

Rev. Karen Graham –Church of the Redeemer
December 27, 2009
Luke 2: 41-52

It always seems a bit of a surprise on this first Sunday after Christmas to hear the gospel lesson --- for even though we celebrated the birth of Jesus only two days ago, here he is already 12 years old. And in two weeks he'll be thirty and will be baptized by John in the river Jordan. Mary wasn't a scrap-booking mother, was she? And if she was it's like Jesus was her second or third child instead of her first. A second child's baby book pretty much goes from birth to 12 in one page – or the stuff is all in box somewhere and maybe by the time the kid is 30 it will get written down in the book. At least that's how it is with a number of mothers I know with more than one child. The first child gets everything recorded and saved. The rest are lucky to get fed and changed. But Luke's gospel isn't a scrap-book. He didn't get all the information from Mary about what Jesus was like after he was born --- his first words, when he walked, his medical history, all the cute things he said and did. No --- there's the story of his birth, and then his circumcision and then his presentation at the Temple when he was one month old, and then boom, it's 12 years later and he and his parents are in Jerusalem for Passover. The timeline moves quickly.

But it's a good story isn't it – and like all the gospel stories there is something here for us to learn – about Jesus, and about ourselves. And what I want to do in this message is to make two rather straightforward comments. The first is to say that Jesus was raised in a family. Actually that's the name many churches give to today – Holy Family Sunday it's called – and while that may seem obvious to us, it's still worth considering. Jesus was not an orphan. He was not a loner. He did not come into the world as a person all grown-up with no need of anyone or anything else. No, he was born a baby and raised by parents who loved him and took care of him. Luke makes it clear in his gospel that Jesus' home life was important to his development. Mary and Joseph serve as models of Jewish piety. Jesus was raised by Jewish parents in a Jewish home. Which meant, as we see in today's lesson, an extended network of kindred and friends. That's why Mary and Joseph didn't realize at first that Jesus wasn't with them on their trip home from Jerusalem. Because the pilgrimage was a traveling community of people who knew each other, and children in that community were watched over by everyone together. So it was natural for Mary and Joseph to think their 12-year old son was with his cousins or his aunts and uncles or his best friends. That's who most kids that age would rather be with anyway --- right? Not their parents. And Mary and Joseph trusted that network --- because that's how it was for all of them --- they didn't raise their families isolated from each other. They knew each other, they trusted each other, they helped raise each other's children. Being a family didn't necessarily mean being private --- and so Jesus grew up in a wide circle of family and neighbors and friends. He challenged his parents a bit in today's story, yes, but how does the story end? “Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them.

Jesus was part of a family --- and that family mattered to him, and he mattered to that family. He was connected; he was part of something that included other people; he learned from them, he interacted with them, he laughed and cried with them, he worked with them, and so on. He had a real life. With real parents – and most likely brothers and sisters too --- and he knew and experienced what we ourselves know and experience in our families. The times we are at our best, and the times we're not. The times when children test their parent's authority. And the times when parents overreact. It's all there together – and it's all real, and it's all just simply the way it is. As we sang in our hymn a bit ago: "Jesus is our childhood's pattern; day by day, like us he grew; he was little, weak, and helpless, tears and smiles like us he knew; and he felt for our sadness, and he shareth in our gladness". Family life is never perfect. The only boyhood story of Jesus in any of the Biblical gospels is a story of a child who worries his parents, and parents who don't quite know what to make of their child. Not necessarily the story you'd think you'd have for what we call the Holy Family. But it is what it is. And the family is Holy because of God --- not because of their own saintliness.

And while Mary and Joseph are portrayed of course as unique in how God is at work in them and in their life together with Jesus as a family, the Bible also affirms that God is with us, and is at work among us in our families as well. And as the gospel continues, how family is defined gets broader and broader --- for the adult Jesus keeps including others into his family – and understands that family is more than your own mother and father and brothers and sisters. Family, for Jesus, is whoever does the will of God. Disciples are family. Believers are family. The lost who have been found are family. And so on. So it's never just about Mary and Joseph – even though that's where it starts. Because Mary and Joseph aren't in it all by themselves either. They have relatives. They have their community. They have neighbors and friends. Jesus was not raised in isolation. He was influenced, nurtured, cared by, raised, instructed, disciplined, and loved by a particular family within a broader network of families. The village of Nazareth indeed helped raise him.

