A Sermon for DaySpring

By Joe Bennett

“*Expecting Jesus*”

Luke 2:41-52

December 30, 2018

I recently heard a story about Jesus disappearing from a church. So apparently this church had a nativity scene outside of it, visible from the road every year as part of their tradition. It’s a nice thought, people can come by the church and see the infant Jesus with Mary and Joseph, shepherds, angels, and magi all brought together in a scene to reflect upon. But one year, on Christmas Day as the pastor was leaving the church, he noticed the baby Jesus was missing from his manger. He was worried that it had been stolen to be vandalized or as some kind of practical joke, when he noticed way off down the road a small boy towing a little red wagon coming up to the church. And the closer that this child got, the pastor noticed that there was someone riding in the little red wagon being pulled by the little boy. Growing closer still, it turns out it was the little baby Jesus that that had gone missing from the manger in the nativity scene. So, the pastor runs down the road to this little boy pulling his little red wagon and he asks him, “Why do you have the baby Jesus in your wagon?” And the little boy looks down at his little red wagon with its infant King cargo and says in reply, “Well, pastor, for Christmas this year I was really praying that I’d get a little red wagon, and I made a promise to Jesus that if I got one I would give him a ride in it around the block.”

Now that story is a little cute and kind of funny, and we could probably have some interesting conversations together about confusing Jesus with Santa Claus and everything that comes with that. But the story we see today is not quite so cute and not quite so funny, at least not if you’re a parent. Luke tells us a story where Mary and Joseph, first-time parents themselves, don’t realize that they don’t have their small child with them. They leave him behind in Jerusalem. and they go home without him. While this kind of story has been made humorous in the Home Alone movie franchise, parents, from what I hear at least, usually think that this is not the most exciting of occurrences on their end. I can tell you as one who has been a child that not knowing where are your parents are can be quite distressing.

I guess the good news for parents here is that if Mary and Joseph accidentally left behind the child savior of the world, left town, and went a full day without realizing that he wasn’t with them, then there’s probably some measure of grace that can be afforded to you for leaving your kids at HEB or forgetting to pick them up from school. This story has some value for parents—keep an eye on your children! But as I sat down with these texts from the lectionary, I kept asking myself the question, what does this story have to do with Christmas? You see, we’ve just heard from Luke about the story of Jesus’ birth and how the angels appeared to shepherds in the fields telling them the glorious news of the Savior. Then the next story that we have is of the young child Jesus being brought to the temple and being identified by Simeon as the source of all hope and as the savior of the world. That’s all very “Christmas-y,” but how does this story fit in with those? I had to sit down and think for a while about what Christmas is really all about. True, it’s about the birth of Jesus Christ, the Incarnation, and God’s wonderful and mysterious love coming from heaven to earth in the form of Jesus Christ, but beyond those things we celebrate at Christmas, we also celebrate that as Jesus Christ once came into the world, we hold fast to the promise that he will come again.

At Christmas, we celebrate as people of hope. At Christmas, we profess that this extraordinary thing this happened, and that the world will never be the same again. And as I was thinking about these things, it dawned on me, “Oh, this story is *indeed* a Christmas story.” But instead of showing us the scenes that we typically remember at Christmas time, Luke paints us a picture of what happens so often immediately after Christmas. In a commentary on this text, Dennis Bratcher asks the questions “Where do we go after we have celebrated? After we have heard angels sing and watched shepherds worship, where do we go after the wonder has faded and we have been plodding amid the ordinary circumstances of life? Do we lose the sense of expectation so that we do not really anticipate this child to do anything out of the ordinary?”

Luke is telling us *that* story. What happens after Christmas? We, too, expect Jesus to be in the caravan simply doing ordinary things like he is supposed to, but the surprising thing is that after Jesus is born, he is in one sense nowhere to be found. Where is he? Mary and Joseph spend a full day looking for him in the caravan, a full day wandering back to Jerusalem, and a full day looking for him in town, and they eventually find him in the temple. And it is at this point when they ask him “Why are you here?” that they give themselves away. You see, even after all of the extraordinary events that Mary and Joseph had witnessed, they forgot that he was no ordinary child. That this was no ordinary time. Even as a child, the young Jesus is in his Father’s house, reaching out and meeting the spiritual needs of a people who were at best misunderstood and at worst despised by the world around them, teaching them and listening to them in great humility. Jesus is not where we expect him to be.

I can imagine what it must’ve been like for Mary and Joseph when they stumbled upon Jesus in the temple after missing him for the past three days. *“Now Jesus, you were supposed to be in the caravan and going back home with us. You’re not supposed to be here with these people, what were you even thinking? Don’t you know how worried and anxious we’ve been? From now on Jesus, you are to do the things we expect of you.”* In this moment where Mary and Joseph seem to forget who they are talking to, it’s easy to hear our own voice being added to theirs. How often do we merely expect Jesus to be exactly where we want him, doing exactly the things we want him to do for the people we want him to do things for at the time that we want him to do them. This great temptation that you and I face is one that attempts to take the wonderful mystery of Christmas and pack it all up in a box and put it on the shelf where it is supposed to be until it is acceptable to open up the box and decorate our lives with it again.

