

THERE IS LIFE AFTER CHRISTMAS!

Sermon, December 31, 2017

Text: Luke 2:21-40

"When they had done everything required by the law of the Lord,
they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth." *Luke 2:39*

What does the Bible tell us about life after that first Christmas? In Luke 2, we have only a little information about Jesus' childhood, and it isn't much! We are told next to nothing about Jesus' upbringing, except for some *rituals* observed at infancy and one incident in early adolescence, when Jesus was about twelve years old ... then Luke 3 picks up with an adult Jesus in His thirties. That's it. That's all the Bible tells us about Jesus' childhood. Wouldn't you love to know what kind of child Jesus was? Don't those of us who are parents wonder what would it be like raising a child who never did anything wrong? (*I know some have children who are always right, but that's not quite the same thing!*) Again, the Bible is relatively silent about Jesus' childhood; we just have this brief account in Luke, and that's it.

By the third century some interesting folktales began to circulate about Jesus' childhood. These fanciful stories were the stuff of legend that never made it into the accepted Scriptures. In one of these accounts, Jesus was five years old, playing in a stream. He took clay from the bottom of the stream, and molded twelve birds out of the clay. He clapped his hands and the birds came to life and flew away. In another story some other boys once hid from him, playing an early version of hide-n-seek; Jesus finds them by turning them into lambs and telling them to come to the Good Shepherd. Another story is when Jesus and a child were playing on the roof of house ... the kid falls down, is killed from the fall, the parents come and accuse Jesus of pushing him off the roof! Jesus then resurrects the boy, who instantly blurts out of his once-dead mouth, "*Jesus didn't do it! I fell!*" ... and so on.

When the Bible skips parts of the story it is telling us, in so many words, "*Don't get distracted by that.*" It is telling us to pay all the more attention to what *is* written. All we have about life after Christmas is here in Luke chapter two, and he tells us just three main things in those first forty days of Jesus' life, three *rituals* observed and followed by Mary and Joseph. The rituals for the Jews were a way of remembering *who they were*; by observing the ceremonial laws and rituals, the Jewish people would rehearse their identity and their calling in this world. These rituals and ceremonies would serve the two-fold purpose of drawing them closer to God and closer to God's people of all times and places.

We have rituals in the church, as well. It has become somewhat stylish in some "contemporary" churches to throw off all rituals, as if they were nothing more than mindless formalities and hollow, empty traditions. But they are only mindless formalities and hollow, empty traditions if we are not paying attention, and we lose something of great value when we toss them aside (*and my subjective personal observation is that usually these "informal" groups wind up making ritual formalities of their own, such as the somewhat mandatory twenty minutes of continual standing for back-to-back praise choruses, but I digress*). I like the story of a wedding rehearsal where the soloist, who was unfamiliar with the rituals of a church wedding, asked the pastor when she should begin singing. He told her, "*After the vows.*" Not being familiar with the language of ritual, she asked: "*What are the vows? I'll need a cue.*" The six-year-old ring bearer, also not very active in the church, turned to the soloist with an exasperated look, and said: "*There is no Q! The vowels are A-E-I-O-U!*"

Rituals still serve the twofold purpose of drawing us closer to God and closer to God's people of all times and places. Each and every Sunday is full of ritual and rehearsal, from the hymns we sing to the creeds we recite and the prayers we pray ... all is a rehearsal of our identity, a reminder of who we are and from where we come. Every time we celebrate the ritual, the ceremony, of Baptism, we are called us to remember that we, too, have been brought into the family of faith and have been set apart for holy purposes. Next Sunday we will celebrate the Lord's Supper; we will come to this Family Table to start off the year by remembering we are family, that God has called us in Christ to be brothers and sisters, that He has called us to love each other accordingly. Every time we recite the Apostles' Creed, we are echoing the exact words of apostles, saints, martyrs, scholars, kings, queens, prophets, faithful servants and communities of faith down through history who have already faced everything we could possibly face in our lives and have come through with a substantial faith that is more than intact! Tradition is not just some conservative "thing" of trying to hang on to an outdated past (*as it is often caricatured*); tradition is a way of deliberately and purposefully rooting our lives deep into thousands of years of genuine and historic faith. We just finished this major ritual of the church called Christmas, as we

prepared the way of the Lord throughout the month by observing the rituals of Advent, and we celebrated the birth of our Savior this past week. And we now go on to liturgically rehearse what it means to live life after Christmas, with Jesus as part of our homes and families.