And it was a family that practiced their Jewish faith. That's the second comment. Jesus was at home in the Temple. Why? Well --- how often had he been going to Jerusalem for the Passover celebration? Was this Jesus' first time in the Temple? No – today's gospel story begins like this: "Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival". Every year -- -as usual. Jesus was raised knowing all about the rituals and feasts and practices of his family's faith. He was at home in the Temple because in some sense he had been raised to be at home. Mary and Joseph weren't astonished that Jesus would like being in the Temple, they were astonished that he had already reached that turning point in his life. They didn't realize that their son was ready to make that claim of faith for himself, and that he was aware that God was going to be using him for God's own purposes. They are surprised, astonished, that their son has grown up so much so soon. Which is how it is, isn't – a twelve year old seems like a child one day, and then not a child the next – and even though as parents you've seen them every day, they can change so much almost overnight it seems – and they begin to become their own person --- and not just the child you've called your own since they

were born. That's how I imagine Mary and Joseph feeling. They've raised Jesus all along to know God and to practice his faith – but now it isn't just their faith – it's his own – and he's claiming it for himself, and he's asserting his own place in the community of faith. He's asking his own questions. He's engaging in his own conversations. He still needs Mary and Joseph, of course, but he's broadening his horizons. He's thinking for himself, and he needs others to teach him, to challenge him, to help prepare him for the path he will take when the time is right. Maybe it's what the parents here will feel like when on January 17 we celebrate their children's confirmation. The children they brought to the waters of baptism are ready now to make their own profession of faith, and to become a member of the church. I remember how I felt when my children were confirmed --- proud, happy, but also just a bit astonished. They're already old enough for this? How could that be? Weren't they just little kids last week? And now here they are making these big promises? Really? And so the process of letting go began to move a bit faster that day --- and maybe that's how it was for Mary and Joseph, too. Of course they had heard all those things the angels had told them – but still, after the shepherds left, the angels left too, and then he was a baby like any other baby, really --- and they had been busy raising him –and laying the groundwork as a family of faith – but did they know in advance when Jesus himself would understand who he was and what he was meant to do? I don't think so. And so seeing him there in the Temple that day, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions, must have been a bit of a jolt to them as parents – ah, so this is what it means.. this is what it's going to be like from now on....

He's our son, but well, not just our son --- and what does that mean? What will we do now as parents? What's going to come next? All kinds of questions, I imagine. All kinds of thoughts running through their heads, which Luke says "Mary treasured in her heart". There might not be a scrap-book of Jesus' early life – but his mother certainly remembered. After the shepherds left the stable, Mary "treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart", and now after these three days of frantically looking for Jesus and then finding him in the Temple, and seeing him be so at home in there, they went back to Nazareth together, and Mary "treasured all these things in her heart".

And Jesus? Well, as Luke puts it, "he increased in wisdom and in years and in divine and human favor". In other words, between the end of this story in Luke's gospel, and the beginning of the next, 18 years later, Jesus grew up – physically, mentally, socially, and spiritually. And when he was baptized, and then entered his public ministry, it was, in part, because of that growing up – and that groundwork that had been laid throughout his childhood and young adulthood. He went to the synagogue his whole life. He was part of a Jewish family and faith community. He celebrated the feasts and festival days. He learned to read the Torah scrolls. He listened to rabbis. He got along with other people. He was at home in God's house.

