

Untitled Sermon
Luke 2:41-52
Rev. Meredith Loftis
December 30, 2018 - 1st Sunday after Christmas

For our society and culture, Christmas is over and Valentine's Day candy is already appearing on store shelves. But for the Church, we continue on for twelve days of Christmas until Epiphany on January 6th. And so today, we are on the 6th day of Christmas, and what did my true love give to me....six geese a-laying. It's tempting to take down all those decorations, forgot those Christmas carols and move on, but for us, let us dwell in this Christmastide season for just a half-dozen more days, focused on the beauty of the incarnation and God's desire to dwell with us.

While we linger here, we encounter just one story about Jesus' childhood. Found only in the gospel of Luke, the writer is establishing for us that Jesus is a true Israelite from birth, and we see the holy family's Jewish faith enacted immediately after Jesus is born. His parents take him to be circumcised eight days later; then, they travel to Jerusalem in order to perform the proper purification laws in the temple, where they encounter the prophets Simeon and Anna, who affirm he is the Messiah and the fulfillment of God's covenant to the Jews. Then suddenly we skip over a decade of their lives to encounter a twelve year old Jesus. Immersed in the Jewish tradition, it is only normal that we see the holy family trek to Jerusalem for Passover and worship in the temple with their Jewish family and friends. Hear now God's word from Luke 2:41-52:

41 Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. 42 And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. 43 When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. 44 Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. 45 When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. 46 After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. 47 And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. 48 When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." 49 He said to them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" 50 But they did not understand what he said to them. 51 Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart. 52 And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.

Have you ever lost something and wanted to pull your hair out because you're so annoyed? You know, the TV remote, your cell phone, car keys, the password to Netflix? These things don't define you, but it's so frustrating when they seem to have been swallowed up and lost forever. You backtrack and retrace your steps; you ask all your family members, you check the dog's bed and the side boards of your car; you call the church. You do a little happy dance when you finally find your missing treasure. What about a child? Have you ever lost one of them?

When I was ten years old, I experienced the event of a lifetime. It was 1996 in hot and humid Atlanta, Georgia when the world descended on this southern city for the Summer Olympic Games. Traffic was a disaster; the MARTA system, our subway, was jam-packed, and my mother was anxious over all of our house guests, but it was an unforgettable summer for my brothers and me. Did anyone go?

It was fantastic. Muhammad Ali lit the Olympic cauldron, American sprinter Michael Johnson broke the records for 200m and 400m races, and for the first time in Olympic history, all 197 recognised National Olympic Committees or countries were represented at the Games.¹ We went to all kinds of events: baseball, basketball, rowing, and more, but the most memorable event we attended was for track and field...but not for what you might think. If you remember, Atlanta built a brand new stadium just for track and field events that would then be turned into the new Braves' stadium. As my family and I were leaving with some family friends after an event, we made our way down the many levels of the stadium to the exits. At one point, my youngest brother Ben, 6 years old at the time, got distracted as little boys do and stopped to watch a TV in the big hallway and did not continue with us. Well, we continued on, oblivious to the fact that the youngest member of our family was not with us. Suffice it to say, when my mother realized he wasn't anywhere to be seen, she flipped. As most mothers would do, she starts screaming for him and running around on the prowl for her missing cub. Now, he was probably missing for only 15 minutes or so. Ben was frightened, of course, because he was a young kid and his world was ruled by mom and dad and that suddenly vanished. (Thankfully, he knew enough to hunt down a police officer and tell them he was lost.) You can imagine her relief when he was back within her grasp. For a moment, both their identities were abruptly shaken, for what would happen if they never found each other?

So, can we really blame Mary and Joseph for their reaction to their missing son? I think the gospel writer is a bit gentler in the way he portrays Mary's reaction. I bet she had much stronger words for Jesus.

For three days they hunt for him. His parents return to Jerusalem to find him, and upon discovering him and expressing their fright and angst, he seems rather annoyed himself, saying, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I'd be in my Father's house?" They stare at him dumbfounded, unable to grasp what he's telling them. Of course they must look for him, he is their child, they must provide for his well being; they must keep him safe. He's the Son of God, for heaven's sake! But he must be within his Father's house, the temple where all the law and authority rest, at least right now. Something within him has ignited, something Mary doesn't understand now, but will come to understand.

And so there is a break, a decisive break and "Jesus separates himself from his earthly parents" and dedicates himself to his heavenly father. "Although Jesus will be the savior and Messiah, these revelations come as a surprise, even a shock"² to his parents.

In these first words that we hear from Jesus himself, we witness his claim on who he is to become. For the first couple of chapters, the infant Jesus is acted upon; his conception is announced; he is born; he is adored by angels, shepherds, and magi; he is taken to temple. Now, it is time for him to decisively act. And all those around him are amazed—a word that will be used over and over again as Jesus' character and ministry grows.

These few words "tell us something about the nature of Jesus' identity, as well as that of his parents. But in this moment, they clash. Their expectations, their "musts" [what they each

¹ <https://www.olympic.org/atlanta-1996>

² *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 1, page 164.

must do] do not jive with each other. They each do what they must; their expectations and identities guide them as they do us. [Mary and Joseph must raise this child of God in the best way they can. Jesus must claim his identity and reach outside his mother and father's sphere.] For the time being, there is seeming conflict in these differing necessities...However, in this case the tension has a more fundamental root that pertains to Jesus' radical identity."³

Perhaps it's in this tension that we see God moving and working, allowing both Jesus and his parents to evolve.

