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**The Gospel According to Luke**  
**VII. The Mystery in the Midst of the Mundane**  
**Luke 2:41-52**

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It started out as an ordinary journey, an ordinary observance of the festival of Passover. In and of itself, that is of some significance, for it indicates the dedication of Jesus' parents, not only to their own faith, but to instilling that faith in their child. Scripture says of them that they went every year. Parents, never underestimate the importance of regular participation in the church's worship in the shaping of your children's hearts and minds. Further, the Law required only the male members of the household to journey to Jerusalem for the Passover – so the fact that Mary regularly goes as well speaks to the deep religious devotion of this family as they worship together according to the instructions of God.

But even that deep religious devotion was not enough to fully prepare Mary and Joseph for what this particular journey to Jerusalem would bring upon them. It was customary in that day for people to travel in large caravans, as protection from robbers. Mary and Joseph and Jesus would have been travelling in a large company of extended family and friends and fellow villagers. Everyone would have been watching out for everyone else – so it was not an unusual or careless thing for Mary and Joseph to depart while assuming that Jesus must be somewhere in the group, probably hanging around with all the other boys his age. This was a reasonable assumption – and the Bible lays no blame upon Mary and Joseph when Jesus is found to be absent from the caravan.

But even if we cannot understand how Mary and Joseph could leave Jesus behind, we certainly can all understand what happens next – that desperate and panicked search for the missing boy. They have journeyed one day from Jerusalem, so they must journey one day back. And then the third day is spent searching high and low, with increasing desperation and fear, for their missing son. But as desperate and fearful as Mary and Joseph must have been as they feverishly searched the streets of Jerusalem, nothing about their search could have possibly prepared them for what they would find. This somewhat ordinary, if scary, human drama is just about to take an extraordinary twist.

For when they finally find Jesus, He is sitting in the Temple surrounded by a group of the teachers of Israel – the experts in the words and ways of God. Jesus is sitting there, listening to them attentively – a twelve-year-old boy – and asking these teachers questions and giving answers to their questions that leave them “*amazed at his understanding.*” This scene is so extraordinary that Joseph and Mary, coming upon it, momentarily forget their desperation and fear long enough to be genuinely “*astonished*” at what they are seeing and hearing. But very

quickly they regain their senses, remember their desperation and parental anger, and speak to their son in words that seem very human and very familiar to us: *“Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been in great distress.”* Can’t we just hear the tone in their voices – *“Son, what were you thinking? Do you know what might have happened to you? Do you know how worried we have been?”* Again, an ordinary scene – and one that would have remained so, if not for what happens next.

Jesus responds to His parents very calmly, as if speaking from out of another world. He says to them – actually He is almost rebuking them: *“Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?”* Scripture states that Mary and Joseph simply could not comprehend what He was saying to them. And we should be sympathetic to their confusion. For though both Mary and Joseph knew that their Jesus was no ordinary child, but rather the Son of God in human flesh – still He also was, in a real sense, just their boy Jesus. They had changed His diapers, helped Him learn to walk and talk. His childhood had, until this point, been as ordinary and human as that of any other child. So, we can forgive them for being startled by this extraordinary reminder of who their boy really was. Mary and Joseph had been frantically searching for their twelve-year-old son – but what they had found, suddenly and unexpectedly, was the Son of God. They had found their child sitting in the Temple – only to suddenly find themselves beholding the great truth of the Incarnation: that this boy, this otherwise normal human boy, was nonetheless also God in human flesh. In the midst of this ordinary scene from an ordinary childhood, the extraordinary truth had suddenly broken open that God really had come to earth in the form of this child. And even His parents, who already knew this to be the case, could only respond in amazement and awe.

And amazement and awe are also what I think this story is asking of us in relation to Jesus. The truth of the Incarnation, of God taking upon Himself our human flesh, is finally a truth that we cannot comprehend any better than did Mary or Joseph or the teachers in the Temple. With them, we ultimately can only stand back in astonishment before this miraculous gift which has been given to us: that into the midst of our ordinary affairs, God has now made Himself at home. Jesus Christ brings together what had so long been severed by our sin – heaven and earth are connected once again. God and humankind are brought into close communion once again. The mystery and the mundane now meet, and shall forevermore be joined, in Him – in this Jesus, Mary and Joseph’s Son, Son of God, our Savior.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in a letter he wrote from a Nazi prison cell to his dear friend Eberhard Bethge, gave a lovely name to all of this. He wrote: *“God is the beyond in the midst of our lives.”*<sup>1</sup> That is what astonished the teachers that day in the Temple. That is the extraordinary truth which greeted Mary and Joseph in the midst of their ordinary parental joy and anger at finding their lost boy. That is the great gift of the Incarnation that has been given as well to you and to me and to all the earth: that God is no longer far away from us and from our ordinary joys and struggles. God no longer sits beyond the reach of our pleas and pains and pleasures. God is no longer distant and divorced from all the ordinary goings-on that you and I call life. Rather God is now in the midst of it all – Immanuel, God-with-us. God, in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, has indeed now become the beyond in the midst of our lives.

