

Hillcrest Congregational Church, UCC
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In My Father's House
Luke 2:21-38, Matthew 2:13b-23, Luke 2:41-52

We have six stories about Jesus' conception and birth. There are only three stories about his childhood as we heard today. He is named, dedicated, and recognized. And then the story skips from age 12 to age 30. In the intervening time, he grows and becomes strong, filled with wisdom; and increases in the Divine and human favor.

It is unfortunate that we don't have more stories. Don't you wonder what he was like as a child, an adolescent and a young adult? What did he do, where did he go, who were his teachers? We don't know. He just disappears from view at age 12. Then he bursts on the scene a fully grown man, witnesses his cousin John's ministry, is baptized himself, and then begins the work of his lifetime; healing, preaching, teaching, prophesying, and leading by example.

So why aren't there more stories? The authors of the Gospel according to Mark and John do not have any stories about Jesus before his ministry. It is Matthew and Luke who are interested in Jesus' beginnings, but unfortunately we cannot ask them where the other stories are. All we can do is focus on the stories that we have. And they must be important,

otherwise why include these stories and not others? Or why would Matthew and Luke not have just started with Jesus as a fully-grown man like John and Mark? There must be something important in these stories for the Gospel writers to have included them.

Scholars have pointed out that the over-riding theme of Matthew's Gospel is that Jesus is the fulfillment of Jewish prophecy. He is in the line of the prophets Abraham and Moses, he is a descendant of King David, he is the Messiah that has been foretold. In our scripture reading today from Matthew 2:13b-23), we hear no less than three prophecies fulfilled: "out of Egypt I have called my son" (just like Moses), Jeremiah's prophecy (that references Rachel the mother of Joseph and Benjamin two of the tribes of Israel), "Rachel weeping for her children," and "He will be called a Nazorean." Matthew makes his case very obvious from the beginning and all throughout his Gospel telling Jesus' story. Jesus is the One that has been awaited.

Luke's story about Jesus' baptism, and dedication also can be seen in the light of what scholars have discerned about his message. Luke wrote to an audience that would not necessarily be familiar with Jewish tradition. He gave them details about the rituals that would have been unnecessary to someone living in the Jewish culture, like the two turtle-doves or pigeons

needed for sacrifice. Like Matthew, Luke also makes his point clear early in the second chapter of his Gospel. He reports that Simeon and Anna recognize Jesus as the salvation prepared for all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to God's people Israel, and all people who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. The light has come for men and women, Gentiles and Jews, holy people and those who are outcast, for all who are willing to see the light.

Luke also notes Jesus' ability to listen, understand, discuss and answer important questions, far beyond the average person. Jesus develops this ability very early, at the age of twelve. This is remarkable because then and now, even the basic knowledge required of a Jewish male was not expected until age 13. Yet Jesus is holding his own in the temple with teachers far beyond his age and experience. There is obviously something very special about Jesus.

But these are overall notes about the three stories we heard. What specifically is there that peaks your interest? Is it the fact that both Anna and Simeon somehow recognize Jesus as the one they have been waiting for out of all the children that they would have seen brought to the temple to be dedicated? What made them notice him? Is it the time the family spent in

Egypt? Where did they live? How long did they live there? Did Jesus go to school in Egypt?

Or how about the overwhelming relief that Mary and Joseph felt when they found Jesus in the temple? Or what we might imagine was a tongue lashing, that drew the exasperating adolescent utter self-confident response from Jesus, knowing that he wasn't the one who was lost, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?"

Or conversely perhaps we can look at a bigger picture here. These are stories of Jesus' life that tell us a little of what he experienced, who he met, how he was influenced, where he began to learn about what it meant to be human and where he began to understand who he was and how he was called to be special.

How might it affect a child to hear the story of how a priest and a prophet in the temple recognized who he was when he was only a month old? How would it affect his parents and their parenting? How would life as an exile in Egypt far from family and friends have influenced his family life and his first impressions?

How would traveling to the temple each year for the festival of the Passover have formed his religious sensibility? How would understanding the debate of teachers far beyond other people's abilities change his self-

understanding? How would being respected and listened to by these teachers mold a young character?

Where would Jesus get the self-awareness to say to his parents- did you not know I would be in my Abba's house? Not the temple of the Lord, not our God's sanctuary, but the intimate form of Father- my Daddy's house. Perhaps these stories show us some of the people who influenced, and the formative moments, that show us the person who Jesus was and would become.

Which brings me to my question for you all today. Who are the people who influenced, and what the formative moments that made you who you are? How have you been affected, taught, learned, recognized, respected, cared for, and what have you experienced that has brought you to be the person you are in this place and time in your life? Can you name them? Can you tell why? I will let you think about that for a moment.

This is one of those questions on a personality test you might take for a job interview. It is also a question you might answer for a dating service. It is also a question that might be on St. Peter's questionnaire at the pearly gates.

But perhaps just as importantly, are you done being formed? Are you a finished product? I was listening to the radio and the speaker advocated

that we exercise our minds, hearts and souls by regularly examining one thing we believe- something we believe to be true and analyze why we believe it and how we came to believe it. What is it we believe to be the truth? About us, about God, about the world, about society? Pick something, anything.

On the UCC Still Speaking devotion page this week, Anthony B. Robinson wrote, "Truth is elusive and hard to come by. Figuring out what is true, listening for truth, speaking truth; it's hard work. It requires something of us. Often today we settle for some odd substitute, something called "truthiness," (the 2006 "Word of the Year"). "Truthiness" is something that sounds true, something that we (or someone) wish were true but is not, not really. It only sounds like truth.

He also noted that In *Caring for Words in a Culture of Lies*, Marilyn McEntyre provides a list of characteristics to help us distinguish truth from its many facsimiles: "Truth is elusive. Truth avoids institutional control. Truth tugs at conventional syntax. Truth hovers at the edge of the visual field. Truth is relational. Truth lives in the library and on the subway. Truth is not two-sided; it's many sided. Truth burrows in the body. Truth flickers. Truth comes on little cat's feet, and down back alleys. Truth doesn't always test well. Truth invites you back for another look."

When we really look at what we believe to be true, when we look at who we are, and when we look at how we have become who we are, who has influenced and what experiences have formed us, we can also realize we still have a choice. We can allow what we believe to be true to remain, we can maintain who we are, we can allow the people and experiences of the past to continue to form us, or we can start again. We can be thankful for all the things of the past that have formed us, and keep what it worth treasuring, but then choose to be open to discover new truth. We can cast off the negative influences and new choose life-giving moments, experiences, and people, and we can become something new. Every day.

I venture to guess that nobody told Jesus what to say that day in the temple. None of the people in his life influenced what he said in that moment. He had never heard it or experienced it before from his family, his religion, his teachers, his culture, or his society. He heard and knew a new truth, one specifically meant for him in that place and time, “I must be in my Father’s house.” He calls us to find the truth. In our place and time. Let us follow him. Amen.