

SERMON: "LIVING WITH THE INCARNATION"
TEXTS: NEW TESTAMENT COLOSSIANS 3:12-17
NEW TESTAMENT LUKE 2:41-52

December 29, 2024

Dr. Dave Kivett

INTRODUCTION

I've almost always had a dog, both as a child growing up and as an adult
Our dog Clarence is a fine and noble beast, a 130 pound monster
who looks a bit like the dog from "The Sandlot" ... You're killing me Smalls
He thinks of himself as a cute little lap dog. He's a good boy

That's what I tell him quite often, "You're a good boy."
And I do so speaking what I consider to be fluent 'dog.'
Dog people back me up here. Speaking fluent 'dog' is all about tone
It is just as much how you say it as it is what you say

Frankly, I think you could say pretty mean things to your fine and noble beast like ...
"Yes, you're a terrible, mess making, loud barking, always shedding ball
of mud and fur ... and of course slobber. You're driving me crazy ...
and they would just wag their tail if you get the tone right
"You're such a good boy"

So two questions for you on this Sunday after Christmas
One – was Jesus a good boy? What do you think?
Two – do we tend to talk about Jesus like we're speaking fluent dog?
Oh, Jesus ... he's such a good boy?

Christmas was great – a babe born away in a manger
We've got shepherds spreading the good news, angels singing
and wise travelers following a star and bearing gifts

The Bible, however, moves on from Bethlehem rather quickly. In Matthew's gospel,
the baby Jesus receives precious gifts from the wise men and then has to run
for his life as a political refugee. Matthew's "after Christmas" beginning reads this way

**Now when the wise men had departed, behold, an angel of the
Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, take the child
and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you;
for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him."**

LIVING WITH THE INCARNATION

Matthew doesn't say anything about Jesus being a good boy

What he does tell us that is Herod, the one with the power, was afraid of this boy afraid maybe of how differently this boy, as a grown man, would do and define good

Luke's gospel isn't so frightening. It's rather matter of fact in showing how Jesus was raised according to Jewish custom. He is depicted as being a good boy circumcised on the eighth day, dedicated and presented to God at six weeks.

After this, Luke tells us Jesus returns to Nazareth where **"the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him."**

Then we get one story from Jesus' childhood, just the one

The Bible does indeed move on from a Bethlehem beginning rather quickly!

That sense of pace has a purpose. And that purpose, as one writer in The Journal for Preachers put it, is to remind us that ...

The real question of Christmas is not "How are we going to celebrate the birth?" but rather "How are we going to live with the Incarnation?"

Bobbi Wells Hargleroad, "Living with the Incarnation"

How are we going to live with the incarnation, with the fact that God has come to us in the flesh, in person, in Jesus of Nazareth ... in this story, as a boy.

Was he a good boy? Or might this story be some foreshadowing of how Jesus' understanding of being good challenges our own well-established notions of what is and what is not good. Was Jesus a good boy in this story?

Before we consider how Jesus defines good, can we start with the parents?

Did they do good? As a parent of four, that question comes to my mind right away. Were they bad parents, losing their child like that?

How about we give them a break? Luke didn't include this story to post some dirt on Joseph and Mary. He is telling us about Jesus, not talking about them

They are not bad parents because they left Jerusalem to head home without their son.

Traveling with a large extended family of what the Bible in some translation calls "kinsfolk and acquaintances" there is nothing wrong with assuming that your child is with another member of the extended family. He knows it's time to go home ...

A day out of town, they realize he is not with them. I can imagine how that must have hit them. So they turn around to look for him, back to Jerusalem.

They search for a total of three days before they finally find their son.

He is in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening and asking questions And when they do their response is most understandable.

UNDERSTANDABLE

And when they saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, "Son why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been looking for you anxiously."

Anxiously, that is an understatement! When she finally sees her son she doesn't know whether to embrace him and never let him go or take him over her knee and teach him a lesson. She is understandably angry, "We've been looking all over for you. We've been worried sick."

Their son was raised in a good Jewish home to obey the commandments, including the one about honoring thy father and thy mother. They have reason to be frustrated, frantic ... just as we would be under similar circumstances.

Mary asks a question the way parents sometimes do, demanding an answer or explanation. Jesus, however, answers with his own question. calm and collected, not really understanding why his parents could be so bent out of shape. The story continues.

And he said to them, "How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" And they did not understand the saying which he spoke to them.

Joseph and Mary don't understand. And that is understandable! Their priority is the well-being of their child as it would be and should be with all parents. But Jesus responds on another level, with other priorities. Maybe he was saying "Being a good boy means me being here."

"I must," says Jesus, be in my Father's house." The Greek word for "must" implies obligation, purpose, vocation. It is a must, not a maybe. This is why he was born, why he lived and loved, why he died and rose again. He was being obedient to his father in heaven, doing what he came to do Jesus was, in this instance, being a good boy.

Looking back from this side of the cross and empty tomb, that sense of priority and purpose becomes clear. We know the end of the story so this beginning, with Jesus in the temple, his father's house, makes perfect sense.

I want to hold onto the tension in the story – that clarity of realizing "of course, this is where the boy Jesus would be" and the very real and very understandable worry of his parents wondering "where has he gone, why isn't he here with us?" Both are good ... but Jesus chose one good over another

SUMMARY

That keeps on happening today, with us, doesn't it?

We may have a clear idea of where Jesus is or ought to be ...

Then he may well have another idea. Both good. One better

You've heard me say more than a few times that Jesus is "on the loose."

I claim that truth as being a life-changing, world changing good thing

Recognizing that truth ... I am going to try and be intentional not to

limit my looking for Jesus at work in this world and that means realizing

what I see and say is good may be good ... but Jesus knows better

Let me go back then to the author I mentioned earlier and her great question about our 'living with the incarnation.' Like Mary and Joseph,

we are seeking to understand what it means to have God in our midst.

Bobbi Wells Hargleroad, in "The Journal for Preachers" wrote ...

That is probably why Luke put this story at the end of his introductory two chapters. He writes to share with the Church, believers from the earliest times right down to the present, the notion that understanding Jesus isn't easy. Not for Mary and Joseph. Not for anyone. Several times during his ministry, Jesus predicts that he will be rejected, betrayed, and given over for crucifixion. Several times he tries to get his disciples to understand. But they never understand. And neither do we.

*We prefer to enjoy the tinsel and the trappings of Christmas and then move on to other things. We prefer to avoid the hard question of this Sunday in between, this Sunday that sneaks in and catches us between parties and asks the question we would rather not deal with. **What do we do now that we have proclaimed that God is living with us?***

What do we do now? Where might we find Jesus?

Not just in a manger. Not just in a temple or church. Jesus is on the loose

And he is up to some good. So let's not limit our understanding of where Jesus

is at work or limit our definitions of how Jesus defines what is good.

You know, it will be ten years that I've been here in ministry with you next Sunday

I remember the committee that called me did wonder if my accent, my Southern speak, might be an issue. Would you understand what I'm trying to say.

I can only think of one time that happened. I was trying to talk about something being really good, better than. I said it was 'mo better.'" Y'all looked at me all funny

I had to explain that one ... more better. Isn't that how Jesus re-defines our definitions of 'good'? He does our definitions of good and does us one better ... mo better