

Sermon December 28, 2003
It's Hard to Keep A Grip on Christmas.
Luke 2: 41-52

Let us pray.

Some years ago a friend of mine agreed to give a continuing legal education presentation as part of a daylong seminar. She was scheduled for the 4:00 PM slot just before the final session of the day at 4:30. The day came and my friend arrived at the hotel where the conference was taking place. At 4:25 she entered the conference center and moved to the stage. At 4:30 she looked up from a last minute review of her notes to see that there was one lone man sitting in the audience. For a moment my friend debated whether to go forward with her talk. Finally she decided to do so -- having spent a lot of time preparing it and having committed to giving it. Well, she gave her talk and when she was done was quite pleased with it. She then stepped down from the podium and approached the man sitting in the audience. She thanked him for attending and for seemingly having paid great attention to her presentation. When she finished the man replied --“well you know I am the next speaker.” Now this is a notoriously low Sunday in the liturgical year. And I know why Dudley and Kevin are here because in a sense they are the next speakers. But as for the rest of you -- I don't quite understand -- but rest assured there is, I've been told, a special reward in heaven for those who appear in church on the low Sundays of the year.

Now there are, of course, many reasons why the Sunday after Christmas is a low Sunday. Obviously many people are away visiting with friends and family celebrating this most special time of year. I suspect there are a few who simply got stuck in lines exchanging gifts and simply could not escape. And for others they have spent a lot of time at church over the last few weeks and simply need a break. But in fact it may also be because it is hard to keep a grip on Christmas. There is a

risk that we pack the message of Christmas away with the lights, the crèches, and the wreaths until year. Why? Some of us are simply exhausted --worn down by the hype, anticipation and preparation that often now start before Thanksgiving. They breathe a secret sigh of relief on the 26th-- no more presents to buy or parties and events to get ready for or to attend. Others are glad to see Christmas go as it is for them not a time of joy, wonder and rebirth, but of loneliness, and of disappointment and of depression often arising from the memories of happier Christmas times. They truly want nothing more than to get back to a normal life and not be reminded of the dark, lonely places in their lives. But for most of us it is neither of these reasons that make Christmas hard to keep a grip on. No Christmas for most of us is a wonderfully joyous time. The story of the annunciation, the babe born in a manger, the shepherds and the magi touches our hearts. And that love and warmth we feel in the story in my experience over flows into our gatherings with family and friends. But like the beautiful ornaments and the twinkling lights on the tree, we are tempted to put the point of Christmas away on the shelf until we celebrate this wonderful birth – this gift of God -- next year. In the Church’s liturgical year Christmastime lasts for 12 days but for many of us it is over before then – when the presents are exchanged, the boxes and wrapping paper placed into the trash and the decorations taken down. We are on to New Year’s Eve celebrations and then back to work or school -- to our “real lives.”

Halford E. Luccock, formerly a professor at Yale Divinity School, wrote for many years a whimsical column on life in a magazine called the *Christian Century*. His articles on Christmas were collected some years ago in little book called *A Sprig of Holly*. He captured this problem in one of those articles. He wrote

”The Christmas Story is the story of a baby. That is a part of its inexhaustible pull on the mind and heart of humanity. But it is also a liability. For a great many people become so entranced with the

beautiful story of a baby in a manger that they miss the chief point of the story, and hence do not feel the compulsion which it lays on life. We can become so charmed with the story of a baby that we grow sentimental about it, it does not ask that we do anything about it: it does not demand any vital change in our way of thinking and living.”

Because it is such a wonderful and enchanting story that seemingly asks little of us, we are tempted to put it back on the shelf. Right up there with that favorite novel, set of short stories or selection of poems that we pull down and read again and again when we want to feel good. Secretly everyone I think has a book or two like that or perhaps a favorite movie that gets rerun now and again.

