug. 29, 2007, "A Saint's Dark Night", by James Martin

floor and begged God to change me...After an hour, waiting, I rose from the floor, the same person as before. A few months later, I was speaking to a spiritual director, lamenting this. Why wouldn't God heal me as quickly as Jesus healed [in the miracle stories]?...The spiritual director pointed to a tree outside his window. "See that tree?" he said. I nodded. "What color is it?" I knew he was leading me to an obvious answer that I couldn't yet see. "Green", I said. "It's a green tree." "In the fall it will be red," he said. And I knew this. I had seen that very tree in the middle of a New England Autumn. It was a glorious scarlet. "And no one sees it change," he said. Conversion happens most often in a slow, deliberate, and mysterious way, like a tree changing colors in the fall."<sup>7</sup>

The conversion of our own hearts and behaviors can be a slow, halting process. God's work in our world has been slowly revealed, over thousands of years. The good news is that God gives us glimpses of who Jesus is and the nature of the divine realm. The good news is that God is with us. There is more to come.

Our job is to humbly give thanks for the mystery of God's incarnation.

In Bethlehem, the present-day Church of the Nativity is built over a cave, which has been considered the birthplace of Jesus since at least the second century. The original church was built in the fourth century and present-day church was built in the 6<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>8</sup> Over the years, the structure has gone through many changes, one of which is the entrance. The 6<sup>th</sup> century opening is tall and wide, perhaps 16 feet tall. This doorway was decreased in size during the time of the Crusades, to an archway, perhaps 8 feet tall. The entrance was again decreased in size during the Ottoman period, reportedly to reduce looting, as the entrance is now too small for a cart.<sup>9</sup> In fact, it is now too low for most people as the entrance is only about 4 feet tall. Visitors to the Church of the Nativity must bow to enter. Some pilgrims enter on their knees through what is now called the "Door of Humility".

The image of bowing down or kneeling in order to visit the birthplace of Christ, seems to be an appropriate image for the Christmas season. We most fully appreciate the mystery of the incarnation from a position of humility, trusting God to unfold the story in the manner and time that God chooses.

God is with us. Thanks be to God.

Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> James Martin, *Jesus: A Pilgrimage* p. 154

<sup>8</sup> Unesco World Heritage Sites: <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1433>

<sup>9</sup> James Martin, p. 55