

Luke 2:41-52

December 30, 2018

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen.

So, for Christmas I got the gift that nobody wants. A nasty cold that set in Christmas day and sidelined me right up until yesterday, when it finally started to lift. As I have grown older and hopefully a bit wiser, I have learned there is a way for me to gauge just how bad of a cold I have. How sick I really am? With this one, all the symptoms were there. Headache, check. Fever, check. Sore throat, check. Runny nose, check. Exhaustion, check. No desire to drink coffee, check. Yes, I haven't had a cup of coffee since Christmas morning, so I knew this one was a doozy. On an already shortened week, this unexpected and unwanted gift left me with little time to prepare for this morning's sermon, so I stand before you in search of a bit of grace.

As I read this text, a quote came to my mind. It was in a speech delivered March 4, 1993 at the very first ESPY Awards show by Jim Valvano just weeks prior to his death from cancer. For those of you who don't know or recall, Valvano was the head basketball coach at North Carolina State University for many years and is best remembered for storming the court with wild jubilation after a shocking upset of the Houston Cougars, a team that consisted of future NBA legends Hakeem Olajuwon and Clyde Drexler. In that speech Valvano stated,

To me, there are three things we all should do every day. We should do this every day of our lives. Number one is laugh. You should laugh every day. Number two is think. You should spend some time in thought. And number three is, you should have your emotions moved to tears, could be happiness or joy. But think about it. If you laugh, you think, and you cry, that's a full day. That's a heck of a day. You do that seven days a week, you're going to have something special.  
(Jim Valvano, speech delivered March 4, 1993 at ESPY Awards)

It was that second item that connected me to our passage this morning. Each day, Valvano suggests, we should think. Spend some time in thought. All three of those items listed are wonderful attributes of being human.

Characteristics God breathed into humanities DNA at the dawn of creation. Laughter. Tears of both joy and sorrow. Thought and reflection.

It's what we find the young Jesus doing in our gospel lesson today. Learning and growing in wisdom. Sitting in the Temple among his teachers, listening and asking questions. And even providing answers that astonished those in attendance. Luke concludes this passage by telling us the family returned home and Mary treasured all these things in her heart all the while Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.

Just days after the celebration of Jesus' birth we may be quick to move on. Put Christmas in the rearview mirror, just as the retail sector does. But I think Luke invites us into imagining just who this babe born in a manger and now growing into a young man and who we will next see baptized by John in the Jordan river is and what that means for humanity. Luke is the only gospel writer to include this vision into Jesus' younger years and I think he does so in part so that we can learn and grow in wisdom and come to know Jesus more fully.

You see, on Christmas Eve and during Advent we sing out, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" and Emmanuel means "God with us." Jesus is God with us. Yet, what does that fully mean? In many ways, part of what Luke is doing is delivering a sermon on the incarnation. That is, God taking on human flesh and coming among us. It's a hard concept to grasp and we are right in our faith to ask hard questions and grow spiritually in coming to know and understand more fully who this God in Jesus is for us and for the world. Each day, we should spend time in thought just as our Lord and Savior did in the Temple that day. Just as our Lord and Savior did in the Garden prior to his arrest, crucifixion, death and resurrection. Just as Mary so often exemplifies in her life of faith.

Perhaps, what Luke is showing us is that Jesus, while fully divine and fully God was also fully human. He was a young boy of 12 years old who did what young boys and girls often do. They get distracted and maybe even forget to tell their parents where they are going. They are curious and have challenging questions and may even challenge authority a bit. They grow, and they learn.

It may be challenging to think about God as all-powerful and all-knowing taking upon human flesh and then growing in wisdom. That goes against the grain of what many of us may have been taught or just had engrained into our minds from other schools of thought. Yet, in this portrait Luke gives we see a God, in Jesus, that fully takes upon our flesh. Fully becomes human. Grows in years and in wisdom. This is a God who lives, laughs, loves, cries, gets angry, worships his Father, maybe even disobeys his parents a bit, who suffers, and who dies.

What does it mean when we sing “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel?” It means God comes. In flesh and blood. God experiences all we experience and yes, that means even some family tension that arises in this passage. He takes time to think. To reflect. To grow closer to the one He refers to as “Abba”. His loving parent in heaven.

I am grateful Luke chose to include this story. It’s just one more opportunity for us to catch a glimpse of the mystery of the incarnation and help shape our understanding of just how much this God loved the world so much so that God would take upon human flesh, be born to a lowly virgin girl, in a stable in the still of night, and even go through all the challenges that come with moving into adolescence and adulthood. God probably could have just set Jesus on earth as an adult. But, that’s not how life in the flesh works. God took on flesh and lived it in all its forms, facets, and nuances. That’s something for us to continue to think about every day. What does this Christ child mean for us?