The real point of the Christmas story is not easy to get or to keep a hold of; indeed in our text for today from Luke it is clear that Mary, Jesus’ mother, does not fully get it. When I read today’s text I initially thought it could be best titled “A Parent’s Worst Nightmare.” All the parents and others who have ever been responsible for a child will empathize with the worry and anxiety clearly exhibited by Mary in our story. Josephus, the Jewish historian of the times, has estimated that literally thousands upon thousands traveled to Jerusalem in the first century to celebrate Passover at the Temple. So it is no surprise that Mary and Joseph and their family with many other devout Jews from Nazareth traveled to Jerusalem for Passover. Jesus is 12 years old in our Lucan story -- at that age when boys are no longer children but not adults and yet want to be given freedom and so Jesus is apparently allowed to wander about presumably with others of his age from Nazareth and to spend time at the Temple. From the time of Jesus’ circumcision eight days after his birth until his baptism by John and the start of his ministry, there are no reports of Jesus’ life as a child -- save for certain fantastic stories about Jesus making birds out of clay and using magic to punish his playmates in the non canonical books --except for our text. Our text is all we have of the first block of Jesus’ life. We are

told that when the Passover celebration is completed, the group from Nazareth begins the journey home en masse. It would not be out of the ordinary for the adolescents in that group to travel together. Certainly that was the case with my children at that age -- they did not want to be seen with their parents let alone travel with them.

What every parent secretly fears happens, Mary discovers that Jesus is not with the group. And it gets worse; Mary and Joseph hurry back to Jerusalem and search for three days for Jesus. My stomach even now takes a lurch when I think about what those three days would have been like for Mary. Under these circumstances it is not surprising that Mary when she finds Jesus in the Temple engaged in conversation with the teachers -- says with more than a hint of an edge "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." (2: 47) In today's parlance the words might have been slightly different but not the sentiment -- why have you done this, we have been sick with worry --are the words I might have used. The words have an edge to them; the edge which parents use to mask that relief they feel after being confronted with the terror of the loss of a child. So our story is in a sense an understandable one of parental worry and love about a seemingly less than fully responsible adolescent.

But it is Jesus' answer that is the real key to the passage and serves to highlight the message of Christmas. "Why are you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" (2: 49) It is a strange answer. As our text highlights neither Mary nor Joseph understood it. Despite Gabriel's words to Mary that the son she is to bear "will be holy" and will be called "Son of God"(2: 32-35) and the shepherd's report to her of the angel's words that the baby will be "the Messiah, the Lord" (2:11- 12), Mary doesn't really understand who this baby that she has given birth to is. Her concern is naturally that of a mother for her son.

The chief point of the Christmas story, however, is that the one who grows up from the baby in the manger, to the adolescent in the Temple, and beyond is not simply Jesus of Nazareth, Mary's son, but the Son of God -- the one who cures the sick, befriends the outcaste, cleanses the Temple, identifies with the poor and the oppressed, and

ultimately suffers and dies. Ironically, it is King Herod, as described in the gospel according to Matthew, who has the greatest inkling in the beginning of the message of Christmas --that is of a baby who will grow up to turn the world upside down. And, of course, this awareness causes Herod to seek to kill the baby so that it never grows up. As Luccock puts it, the chief point of the [Christmas] story is that the baby did grow “up to become the sternest challenge to a world of hard power that ever had been made. He was no sentimentalist: he was a terrible realist! Everything opposed to love and unity in our world, he declared flatly, is doomed and damned – for the reason that at the center of the universe is a God of loving purpose to all people.”

The question for us is whether Christmas is going to be simply a marvelous and tender story of a baby born in manger that is put back up on the shelf to be read next year? Or is it more a story about the person into whom the baby grew, who came to redeem the world from its sins and who calls us into partnership with his great and mighty purpose? John begins his description of the incarnation in the memorable words

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.

The message of Christmas is that the birth of the babe was the light coming into the world not just for a day to be turned off and put back on the shelf -- but is the light for every day. Jesus is the light that illuminates a path that we are challenged to follow--the path of the baby grown up. We too are to love God and our neighbors, to identify with the poor and to tilt at the windmills of oppression and exploitation wherever they are to be found. The message of Christmas is not for the shelf but one to be grabbed a hold of everyday. For me all this is easy to say and I nod my head yes, of

course, the story is not just about the birth in Bethlehem. But you know I soon will be back to life as usual and I fear I will have packed the Christmas story back up on the shelf with the lights and the ornaments and other decorations. So I have decided not to put this tree ornament away. I am going to keep it out where I will see it often. Perhaps just maybe I will be reminded that the Christmas story is not to be packed away and forgotten; yes, it is about a baby but also about the fact that the baby --the Son of God -- grew up and challenges us to follow his path every day. Maybe you too will find a way not to pack up the Christmas story and put it on the shelf.