Luke lists here three acts of ritual obedience that helped Joseph and Mary prepare for the awesome task of receiving and raising this divine gift of God's child; three rituals that bound them closer to God, and closer to God's people of all time and places.

- (1) *The first thing they do was give him the name Jesus, as the angel told them to do.* This was the name the angel Gabriel told them to give, the name that means "One who Saves" or "Savior." They believed in what they had been told in their divine dreams and visions, and they *acted* upon it. Sharing a dream, sharing a vision, always draws people of faith together. Living by that dream, acting in obedience to that vision, creates a special community. The holy family's first task is to *name the name of Jesus* ... thereby acknowledging He is the Savior.
- (2) *The second thing they did was to follow the ritual to make Jesus part of the family of God.* They had him circumcised, according to the law, on the eighth day in accordance with the covenant God made with Abraham. The child was thereby marked and identified as part of the family of God's people ... just as we do in baptism ... and from that day forward the child was to be treated by them AND by the believing community as part of the family of God.
- (3) *The third thing was they presented Jesus to God at the temple.* First born sons were to be consecrated to the Lord (*see Exodus 12*). Every child is a gift from God, but the first is special because it is first. The first child is consecrated because the first sets the pattern. What is first goes to the One who is First. The Scriptures tell us that the first fruit of *all* our labors (*pun intended*) belong to God. This is part of what it means to recognize our stewardship. Our best, our finest, our hopes, our dreams belong to the God Who is first in our lives. Mary and Joseph recognized their stewardship of this child given by God. They acknowledge their child was not just their child. Rather, he was God's child ... and the purposes of his life should be, would be, determined by God. As parents entrusted with God's child, they display they want to raise this child as God would have them raise him ... just as all of us are called to do with the children we are given.

As they perform the ritual of presenting their son, it is there and then in that center of worship that the identity of their son is affirmed and reaffirmed by the old man Simeon, who had been promised by God that he would not die without seeing the Messiah, and Anna, an 84-year old prophetess. Both recognize the baby as the long-awaited Messiah. Some of their words were uplifting and full of joy; some of them were soberly foreboding and grave. Yes, Mary and Joseph, your boy will be "... a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel, but he will cause the falling and rising of many, and will be a sign that will be spoken against. And a sword will pierce your own soul too." Mary and Joseph have consecrated this son to God, recognizing he was God's, not simply theirs. They recognized God would raise him in God's own way and in that recognition they bound and pledged themselves to loving their son as God would have them love him. There will be joy, there will be sorrow; but the joy will be doubly dear and the sorrow will be tempered by the assurance that this is God's child fulfilling God's purposes. Through the ritual, they acknowledge this ... this child is God's child, and God will accomplish His purposes in him.

The first Christmas is over, the rituals were all faithfully observed, and Mary and Joseph were now ready to take Jesus home to Nazareth and into their lives for life after Christmas ... just as we are called to do. As all our rituals remind us, we, too, are the holy family of God, called to name the name of Jesus, called to identify ourselves and our children as part of the holy family, called to consecrate our first and our finest to God ... and after Jesus enters our lives, in life after Christmas, we are called to take Him to live with us in all we do.

And I close with this: How we do that? How do we, in life after Christmas, best go about taking Jesus to live with us in all we do? In response, I'd like to slightly adapt a quote from nineteenth century Anglican clergyman J. C. Ryle, which also might very well be a good New Year's resolution for all of us to make:

*"Do nothing that you would not like Jesus to see. Say nothing you would not like Jesus to hear. Write nothing you would not like Jesus to read. Go nowhere you would not like Jesus to find you. Read no book of which you would not like Jesus to say, 'Show it to Me.' And never spend your time in such a way that you would not like to have Jesus say, 'What are you doing?'"*¹

And that's how we best live life ... real and full life ... after Christmas.

¹ See <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/253580-do-nothing-that-you-would-not-like-god-to-see>