

Christmas 1 (C)

Luke 2:41-52

In about 6 weeks, we'll all probably be subjected to listening to arguments over one of our great, national debates. Did George Washington really chop down the cherry tree? And if he did, did he really say, "I cannot tell a lie?"

It's a great story, and we all heard it as children. But we also all probably know that this story only began to be told long after George Washington was famous. And how much of it is fact and how much of it is merely legend is still a matter of great debate.

Yet we love to hear stories about our great leaders from their very beginnings – especially if stories of their childhood foretell the great things they'll come to accomplish as adults. This has been true throughout history, and it was true in the ancient Greek world as well. Long before Jesus, it was common for legends to be told of great figures – both mythological figures and actual historical people. Many of them had some basis in fact, but some were just legends made up long after the fact.

As the story of Jesus was told in the first couple of centuries, early Christians were most interested in telling the most important thing about Jesus as an adult – that Jesus died and rose again from the dead. And because of Jesus' resurrection, we can trust that he really is God's Son and that through him, God will deliver on his promises of forgiveness, salvation and eternal life. That was the most important thing about Jesus. That was the proof of the promise. And even though some people knew the story of Jesus' birth in a manger, even that story didn't matter nearly as much as the good news of Jesus' resurrection.

Still, there were stories that circulated about Jesus' early years. But they only began to circulate after the Resurrection, and like the story of George Washington and the cherry tree, it wasn't always clear whether these stories were true, in part or in whole.

Luke, for example, says that he researched the story of Jesus very carefully and recorded only things that he thought were very credible and based on reliable witnesses. And there were quite a number of stories about Jesus' childhood that were in circulation by the end of the first century when Luke wrote his Gospel. Many of those stories we know about because they were recorded in other writings

not generally judged by early Christian communities to be all that reliable. One of the best known is the Gospel of Thomas in which the adolescent Jesus does all kinds of remarkable things ...

Yet for all of these stories – and in spite of the fact that Luke was writing for a primarily Greek, gentile audience who expected such stories to be included – the Gospel reading for today is the only account of Jesus as a young child that's found in any of the 4 canonical Gospels.

The Gospel writers, even Luke, considered most of the stories of Jesus' youth to be pretty much unreliable legends. But Luke includes this one, even though he probably knew of many others, and even though this story presents more questions than it answers (for example, why would Mary and Joseph not know who Jesus was with? Where was Jesus staying for the days that Mary and Joseph were looking for him? And why didn't Mary and Joseph understand that Jesus would be in his Father's house, when they should have known this from Gabriel's announcement?)

If I were Luke, I'd probably have left this story out, even if I was sure it was accurate. So why did Luke include it? Well, one of the reasons you tell a childhood story about someone who grows up to do great things is because the story shows you early on something that's important in that person's life. And perhaps Luke included this story because it illustrates, from very early on, Jesus' understanding of what it meant to be God's Son. For it was clear to Luke that Jesus understood that being God's Son meant:

- A) being completely dedicated to God – Jesus' first priority in this story, as it was throughout his life – was to be focused on God and God's will; and so he is in his Father's house (and some translations says "about his Father's business" ...)
- B) being dedicated to the family God had made him a part of – this story says that he went back to Nazareth and was obedient to his parents, honoring them as God instructs us in the 10 Commandments; Jesus understood throughout his life that his dedication to God wasn't an excuse to ignore those whom God had made part of his family (and so even when dying on the cross, he makes sure his mother is cared for, and he criticizes others who use religion as an excuse to ignore their responsibilities to their parents ...)

- C) being dedicated to the larger community of God's people – Mary and Joseph could assume that Jesus was with other members of his community on this 4-5 day hike back to Nazareth, because Jesus understood that his mission was to be part of – not apart from – the other people God had made in the world; Luke knew that unlike some other religious figures of the time, Jesus didn't disappear from society, but knew that his relationship with God called him to interact with and be part of the larger world that God had made, and Jesus called his disciples to do the same ...

Well, this is the only story any of our 4 Gospels tell about Jesus from his birth until the day he's baptized at about the age of 30. But I think Luke includes this story because he wants us, as we read the rest of the Gospel, to consider how Jesus calls us to live as God's children. For this story points us to understanding not only what it means for Jesus to be God's Son, but what it means for us to live as people who have been made into God's children through our baptism into Jesus.

For us, too, being children of God and disciples of Jesus means:

- A) growing in our dedication to God's will in our life – learning and growing in faith isn't just for 12 year olds, but for all of us at any stage of our lives ...
- B) caring about the families that God has made us part of – whether that's our biological family, our church family, or those closest to us who are like family ... (Luther reminded people in his day that God's call was often to be a good parent or sibling or friend – because like Jesus, being a child of God doesn't excuse you from relationships, but makes those relationships part of your calling as a child of God...)
- C) living as God's children in the world – Jesus did indeed call his disciples not to be “of the world” but he always called them to be “in the world” just as he was in the world; and part of being God's children means being actively involved in communities outside of our own family and friends so that we can be messengers and instruments of God's love and care for those who haven't experienced it ...

So maybe Luke chose to include this story as part of the bigger “Christmas story” because he wanted to remind us that while the message of Christmas is that Jesus is God’s Son, it’s not just about Jesus. Instead, the message of Christmas is that through Jesus, we’ve been adopted as God’s children, too.

And just as Jesus lived his whole life as God’s child, Jesus calls us also to live as God’s children each day. Jesus calls us to live as he lived by growing in our faith and devotion to God each day. Jesus calls us to live as he lived by honoring the relationships God has given us. And Jesus calls us to live as he lived, making God’s love into a tangible reality in the life of the world around us.

Amen.