

## The Human Jesus

Last Sunday we were still anticipating the arrival of the babe in Bethlehem. On Monday evening we stood by a manger with shepherds in awe of what the heavenly host had revealed. Next Sunday, with Matthew we will consider others who come from a far distant land to pay homage after following a star. Luke does not mention these visitors. Instead after the shepherds leave Luke describes the presentation of Jesus at the Temple in Jerusalem. This trip from Bethlehem was made for the circumcision and dedication and naming according to the customs of their faith. Careful attention is given to the details which confirm the couple's adherence to the customs and traditions of their faith. Jesus' first trip to the Temple was thus when he was about a week old as tradition demanded circumcision representing his entrance into covenant membership on the eighth day after his birth. That passage ended with the family's return to Nazareth where Luke tells us "the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom, and the favor of God was upon him." The gospels give little information about the manner of this growing up of the boy Jesus. There are some non-canonical stories about this period found in documents written much later than Luke. These texts were not considered reliable accounts of events and were not included in our Biblical record. One of these texts is called the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*. The stories in this text describe a child who is very much like a normal child, playing in the mud in one story. He dams up a little creek to make a pool and plays in the mud and then pitches a fit when another kid knocks down his dam. Unlike a normal child, however Jesus claps his hands and uses divine power to turn his mud birds into living ones. He also curses that child who knocked down his dam so that he dies. Luke, however, does not give us any story about the child Jesus who while playing uses divine power. Whether or not those stories would have been circulated when Luke wrote his narrative is not known, but what we are told in the prologue is that Luke sifted through all the information before beginning. Then he only related what he could verify. So until the age of twelve when this scene is described we don't know how alike or how different Jesus appeared to those living around him. The scene today presents the second described visit to Jerusalem made by the Mary, Joseph and Jesus. It again begins with details about the devout practices of this family. "Now every year, his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover." This pilgrimage was to fulfill a requirement for all male Jews to go to the Temple based on Deuteronomy 16:16. Mosaic Law set a standard of three pilgrimages, but most ordinary folks probably could only afford this journey to Jerusalem once a year. Records indicate that Passover was most often the occasion of that one visit and entire villages went together. Luke wants us to take note of this devout behavior as the next verse repeats the fact that it is a yearly event for the family. "And when he was twelve years old they went up as usual for the festival." This trip to be in Jerusalem for Passover is normal. It is customary for them. There is no description of the festival itself or what activities which occurred during the holy days. Those activities were unremarkable because they happened yearly. What is of importance in the narrative is what happens after Passover is over and it is time to return to Nazareth. Unlike previous years, Jesus does not remain with his parents and leave with them and the group from their village. Mary and Joseph would have been traveling with a group of friends and relatives from Nazareth. In such a crowd the children would have gathered together as they walked so it would not have usual for Jesus to be with other children and not with his parents as they left

Jerusalem. In fact, since they had been in Jerusalem for Passover, the crowd leaving Jerusalem might have included pilgrims from other villages who were all leaving at the same time, traveling together in a slow moving caravan, talking and sharing experiences. After traveling for a day, Mary and Joseph began to look for Jesus among their relatives and friends. What happens next is a scenario which elicits an empathic response from anyone who has had the care of a child in a group. It is probably every parent's nightmare—their child is not to be found. He is lost. So Mary and Joseph go back along their route as they head back to Jerusalem. "When they did not find him they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking questions." There are two aspects of this story which lift up the humanity of this child. First, there is the description of the reaction of Mary and Joseph when they do not find him among the group returning to Nazareth. It was the reaction of any parent—the need to find their son who was not where they expected among their group of pilgrims—they stopped their journey home, returned to Jerusalem and spent three days searching for him before they located him. And when they located him in the temple they were amazed that he was just sitting there. Their reaction was relief and also disappointment and anger. "When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, 'Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.'" In this story, in their minds, he was their son—not the Messiah—not the Son of God—but the child who had been an infant—small, helpless, vulnerable and dependent upon their care. The child who they had watched grow as did other children. The second aspect in this passage which places emphasis on Jesus' humanity is where he was found and what he was doing. "After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions." As can be seen from Jesus' response to Mary's scold, Jesus did not consider himself lost. It was only from their perspective that he was lost. We tend to think of this scene as the boy Jesus being divinely omniscient—as being very precocious—and teaching the teachers. But careful reading does not say that. The text says, "He was listening to them and asking questions"—He was not interrogating or test them, he was asking, listening, growing. He's twelve and seeking to learn about the Scriptures and their interpretation. This text sets a pattern we will see later in Jesus' life. He was a listener and he always asked questions. In this setting we are told that "all were amazed at his understanding". That is, when they taught, he was super attentive. He comprehended. He was open to knowledge. The questions Jesus asked also amazed because of his understanding of what they had taught. The stories of the adult Jesus contain this element of seeking to know those he encounters through the questions he asks but the presence of power often masks that for us. Since the very earliest years of Christianity, the insistence on the unlikely formulation we attest in our affirmations of faith has created a tension. That Jesus was both fully God and fully human has meant that Christians have had to face the shocking idea that Jesus was for a time, really and truly a baby. I have stated many times that I am not a movie watcher, but sometimes I do encounter films. I took a class in seminary about the theology found in film and a scene from a popular Will Farrell movie was used in the class. The movie is *Talladega Nights* and the scene is memorable. It takes place at the dining table where the family has gathered for a meal. Ricky Bobby, Will Farrell's character, is saying grace. In this prayer, Ricky specifically addresses the "8lb 6 oz baby Jesus, in his Golden Fleece diapers with his little books about shapes and colors," etc., etc. His father-in-

law interrupts and objects to Ricky's preference for the "baby God" and shouts "He was a man, he had a beard!" Ricky replies "But I like baby Jesus best!" It is truly a funny scene. Yet theologically it's actually pretty serious. Both Ricky and his father-in-law in their shouting match make valid theological points. Jesus was the adult man who died on the cross, but he was also a baby. This is a truly radical and shocking idea—that the infinite God who created the universe also chose to descend, dwindle, become small, become helpless, become dependent upon human beings God created. This is not a sentimental or cute idea, but is potentially radical, transformative, and controversial. We also have a tendency to find it hard to reconcile this image with our understanding of God. In fact, only at Christmas and Easter do we lift up the image of the humanity of Jesus. However, it seems a mistake to ignore or pass over Jesus' infancy because his infancy is essential to a full understanding of the radical potential of Christian theology. One reason for this is because if Jesus was really a baby—then God must love human beings very much. A baby or a young child does not judge or condemn. A baby just loves. Babies don't care about status or class or wealth. They just want to be safe and warm and comforted. The idea of God reaching out to us to be picked up and carried or bounced on our knees and falling asleep on our laps, can, if we think about it also provide us with a deeper sense of what it means to say that God loves us. For some people, John Calvin included the arrival of Jesus as a baby was just a rather embarrassing phase of weakness and incontinence that Jesus had to pass through only out of necessity in order to get to adulthood where his power and glory could be evident. For these people, the grown up Jesus—the man with a beard—is the "real" Christ. The focus is on the divine present within Jesus. Our faith affirms that in Jesus, humanity and divinity were equally present. In our minds we tend to rely heavily on the metaphor of God as father or parent. We focus on Jesus as our Savior, the one who has divine power to heal and restore. But what happens when we think of God as a baby? What does that image mean to us? What if it means that God loves us like a baby loves their parents? That is a love that is unconditionally given. That is the love which is revealed to be ours through the baby Jesus. Thanks be to God.