

Jesus claims his birthright

We celebrated Christmas just 2 days ago but today's Gospel moves us ahead 12 years to when Jesus and his parents are celebrating the Passover in Jerusalem.

On their return home to Galilee Jesus' parents are one day's journey away from Jerusalem when they realize that Jesus is not with them – he is not where they expect him to be.

This is actually not totally unexpected as the usual mode of travel at that time would have the women and children leaving first in a slower caravan while the men, who were quicker, would wait for later and then all would meet up at the end of the day. Here it was that they discovered that Jesus was not with them – each no doubt thinking that he was with the other parent.

On the third day of Jesus being missing Mary and Joseph found Jesus sitting in the temple with teachers, "listening and asking questions". A key passage in the life of Jesus follows:

"Your father and I have been anxiously looking for you," says Mary, to which Jesus responds, "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?"

Gently and directly Jesus takes the name *father* from Joseph and gives it to God.

Jesus needed to be at the temple, he wanted to be involved there, he was comfortable there. Questions for us to ponder here at Zion:

- Does our faith life also motivate us to participate in the life of our place of worship?
- Do we feel at home here?
- Do we look forward to conversations about matters of our own faith?
- How do we respond after we leave these doors after worship?

At some point along the journey of his earlier life Jesus recognizes his relationship to God and claims it here in this passage – even so, he stays with his parents, obeys them and "grows in wisdom and stature" for the next 20 years before beginning active ministry.

I think this points to why we see this text at this juncture in the lectionary, just 2 days after Christmas – Jesus is no longer a baby in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger but he is a 12 year old boy who now recognizes himself as the *Son of God*. In a sense he claims his Divine nature for his own just *as we also have been called to do during this Advent and Christmas season* – being drawn ever more deeply into the living Christ who re-enters our lives each day and each moment of our lives.

Not where we expect him to be

This text reminds me of another story in Luke, of the resurrected Christ encountering two men on the Road to Emmaus – 2 disciples who were of a heavy heart thinking they too had lost Jesus; that he had died, not to return. They did not recognize the risen Christ as he walked with them as they were leaving Jerusalem, returning home, and they too were told by Jesus that his activities were necessary - Jesus was busy with his father's work, to die and rise again for us. These two disciples as well soon discovered Jesus anew, also where they did not expect to find him.

I think these two stories tell us something more about the larger narrative of Luke, and what the message is for us, here at Zion. On one level at least, Luke is trying to tell us that finding Jesus is not always as easy as we imagine. God is not always where we expect him to be – not on the road back to Galilee after Passover with his parents; not in his tomb after his death; and perhaps not even in our lives where we presume to have found him.

And it not surprising really, that this is so. God's work on our souls and in our lives often occurs silently, as a breath of wind or an inclination or suggestion – meant to draw us into deeper prayer, more authentic searching, and service... *and humble bewilderment*.

"Where are you Lord?" Is a question we may ask ourselves in times of difficulty or struggle – perhaps even over this Christmas holiday. This can be a difficult question to answer – because deep, eternal, and frustrating silence is often all we hear in response to struggle – especially in response to struggle. There is something in the silence surely, but it may take our whole lives to work out (or work with)...and even then we are left only with faith and a hope, an anticipation, that God is steadfast, enduring, and faithful. That wonderful gift of faith!

If it were otherwise - and Jesus were to simply walk around Stratford healing, performing miracles, and coaxing us to follow him - it is most likely we would try to take control of the whole process; or we would run in fear; or we would allow our rational minds to shut the whole thing down.

No, in order for God to work in our lives we must each learn to live with a *cloud of unknowing*.

Yearning for God and discipleship

St. John of the Cross likens the experience of God's careful work on our lives to that a small deer who, when we least expect it, jumps out in front of us and gives us a *heart wound* but then retreats – and a yearning for God begins to grow from within the awareness of our own woundedness. The wound heals eventually but the deer keeps following us and every now and then jumps out, always knowing where this *heart wound* is located, and re-wounding us over and over again. The wound grows and heals again, as does our longing for God.

In a sense, our main task in life is *not to be diverted from our longing for God* – to discover God anew over and over again in our joys and our wounds.

Discipleship is a way that we answer this longing, and it too involves the unexpected, of encountering the other, ourselves and God in new ways. Through our activities with others we sense God, and even find him, only to discover that God is not always as we imagine him to be. He comes in many “distressing disguises” (says Mother Teresa) – but never-the-less through discipleship we hear God calling us into more authentic service, into deeper personal reflection and prayer.

Our Advent journey – following Jesus

We have just finished our walk through the Advent season and Christmas day together.

For those who were part of the Advent bible study group that we had here at Zion we were journaling, perhaps daily, about the movement of God in our lives.

In our grade 7 confirmation class we asked each week where God was present for us, reflecting on the signs of the Divine in our lives.

And now we have come to church this morning, as we do each Sunday, singing praises and discovering Jesus together in Word and sacrament...

...Jesus is here surely, but the church cannot contain Jesus, he has also gone ahead of us to where the action is: he is off comforting those in the Alzheimer's unit of the local hospital; he's in Syria in the middle of the war zone; he is over at Hillside Manor caring for the aged and the lonely; and he is feeding the hungry, caring for the abused, and the misunderstood through people like you and me. He is in our Christmas celebrations, in the gurgling of a new-born baby, and the gentle wisdom of the aged. And he is asking us to follow him; to discover him in these activities.

Jesus is going where there is need and where there is love and we are asked to follow and respond as he did...perhaps not with grand works but rather with simple acts of kindness – to give that human something with our heart to our neighbour.

We are already one

...and to engage in each other's reconciliation -

There is really no other way to deepen our understanding of God or further our own healing than in relationship. But beware - this is humbling work indeed.

As C.S. Lewis said, “Friendship is born at that moment when one person says to another, ‘What! You too? I thought I was the only one?’”

You see, we are all connected at our deepest levels; really, we are – all the way to the bottom.

We need each other to discover who we are and where our blind spots are and our wounds. Then we need each other further to ease into the healing of Christ through relationship – humble, committed, steadfast relationship – in which God pours himself out through our mutual acts of kindness, gentleness, and compassion.

And perhaps, through grace, we may experience God anew as the deepest part of ourselves... and our longing for God continues to grow.

Conclusion

Our call is to love and serve each other and God:

To celebrate the beauty of this world together + to serve others;

To sing and praise God with one voice + to weep for those less fortunate;

To celebrate Christmas together in our communities and families with joy + to go out and be with those who are sick or troubled or lonely.

Jesus is with us in all of this, yet even as we turn our heads to see him he continues on, deeper into the struggles of the world, deeper in to the mystery of Christmas, deeper into our own hearts and into the still point of silence and prayer, where the dance begins. He is here and he has also moved on ahead of us to Galilee, or he will be “asking questions and listening in the Temple”.

Follow him and you will see, Jesus will always lead the way.

Amen