

The First Sunday of Christmas

Going to the Temple

December 27, 2009

Text: Luke 2:41-52

The church shapes many people's lives. It is very common to visit shut-ins who can point to the church's presence during the most important times in their personal lives. Some have been born and raised in at First. So even though they do not remember it, they were baptized at the font which is still at the front of our sanctuary. Many remember affirming their baptisms and being confirmed at the church and afterwards being invited to commune for the first time around the altar. Several share that they were married in the church. For many shut-ins they can recall their children being baptized and confirmed at church. Some have commended loved ones into God's hands at a church funeral. There is an old saying about being "hatched, matched, and dispatched," in the church. This is because if the church is important to a family, they are at the church for the most important life changes. In any church, you can find members whose lives have been shaped by the blessings, prayers, and official rites of the church.

Mary and Joseph of course did not go to First, but their lives were shaped by faith as well. Because they were faithful Jewish parents, the important times in their lives took place at the temple. Luke's gospel is very clear that the temple is a central place where people go to be in the presence of God. Even before we meet Mary, we learn that the temple will be central in the gospel. Zechariah is serving in the temple when he is given the great but unbelievable news that his wife will have a child. After John is born, Zechariah and Elizabeth return to the temple to have him named. For Jesus, the temple is also life shaping. The only thing we hear in scripture between Jesus being born and today's lesson is that Jesus was brought the temple to be circumcised. Mary and Joseph celebrate the birth of this miraculous first born child by bringing him into God's presence. When he is at the temple, he officially becomes part of God's chosen people – he is made part of the covenant by his circumcision.

Because the temple is the central place for the rites of passage, we learn that at twelve Jesus travels to the temple once again with his family. The gospel tells us that Mary and Joseph travelled with family every year to the temple. Most likely Jesus is at the temple for his bar mitzvah. We cannot be certain. But it is clear that his parents know and believe that they understand the centrality of the temple. So the temple is certainly not an unfamiliar place for Jesus.

In today's world a twelve year old would never be out of the site of his parents for a day's journey. But in Jesus' world, he was almost an adult. The extended family travelled together to Jerusalem and it would not be uncommon not to know exactly who was with the group. But after walking for a day, Mary and Joseph realize that Jesus is no longer with them. These two worried parents have to make the long and dangerous journey by themselves back to Jerusalem. They search for Jesus. Of course Jesus is right where he is supposed to be. He is in the temple – his father's house. He is discussing the word of God with the rabbis. Where else would Jesus be?

Even until the last week of Jesus' life on earth, the temple is central. Jesus travels to Jerusalem for one last Passover during what we call Holy Week. When he goes to the temple, it is not being kept as a house of prayer but is a marketplace where profits are being made by thieves. He cleanses the temple in anger and leaves it. But we hear that at the end of his life, the temple curtain which separates the holy of holies from the rest of the temple is torn into two.

Even though the temple has been so important for Jesus' life, Luke makes it clear that the temple is no longer where we find God. The temple is replaced by the community of believersⁱ. The church, not this building here or any building anywhere in the world, but the gathering of the faithful, replaces the temple.

So even though the church building is central for many of the faithful, the building itself is not what makes those life stages so blessed. The assembled people of God – the followers of Christ – are the church. So when we remember the important times in our lives, I hope that the church is there. When you are a shut-in or one of the oldest members attending church, my prayer is that you can say that the church has been central during all the holiest and most important times of your life. I pray that you will look back and remember baptisms, first communions, confirmations, weddings, even funerals here. But I do not want you to dwell on the church building. Remember the community of the faithful gathered for worship and surrounding you with prayers. Trust that you were in God's presence because the temple of God, the dwelling of God, was among the followers of Christ. Look around today and rejoice that you are part of the temple. Rejoice that the church is with you throughout your life.

ⁱ Jensen, Richard A. *Preaching Luke's Gospel*. CSS Publishing, Lima, OH, 1997.