

The First Sunday after Christmas
December 27, 2015

“The Floor is Now Open for Questions”

by Mary Anne Biggs

Colossians 3:12-17 ~ Luke 2:41-52

Kids grow up awfully fast don't they? It seems like one minute you are trying to encourage your child to go faster on his bicycle ... to get up enough speed to stay balanced ... and the next you are pleading with the same boy now at the wheel of a car ... pleading with him to slow down and live. One minute you're urging a shy daughter to say hello to strangers ... and the very next, you're trying to discourage her from responding to strangers on the Internet.

Jesus is growing up fast too. Here we are ... less than a week from Christmas ... from the baby lying in a manger. Now Jesus is already an adolescent wandering off on his own. Last week Jesus was "prophecy miraculously fulfilled." This week he is questioning the teachers of that very tradition.

The classical confessions of the church hold that Jesus is "fully human, fully God," and in today's familiar story from Luke, we can see both sides. Jesus, fully human, is growing up as all mortals must. In the process, Jesus has scared his parents half to death ... as all teen-agers do. Jesus is asking questions, as should we all, and he is listening to learn, as all we must. And in this story, we see the twelve-year old Jesus fully divine with everyone amazed at his understanding and his answers. We hear Jesus declaring his unique relationship with God the Father ... as only the Son can do.

His parents, however, are not so quickly impressed. They have not come back to Jerusalem for a theological discussion. Just last week, angels sang and shepherds came to celebrate his birth. Priest and prophet proclaimed Jesus to be God's answer to the yearning of all humankind. Now, his parents just want some simple answers. "Just where have you been? And what do you think you're doing?"

As a mother, I can easily identify with Mary and Joseph in this story. "Child, why have you treated us like this?"

Our questions are best directed to the gospel writer Luke. "Just what, Dr. Luke, are you trying to tell us in this story of Jesus, boy wonder?"

Well, I think that first, Luke wants to reinforce the point he's been making from the beginning ... that Jesus is unique among all humankind. The devout Simeon has proclaimed this child "God's gift of salvation for all peoples ... a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."

The aging prophet Anna has spread Simeon's revelation about Jesus among all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. The UCC "Statement of Faith" proclaims "In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Lord, God has come to us and shared our common lot, conquering sin and death and reconciling the whole creation to its Creator."

Again, Luke's first point ... Jesus is unique among all humankind.

Now his second:

Jesus is anchored in the faith of ancient Israel. His family is immersed in the practice of Jewish piety. "Jesus lived as a Jew among Jews." Mary and Joseph had their son circumcised ... given the sign of the covenant. They had presented their first-born son in the temple and offered sacrifices according to the Law of Moses. Every year, Luke says, they go up to Jerusalem for the Passover Festival. Here is a family serious about faithful practice of the Jewish faith providing us with an example of what it means to be practicing Christians in a secular world. Practicing Christians? What an uncommon turn of phrase. And yet practicing Christian is precisely what Biblical faith prescribes. Practicing Christians observe the Lord's Day each week with worship, study and rest. As Jesus and his family participated in the great festivals of the Jewish faith ... so practicing Christians observe the seasons and high holy days of the Christian year--Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost.

Christianity, like the Judaism of Jesus, is a communal faith. We unite with sisters and brothers in the community of the church ... not a perfect person among us ... and yet all of us together experiencing the perfect love of God. Practicing Christians keep the commandments including the divine directive to tithe, to give a portion of our income to meet the needs of others. Practicing Christians pray without ceasing and seek opportunities to serve rather than to be served.

This is precisely what the Colossians reading is about ... the congregation as a people close to God. And we are pulled up short at its very first statement. We are addressed as God's chosen ones. Ask anyone why he or she is in a congregation and you will get many answers, most linked with some aspect of personal choice. You will almost never hear someone say "Because God chose me."

There follows a wonderful description of gifts needed to form and hold a Christian congregation, all of them practical and realistic. We might almost call them the commandments of congregational life ... for practicing Christianity. Among them:

- Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience.
- Forgive each other. The word is repeated three times!
- Be thankful. This is utterly central to our lives.
- Let the word of Christ dwell in you. Most of us think of the Word as being in a

book, rather than the word of Christ being actually in each of us.

