

[BLANK][PRAYER] Welcome! Welcome to Christmastide, this beautiful, short season when we get to bask in the light of Christmas trees, feast on Christmas leftovers, spend time with family and friends who we haven't seen in so long, and generally put everyday life aside for the sake of the love that God brings us at Christmas. My family has been doing just that, and it has been a joy and a blessing in so many good ways.

And here, in our church, we still hold on to the light of Christmas in our hearts. Our manger scene is still with us; the stars of Christmas are still with us; and there will certainly be left-over treats worth nibbling on for fellowship after this service! We don't want to let go of the baby Jesus, born of Mary and of God, too quickly, or easily. It just feels too good to push away too soon, Amen? We want Christmas to be a time when time stands still, a time when peace and quiet seems like it will last forever.

It was like that then June-Ann and I first brought Christopher home from the hospital, when he was born. Chris was born in a Caesarian operation, and so we had to set up camp in a little guest bedroom on our first floor when he came home, while June-Ann recovered from the operation. The little bedroom had Christopher's bassinet tucked into the corner, just a few feet from the bed, and we all huddled and cuddled together, marveling at the miracle of birth, and new life. It was like our own little Christmastide, like a manger scene in the back bedroom of our little house, a time when life was extra special.

But soon enough, life moved on. Soon enough, we moved Chris into his new room, and June-Ann and I moved back into our own bedroom, and got a little more rest. A little. Because, as you know, babies don't stay babies for all that long. Mother's milk gives way to solids, diapers give way to pants and skirts, and before you know it, [WHEELS] you're taking the training wheels of of your child's bicycle, and feeling that moment of deep joy and fear mixed together, as you let go and watch them take their first solo ride. [BLANK]

I suppose that's why we tend to hold on to memories of when our children are born so tightly, and so fondly. It is a moment of perfection, when all seems right, all seems possible. [MARY+JESUS] Like our church windows, which show moments in the life of Jesus, we want those early moments of life to last as long as we can, just like we hold on to the image of Jesus in Mary's arms at Christmas. [BOY JESUS] But on this Christmastide Sunday, I am reminded that right next to the window of the baby Jesus with Mary, we see that God's perfection is not about holding on to moments. In the next window, we see Jesus as a boy, already growing.

Christian discipleship, like our celebration of Christmas, isn't about holding on to perfect moments that can't last. Christian discipleship is about letting God's possibilities grow in us, and around us, as a part of God's plan for life, a plan perfected for us in Jesus. Jesus didn't stay a baby, and we aren't meant to stay babies as children of God in Christ. We're meant to grow in God's grace, inspired by God's perfection, a day at a time, as a part of the family of faith that is God's church in Christ.

[BLANK] We see in today’s reading from Luke’s gospel that early Christians understood that the reason for the season, Jesus, was important, but just a preparation for the reason for the reason for the season - building a life of Christian discipleship for us and our families, in Jesus, that makes us a part of God’s plan for the world’s salvation.

Luke’s gospel has the most detailed story of the birth of Jesus that we find in our four Christian gospels, but Luke doesn’t dwell on his birth for long. Luke shows Jesus being circumcised eight days after his birth, brought to the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem forty days for a ritual purification, and Jesus growing up as a child in Nazareth. The story of Jesus in Bethlehem is important, but Jesus, like all of us, was meant to grow, in body and spirit!

And what we can’t help but notice in this story of Jesus is that his parents, Mary and Joseph, did not leave the faith life of Jesus to chance. Faith is a choice to become more spiritually mature in God’s family, no matter what our age. Mary and Joseph were good models for Jesus, active in their community of faith, following all of the ways of their faith carefully, learning about their way of looking at God. Jesus Christ, Son of God, maker of heaven and earth, was still, no matter what, just a child on earth, needing parenting, just like any other child, and needing to learn from parents how important the love of God was, and obedience to God was, from a human point of view. Faith that saves us is learned from families, either our own families, or families who we adopt.

My own family taught me well. As a little boy, I was a “squirmy worm” in church. I was easily distracted, and, one Sunday, my Dad was so upset by this that he gave me a good talking-to! He reminded me that church was important, and that I should pay attention. And, after that, I did. I started to hear more, and understand more, of what church was about. And, pretty soon, I was in love with church. I loved the music, the sermons, holy communion, the scripture stories - it was a place that I loved to be.

In today’s reading from Luke, we can see Jesus expressing his love for God in his place of worship. Mary and Joseph, brought Jesus to the Temple for the Jewish celebration of Passover. On the way back to Nazareth after this holy celebration, a whole village of families would have been there to protect and guide Jesus home. That, too, was part of good faith parenting: helping other families’ children to feel safe in a community of faith. But then Mary and Joseph noticed that Jesus wasn’t with the people from Nazareth. They rushed back to Jerusalem, and found Jesus, speaking to the teachers of the Temple.

There comes a time in our faith lives when we give our children their own independence in faith. The training wheels come off, maybe when we’re there, maybe not. But off they must come. Our children pick up the Bible on their own for the first time, they begin to pray for people on their own for the first time, or, in some cultures, they read scripture publicly for the first time, or witness to their faith in public for the first time. Faith is meant to grow. We are the parents of our children, but only so much

their parents, if they are going to continue to grow in healthy ways. We model a good faith life for our children, so that when that moment comes, like Jesus had in the Temple, all of a sudden, they are seeking out God as a parent who will watch over them for the rest of their lives.

Finally, Mary and Joseph found Jesus with the teachers of the Temple. They scolded Jesus for not letting them know where he was. Sometimes, after all, as parents, we are afraid not only for our kids, but for ourselves, because we are afraid that we have not been responsible parents. But how many of us have had a child like Jesus, who said to us, “Why were you looking for me? Didn’t you know that I needed to be in my Father’s house?”

Mary pondered these things in her heart on the way home, we’re told. How many of us, as parents, and grandparents, and family members, have the same chance to ponder these things in our hearts? How many of us have dedicated our time, our minds, and our hearts, to the point where the children in our lives are ready to accept God as their new adopted parent in life, after we’ve done the good parenting work to lead them to their new parent?

Many of you have, I know, and I am very grateful for that, as I see young people in our church beginning to grow in faith. But for the sake of children today, we need, as a church, to do more for our children and youths to accept God as their ultimate parent. One way or another, the training wheels will come off. Our children will choose some kind of god for their lives. Maybe it will be the God of Jesus. Maybe not. Will we have modeled for them, as Mary and Joseph did, what it feels like to have a godly family, that supports their journey into becoming a member of a faith family? Will we ponder, with gratitude, our children saying to us, in their own special ways, “Why were you looking for me?” as they choose the God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Transformer, as their God family?

I hope and pray so, and I pray that we may, as God’s church in Christ, focus on children and young adults, who need to see us modeling what they will need to do with their own faith, to be in Jesus, in God’s family of faith, not just at Christmas, but forever. Have a blessed Christmastide, as we prepare to grow in faith. Amen.