Which means, among other things, that just as it was for Mary and Joseph and the teachers in the Temple, so we can never now know when, in the midst of our ordinary moments, He might next choose to show Himself to us. Humanity and divinity have been joined in Jesus, earth and heaven placed in intimate communion – which means that we can now never know when we might next find ourselves astonished by the presence of God’s great mystery in the midst of our mundane and otherwise ordinary experiences. God is on the loose among us, as it were. Meaning that He is never far away from us – never, even for a moment. And that, at any moment, the mystery might break through the mundane, and we will find ourselves every bit as astonished as Mary and Joseph and the teachers in the Temple at the sudden presence of God right there before us, right there in our lives, present to us in our here and now.

I have experienced moments like this, and I know you have too. In fact, I experience moments like this all the time here at our Temple, Easley Presbyterian. I would be remiss if I didn’t point out to you again, as your pastor, that the place where Mary and Joseph found Jesus was in the Temple. The Temple – the Church – is still one of the best places to find Him to see Him, to experience His love and His peace and His grace firsthand. For example, I see Him, I feel His presence constantly in our worship together – feel Him moving among us as we raise our voice together in prayer and in praise. One place I nearly always see Him is in our annual Service of Wholeness (which I hope we will be resuming very soon!), when someone comes forward and kneels at the prayer bench with the Elders beside him or her laying on hands. And, as I look into that face, as pastor I often know something of the suffering that is hidden behind those eyes – even as I see also the courage and the hope and the determination and most of all the faith that has brought that person forward to kneel in prayer in God’s House. And, in that moment, I am astonished and amazed at the beauty of that soul, and the power of that faith. And I sense in that moment that God is really there with us at that kneeling bench, drawing very near to us with His blessing of love and of healing – the beyond in the midst of our lives. And I see it on Wonderful Wednesdays around the dinner tables, at choir rehearsals and youth fellowship meetings, and even at Session meetings – the Beyond in the midst of our church life.

But, of course, it happens outside of the church all the time also. We are just going about our ordinary business and suddenly there is God in the midst of it with us. We’re walking down the driveway to pick up the paper when a neighbor walks by and we start to chat. And as the talk continues and goes deeper, we begin to feel that God is not only present in our conversing and in our caring for and about one another, but that He is the One who arranged this meeting. Or, we’re out for an exercise walk, and we’ve got our tunes plugged into our ears and our worries and to-do lists on repeat in our brains. And suddenly, something breaks through and captures our attention – a coyote crossing the road ahead of us, a bird singing in a branch right above our heads, the sight of neighborhood children at play. And suddenly a new tune appears in our ears and in our heads: *“This is my Father’s world, and to my listening ears, all nature sings, and round me rings the music of the spheres.”*<sup>2</sup> A moment, a word, an action – just something otherwise very ordinary in the midst of our ordinary day – and suddenly, there He is, there is God in our presence. Suddenly we are astonished to discover that God is actually with us at our work or with us in our chores or with us as we dodge cars on our daily commute. That He is there in something that our child just said or that our spouse just did or that a stranger just offered to us. The Beyond in the midst of life. The mystery made manifest in the midst of the mundane.

This is one of the best parts of what the Incarnation means for us. It means moments like these happen every day and all around us – if we just have eyes to see and ears to hear and a heart open to receive Him. “God-moments” – that’s what they are. Because of His Incarnation, Jesus Christ is now and ever shall be the beyond in the midst of our lives. He is the mystery that meets us in the midst of the mundane, the heaven that finds us here on this earth, the Divine presence peeking out at us in love in the midst of all our busy, bustling humanity. God-moments.

A group of teachers in the Temple find themselves astonished by the wisdom and understanding of a twelve-year-old boy – the beyond in the midst of life. Two frantically worried parents finally find their three-day missing son, only to be astonished by the reminder that this boy is so much more than he appears – the mystery in the midst of the mundane. And you and I, because of that boy – who grew up to become our Lord and Savior – truly we are now blessed by the truth that He is never far away from us, He is ever in our midst – He is indeed the beyond who has made His home in midst of our lives.

Michel Quoist, a French priest and poet, wrote these wonderful lines – and I will end with this:

*If only we knew how to look at life as God sees it, we would realize that nothing is secular in the world, that everything contributes to the building of the Kingdom of God. To have faith is not only to raise one’s eyes to God to contemplate him; it is also to look at this world – with [the eyes of Christ].<sup>3</sup>*

And to see Him there.

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<sup>1</sup> Letter dates April 30, 1944; Eds. Geoffrey B. Kelly & F. Burton Nelson, A Testament to Freedom (HarperSanFrancisco, 1990), p. 527.

<sup>2</sup> The opening line of Maltbie D. Babcock’s beloved hymn.

<sup>3</sup> Michel Quoist, Prayers (New York: Avon Books, 1975), p. 11.