



*God in the Silence*

*Luke 2:41-52*

*Sunday, December 30th, 2018*

*First Federated Church of Peoria, Illinois*

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*Text: And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years (strength), and in divine and human favor. (v. 52)*

Today's lesson is the only story that we have of Jesus' boyhood. But even in this story, we know very little about his early years for the story of a twelve year old Jesus finds him on the cusp of adulthood. We know very little about his early years. Some people call this period in his life "the silent years". The gospel of Mark is completely silent on the matter. His gospel begins with the call of John the Baptist and Jesus baptism. John's gospel is equally silent. His gospel echoes the Creation story the begins the Old Testament book of "beginnings"; Genesis. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ... All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. (1: 1, 3 KJV) According to John, then, Jesus is God, the One who was at the Beginning and whose Word brought everything into existence.

Matthew speaks only of Jesus birth, the wise men, the family's flight into Egypt, and the killing of the innocent. Luke gives us the main elements of what we think of as "the Christmas story"; the annunciation by the angel Gabriel, the birth of Jesus, the announcing angel and accompanying heavenly hosts, the shepherds in the field at night, and his dedication in the Temple--Simeon's blessing and the prophetic words of Anna.

By and large we don't think very much about Jesus boyhood. But there is no reason to think that if Jesus is fully human and fully divine, the very incarnation of God, the visible manifestation of the invisible God, as the letter to the Colossians says, was not like other boys. He was fed and bathed and tucked into bed at night; played in the streets of Nazareth, had a best friend or two, even got into a little mischief from time to time. I suppose that he probably had a favorite food and had some foods that he was not terribly fond of eating. I imagine that he even followed his dad around, as little boys often do. Since Joseph is not mentioned as being present in Jesus later life, I suppose that Jesus grieved at Joseph's grave. But other than these events, there is silence.

Silence makes us uncomfortable. Listen to the coughs during an extended silent prayer or notice the nervous shifting of we. How long can we drive without turning on the radio because we cannot stand the silence? It's almost as if any noise is better than no We are startled by silence in this world of continue background noise and mood music. Silence forces us to come face to face with ourselves. There are no shiny objects, no squirrels, no distractions.

Richard J. Foster speaks of a "purifying silence" of the soul. This silence is not dramatic. Rather, it is subtle, gradual not unlike the realization that a child has grown by noticing the pencil marks on a hallway door jam. (Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home, p. 21)

The early Christian mystic St. John of the Cross referred to the silence of God as “the dark night of the soul”. This silence strips us of two things. First it strips us of our dependence on exterior “things”. “We find ourselves less and less impressed with the religion of the ‘big deal’--big buildings, big budgets, big productions, big miracles. Not that there is anything wrong with big things, but they (just) no longer impress us.

The second stripping is of our dependence upon exterior “results.” In this stripping we become more aware of how little in life we really control. In this stripping we grasp how little control we have for our own destiny. We are at the mercy of others more than we like to think or admit. (ibid. p. 22)

God is often found in the silence.

The Old Testament the prophet Elijah sought the voice of the Lord in the strong wind, the fire, and the earthquake, but the Lord’s voice was not found in any of the three. The voice of the Lord was found in a still small voice. And it was a voice of courage, and determination, and promise.

God works in silence.

George McDonald once wrote that when God wants an important thing done in this world or a wrong righted, God goes about it in a very singular way. God’s doesn’t release thunderbolts or stir up earthquakes. God simply has a tiny baby born, perhaps of very humble parents. God puts an idea in the parent’s heart, and they, in turn put it in the child’s mind. And then, God waits.

The great events of this world are not battles or elections or earthquakes or even thunderbolts. The world’s great events are babies, for each child comes with the message that God is not yet discouraged with us--with humanity. God is still expecting that goodwill will become incarnate in each and every human life. (Paraphrased)

In silence God makes every moment of our ordinary lives holy. It was in the devotions of Brother Lawrence that I first realized God sanctifies even the washing of dishes and taking out the garbage, going to work and working on calculous. There are no real ordinary times or wasted moments under God’s watchful eye. Every moment counts. The Psalmist reminds us that God is “acquainted with all our ways--our sitting down and rising up; even our thoughts from afar.” (Psalm 139) Understanding this can’t help but to give us pause in this hurry up, quick-fix, instant-oatmeal, smartphone world.

In the silent years of Jesus faith matured. He developed the habit of worship. Our gospel lesson reminds us that Jesus’ parents had “a custom” of going to the Temple in Jerusalem every year during Passover. And later in Luke’s gospel we are told that Jesus had the habit of worship. It was this habit that took him to his hometown of Nazareth where he was handed the scroll Isaiah to read during worship.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, he read, “because He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor; ... proclaim release to the captives ... sight to the blind ... liberty to the oppressed, and to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord (Luke 4: 18-19)

He then closed the scroll and declared that this word has been fulfilled in their hearing.

In the silence of the Temple Jesus told his parents that he “must be about his Father’s business.” If we, as a Christian community, are the body of Christ in this time and this place then we, too, must be about the Father’s business. We are called to embody compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness, love, peace, and thanksgiving.

Quite frankly, though, these qualities are increasingly hard to find in today’s culture. They are said to be naive; they may be ok for the weak or the naive or the “baby Jesus, meek and mild” but they are not “real world” stuff, not in this world of villainizing those with whom we disagree.

Those who decide to take Jesus seriously do not measure themselves by the standards of the world, though. We know that there is a higher standard, a higher calling, a higher measure. The letter to the Colossians invites us to be wise, mature people understanding that there is a greater Reality than this time limited on in which we live and move and have our being. We are invited to live into our baptism vows and nourished at the Lord’s Table. In the words of the apostle, “God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved” (3:12), be a Light to the nations. Bring a word of Hope to the world. Do this to the glory of God. Amen.

Amen.