I hope our college students are glad to be back in their home church today – but I hope even more that where ever they go and what ever they end up doing, church continues to be a place where they feel at home. This church – or any church that they settle in. Because it's good, I think, to have another place, beside your own family, where you know people care about you, and want what is best for you, and will pay attention to

you, and will be there for you. Mary and Joseph couldn't do it by themselves for Jesus, and neither can any of us. We need other people in the faith community to teach and nurture and guide our children and youth and young adults – and when we are those children and youth and young adults, we need other people beside our parents to listen to us, and be examples for us, and even intercede for us if we need them to. I've heard enough of you say how much you appreciate Redeemer helping you raise your children. And I've heard enough of our young people say how much they value being raised here. I hope that continues – for this group of college students, and for the ones who will follow. I hope that other children, other youth, other young adults will see this as place where they are at home, and where they can get a sense of what it means to be doing God's business in their own lives – through their own vocations, through their own life experiences, through their own choices and their own actions. Because there are lots of other alternatives to family and faith and church, you know. And lots of other places young people can be, and lots of other things for young people to be doing. And if they don't feel at home, here, then those other alternatives just might be more enticing. And maybe they'll be okay – but maybe they won't. So how we fulfill our responsibilities as a church is important.

I came across these examples which I want to share now: one comes from another pastor who tells about a woman and her son. He writes: "Barbara Lohrbach says that her son David's favorite color was black. His clothes were mainly black and he wore the big wide leg pants with lots of metal studs and all. He had the big chains and collars that looked like dog collars. And he dyes his hair sometimes blood red, sometimes very black, sometimes teal. One of the grandmothers at her church pulled Barbara aside one day and said, 'Now Barbara remember that this is how David needs to express himself. He's searching for his identity, and it cannot look like you. And remember that it's only hair and clothes and that he's still coming to church. So pick your battles carefully. And then this grandmother told Barbara about her grown son, whose father had a fit when the son's hair was shoulder length in high school. She said, "I told my husband...it's just hair. Let him have it while he still can". And then they laughed, because her husband's head was as bald as bowling ball". He then continues the story, "Unknown to Barbara until later on was the kindness of one of the men in the church to David during those teenage years of finding himself. When this man, named Jerry, died of cancer, David was greatly saddened. Barbara didn't know the connection and asked why he was so upset. David told her that Jerry was the one grown-up who would come and talk to him during coffee hour. Didn't matter how weird David looked, Jerry would come over and ask him how school was going and talk about lots of things, but never, never how David looked. He was one of the reasons David kept coming to church"(King Duncan, "Family Matters", www.sermons.com)

The mother had the church grandmother to help her raise David, and David had Jerry who kept him coming to church. That's what it's about, I think. And that's what we are called to do, too. That's what being a faith community entails, I think. None of us can do by ourselves.

And that leads to the next piece. It's from the Center for Worship Resourcing of our United Methodist General Board of Discipleship and was written for Kwanzaa 2007. The prayer affirms the seven principles of Nguzo Saba, going through each one at a time. And with Kwanzaa having started yesterday, December 26, and continuing through January 1, I thought it would be good for us to hear one of these affirmations – and it's the seventh one, called Imani, which in Swahili means "faith". The reader says: "I have the faith to believe that with God all things are possible. I will practice Imani, and honor my ancestors on whose shoulders I stand. By their work, institutions for higher learning were founded and sustained; by their creativity, jazz, blues, and gospel songs came into being; by their work, we gained the level of freedom we have this day. I will practice Imani, hoping that the teachers and leaders of our community and nation will remain true to the cause of freedom and faith. I will practice Imani, knowing that it takes a village to raise children, and in my hands and heart lay the ability to help raise up children for God. I believe that God lives in me and in you; and together we can show forth the kingdom of God until Christ shall come again" (The Rev. Marilyn Thornton, "An Affirmation for Kwanzaa", www.gbod.org/worship).

On this Holy Family Sunday, and on this United Methodist Student Sunday, we are reminded of how important it is that we do what we are meant to do. To raise our children in the faith. To make sure God's house is a place where young people are at home. To widen the circle of family, so that other parents, other children, are supported and loved. And to remember that God is with us ---helping us all to grow, as Jesus grew, - in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor, so that we too can be about God's business in our lives - as individuals, as families, as a church. So be it. Amen.