Jesus' words to his parents did not make sense.

They were doing what they must do.

And so was he.

And so it seems that our "musts" must change at times too, though perhaps we don't understand at first, to reflect what God intends for each of us.

In the incarnation we see a beautiful, amazing thing, "not the least of which is the reminder that God was a child like any of us. In Christ, God wondered and wandered and whined and wailed."⁴ Just like any teenager, Jesus had to discover for himself who he was, what his identity in God revealed, and what it meant he must do. And it meant at this moment, his identity and expectations did not meet what his parents thought they must be.

"In the context of this passage, the incarnation teaches us that God can be found even in difficult familial circumstances. [There is even strain and tension within the holy family.] It teaches that God's wisdom is available to the young as well as to the old, which means that we must make room for God to surprise us with unexpected revelations given by unusual messengers. It teaches us that though God's wisdom and holiness remind us of our limitations, it is precisely within these limitations that wisdom is revealed. The incarnation [God with us in human flesh and blood] is the moment in which this wisdom enters the human sphere in all its contradictions, so that nothing is left without transformation and transfiguration."⁵ Perhaps it means that our "musts" are radically transformed as well.

The incarnation teaches us that our own identity is intertwined with Jesus Christ's, for it is through his life, death, and resurrection that we find who we are; that our very identity is transformed because of Jesus Christ. We are no longer beholden to the "musts" or expectations that do not honor the incarnation or resurrection.

My favorite Christmas gifts as a child were always books. One year I received the children's classic book, *The Velveteen Rabbit*, which I pray most of you are familiar with. In it we meet a stuffed rabbit who seems to have his own identity crisis. Is he real or is he just a toy. It begins, "There was once a velveteen rabbit, and in the beginning he was really splendid. He was fat and bunched, as a rabbit should be; his coat was spotted brown and white, he had real thread whiskers, and his ears were lined with pink sateen. On Christmas morning, when he sat wedged in the top of the Boy's stocking, with a sprig of holly between his paws, the effect was charming."

...He was naturally shy, and being only made of velveteen, some of the more expensive toys quite snubbed him. The mechanical toys were very superior, and looked down upon everyone else; they were full of modern ideas, and pretended they were real. The model boat, who had lived through two seasons and lost most of his paint, caught the tone from them and never missed an opportunity of referring to his rigging in technical terms. The

³ *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 1, page 168.

⁴ <https://modernmetanoia.org/2018/12/17/1st-sunday-after-christmasc-a-little-child-will-lead-us/>

⁵ *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 1, page 168.

Rabbit could not claim to be a model of anything, for he didn't know that real rabbits existed; he thought they were all stuffed with sawdust like himself, and he understood that sawdust was quite out-of-date and should never be mentioned in modern circles.

[The boy often took the velveteen rabbit outside to play. He would made him a cozy nest and would go pick flowers.] One day, "he saw two strange beings creep out of the tall bracken near him."

They were rabbits like himself, but quite furry and brand-new. They must have been very well made, for their seams didn't show at all, and they changed shape in a queer way when they moved; one minute they were long and thin and the next minute fat and bunched, instead of always staying the same like he did.

"Why don't you get up and play with us?" one of them asked.

"I don't feel like it," said the Rabbit, for he didn't want to explain that he had no clockwork.

"Ho!" said the furry rabbit. "It's as easy as anything," And he gave a big hop sideways and stood on his hind legs.

"I don't believe you can!" he said.

"I can!" said the little Rabbit. "I can jump higher than anything!" He meant when the Boy threw him, but of course he didn't want to say so.

"Can you hop on your hind legs?" asked the furry rabbit.

That was a dreadful question, for the Velveteen Rabbit had no hind legs at all! The back of him was made all in one piece, like a pincushion. He sat still in the bracken, and hoped that the other rabbits wouldn't notice.

"I don't want to!" he said again.

But the wild rabbits have very sharp eyes. And this one stretched out his neck and looked.

"He hasn't got any hind legs!" he called out. "Fancy a rabbit without any hind legs!" And he began to laugh.

"I have!" cried the little Rabbit. "I have got hind legs! I am sitting on them!"

..."He doesn't smell right!" he exclaimed. "He isn't a rabbit at all! He isn't real!"

"I am Real!" said the little Rabbit. "I am Real! The Boy said so!"⁶ I must be real!

Like the velveteen rabbit, we too must be insistent about our own identities, identities that are claimed by Christ, even when there are contradictions, even when the tensions overwhelm us.

⁶ <https://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/williams/rabbit/rabbit.html>

We are made real because God was made real in flesh and blood and showed us the true reality of dwelling with God.

In the end, the velveteen rabbit is made real by a fairy and her magic. But he was real before that because the boy loved him.

In the end, we are made real because God insisted that we must know God through the Christ child who came as a human and gives us everlasting life. It is a gift to us before we ever even claim it for ourselves. Christ's identity becomes ours as well.

We each have an identity that we claim for ourselves, labels that we eagerly grab onto, and some we run away from. Many we must be. Some are held in that tension and will have a cost.

Many of those labels we must be, just as Jesus must be who God intends him to be. Which must mean that we need to discover the "musts" that drive our own behaviors, how they confirm our identities, and how they merge with the one essential "must" that pertains to our relationship with Jesus the Christ.⁷

The one must we will always be though is Child of God. There is nothing we can do to change that. That is God's gift to us.

We cherish that gift now, the God-child that came down that we might all be children of God.

⁷ *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 1, page 168.