- Teach and admonish one another. Wonderful things can happen when a congregation realizes that many of its members have this gift and ministry.
- Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord.

These are what practicing Christians do!

So, first and foremost, Luke would have us know Jesus is unique among humankind, and, second, this Jesus is a practicing Jew as we ourselves are called to be practicing Christians.

Now point three in the story:

The Gospel writer wants us to know that questions are as natural to faith as fish to water ... as butter to bread. Surely, Theophilus, to whom Luke has addressed this work, has been asking questions. Luke says that he's writing to provide an orderly account of the Christ event. Apparently, Theophilus has expressed some interest ... but perhaps some reservations too. Otherwise, Luke would not have gone to the trouble of writing the work that we know in Christian tradition as the Third Gospel.

Today we are only at chapter 2 and already the characters in this story have had many questions. Zechariah and Mary have questioned the angels who appeared to them. Elizabeth has questioned Mary. The people who form a kind of Greek chorus in Luke's Gospel have questioned one another. Now, in today's episode, there are more questions ... Mary and Joseph questioning Jesus and Jesus questioning his parents and the religious leaders.

I think that all of these questions flying back and forth in the story represent the Gospel writer's concession that comprehension of Jesus as the Messiah, the Holy One of God, is a complex issue.

This, against the claim of many devoted church folks who say that there is nothing in Holy Scripture to question ... and many equally sincere skeptics who claim that God's Holy Word has no believable answers. Here at the outset of his orderly account, Luke assures us that in biblical faith, the floor is always open for questions.

I admit that I was slower to take the floor ... slow to pursue my own questions ... slow in the words of Harry Emerson Fosdick "to doubt my doubts." I grew up in the church ... I was reared on the stories of Jesus. But as a young adult, I developed many questions ... questions about the origins of our ancient tradition ... the sources of the biblical writers ... the claims of the church for Jesus as God's self-revelation. I had many questions but little resolve to seek answers. I quickly fell to the temptations of the "bright lights of the big city" and a secular career. Still, neither the questions nor the calling would go away.

At midlife, I had the rare privilege to step down from life's proverbial merry-go-round and pursue my questions. Like Mary and Joseph going back to Jerusalem looking for Jesus, I had the opportunity to go back to the place where I had given up the practice of faith in the first place. I went back to my alma mater, back to the Theology School of my undergraduate university. Over the years, many people had tried to help me make the leap of faith ... suggesting first this book and then another. My theology professor listened patiently to me as I pleaded for help in returning to the faith of my childhood. Then he rose from his chair and began to peel books off of his bookshelf. He sent me home not with just one book but with a box full of books ... books of critical biblical scholarship and books on the spiritual life ... books on theology and books of devotion. I was relieved to know that I was not the only one to have questions. Far from it, questions seemed to be the fuel of faith for many. That box full of books introduced me to what Karl Barth describes as the "strange, new world of the Bible." Among those books was a very small classic by J. B. Philips entitled "Your God is Too Small." The title told me what I needed to know ... that the God I had been trying so hard to believe in was not God ... but the figment of a small child's imagination. The Jesus I could not follow was the creation of popular religion and not the Jesus of the New Testament.

Jesus is growing up fast in Luke's Gospel. The irony of faith is that to grow with Jesus we have to slow the story down. To grow with Jesus, our living Lord, we must give one another ... and we must allow ourselves ... the time to ask our questions ... to seek in order that we might find ... to doubt our doubts.

Jesus is growing up fast, but the irony of faith is that it will not be rushed. As today's story concludes, Jesus is obediently returning to Nazareth where he will grow in wisdom and in years and in divine and human favor. More than twenty years will have elapsed on the time line of Jesus' life when Luke resumes his narrative in the next chapter. More than two decades ... that is a long time for spiritual formation. But consider the everlasting benefit to you and to me and to all of humankind.

May we pray?

Blessed Lord, you have caused all Holy Scripture to be written for our learning. Help us to use our questions, as well as the questions of others, to more fully explore this sacred gift. Give us the courage to doubt our doubts and the patience to go where the Spirit leads us that we might believe and believing that we might live faithfully as your children, sisters and brothers of Christ our Lord. Amen