It’s the easiest thing isn’t in? After Christmas the family who’s come in from out-of-town leaves, and those of us were traveling come back home. We pack up our Christmas trees, put away our nativity scenes, take down the lights from around the house, and remove all traces of Christmas from our homes. Isn’t that what we’re supposed to do? I mean, after all, Christmas is something that we have been celebrating in society at large for several weeks already, and it’s nice for Christmas to have its place and it’s time. But after a while all those songs and all the lights and all the decorations get a little old. It’s time to celebrate the new year! It’s time to begin returning back to our ordinary lives, make new resolutions, and keep Jesus exactly where we expect him to be: at church, and small groups, maybe in saying grace before a meal. Let’s just all agree to assume together that Jesus is going to be exactly where he is supposed to be.

Yet these are no ordinary times, and this is not an ordinary child. In fact, the stories of the gospels feature examples time and time again where Jesus is in precisely the places he is not supposed to be. He is in the house of Zacchaeus and sharing tables with prostitutes and tax collectors instead of dining with the religious people. He is too late to the bedside of Jairus’s daughter and too late to be with his friend Lazarus. And the Messiah is not ruling and reigning and freeing his people from the Romans. Instead, he is tortured and condemned and hung from a cross. But it doesn’t even stop with his earthly ministry, Jesus makes a point of being exactly where he is not supposed to be even after he dies. The women go to his tomb, and he’s not even there! This story from Luke is just one story of many stories to follow where Jesus is not where he is supposed to be. It seems as though this Jesus has gotten everything wrong about who he is, where he is supposed to be, and what he is supposed to do. Or maybe we are the ones who are mistaken about who Jesus is and where he’s supposed to be and what he’s supposed to do.

After Christmas, what becomes of Jesus? Shall we pack him up with the other decorations and return to our ordinary everyday lives? Christmas is great, but if this is an ordinary event and if Jesus was an ordinary child, then what is the point of living anything other than an ordinary life? But the good news, again, is that Jesus was no ordinary child, his birth was no ordinary event, and these are no ordinary times. Here at DaySpring, we pride ourselves in being able to keep things sacred and simple, but this should never be confused with being ordinary. Brothers and sisters, it seems that we ought to follow the example of Mary, of course not when she leaves Jesus behind, but after that where she treasures all of these things in her heart. What happens after Christmas? What happens after this extraordinary event brought with promises of the good news and glad tidings of great joy? We are to be a people who carry Christmas around in their hearts. We are to be a people found in unexpected places with unexpected people, living in unexpected ways, and doing unexpected things.

Paul gives us some instruction on this, as we see in or text from Colossians this morning. *As those who are been chosen of God holy and beloved put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience, bearing with one another, and forgiving each other just as the Lord forgave so also should you. Beyond all these things put on love which is the perfect bond of unity and let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts. Whatever you do in word or in deed do all in the name of the Lord Jesus giving thanks through him to God the father.* These instructions that we have received offer us a glimpse of what it means to be people who live in light of Christmas. Our lives have changed forever, and we will never be the same.

It seems that people today are still asking the same questions of God that Mary and Joseph did on that day in this story. “God, where are you? We have been anxiously looking for you.” It’s easy to wonder where God is in the midst of hardships, to wonder where he is when the strong oppress the week, and when we see so many without homes or without food, when we see people living in seemingly hopeless conditions and situations. God, where are you? Many today have given up on being able to find God, and many don’t even want to. It is a strange thing to think that when Jesus Christ was born, the entire world has changed and almost no one knew it. And yet today, we are tempted to live as though that were still the case. Christmas is something that Christians celebrate, but it is something that the entire world needs. We are called to show the world where God is by living in an extraordinary way. God is still at work in this world, and he is still found in unexpected places. Most people probably don’t imagine finding God when they go to work every single day or when they go to H-E-B or when they get a haircut, but if we are living lives of extraordinary calling, then people may just find Jesus in the seemingly ordinary places.

Christmas is indeed a celebration and a time for feasting and a time of remembrance as well as a time of future expectation, but after Christmas shall we live as though these are ordinary times and as though Jesus was an ordinary child? May not be so in our lives, brothers and sisters. After Christmas, we may not have our Christmas trees up, or our lights, or our decorations, but we carry it with us in our hearts and minds. The world changed forever at Christmas time, and today Jesus is still to be found in unexpected places doing unexpected things with unexpected people at unexpected times. Thanks be to God.

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