



Sermon by: Rev. Robert W. Ater
Text: Luke 2:41-52

December 29, 2024

Finding Christmas

Last Sunday a group of about fifteen Immanuel friends attended a performance of *All Is Calm: The Christmas Truce of 1914*. The entire 70-minute show is told in acapella song, through the real letters and words of soldiers in the trenches during the first Christmas of World War I. As the story goes, no one, especially the soldiers who bravely and enthusiastically signed up to fight, expected the war to still be on by Christmas and they certainly never expected to see and experience the atrocities of war that they did in this first modern international conflict. . . . And in the midst of it all on that first Christmas Eve, a brave German soldier steps into "no man's land," that deadly area between opposing forces . . . singing, "Silent Night," and miraculously, a sort of truce unfolds, as British, French, and German soldiers gather to sing, tell stories, and play games together - a true moment of peace and goodwill in the middle of war. History tells us the war continued through another three Christmas seasons, and nothing like that Christmas Truce of 1914 ever happened again! It was an amazing experience of these soldiers finding the true meaning of Christmas, and perhaps even Christ himself, in the humanity of one another, realizing that although they spoke different languages, ate different food, and came from different places, that they weren't so different after all - that they all wanted to connect, to be loved, to find peace and goodwill.

"Christmas comes," . . . these words from Ann Weems' poem by the same name called us to worship today with the promise and the hope that Christmas does come, in spite of what's happening in our world or in our lives, even in the face of warring and hatred, political unrest, pain, strife and disaster, and even the Herod's in our midst, that Christmas comes . . . determinedly, inevitably, . . . and thank goodness it does.

I don't know about the rest of you, but for some reason, this year Christmas seemed to come really, really quickly. With Thanksgiving on November 28, there were only 27 days, a little less than a month between Thanksgiving Day and Christmas Day. And although Christmas seemed to come quickly this year, I'm concerned more on this fifth day of Christmas, not with how quickly it came but with how quickly it might go! Our culture seems to have pushed Christmas up on the calendar, conflating the seasons of Advent and Christmas, so that instead of Christmas Day being the first day of Christmas, it becomes the last. But the church still endeavors to honor the value of each of them separately. Advent anticipates Christ's birth, and the season of Christmas, Christmastide, which begins on the 25th and lasts for 12 days, celebrates Christ's birth.

The Christmas message for us today seems to be one, then, about timing, a theme that is highlighted in today's text from Luke. In many ways the story is surprising and jarring, it jumps almost immediately from the stable to the temple, from the infant to the twelve-year-old boy. After going to Jerusalem for the annual Passover festival, Jesus' parents Joseph and Mary join with their friends and family in the caravan headed back to Nazareth. This was the normal way to travel at the time and not unusual that Jesus might have been travelling with other kids his own age or perhaps cousins or other family members as the group set off for home. At the end of the first day though, Mary and Joseph are alarmed to find that Jesus is not anywhere in the group. So they immediately leave the caravan and begin the return trip to Jerusalem to search for him. The experience of their searching, as told by Luke, is one of those stories that is helpful for understanding perspective in the context of a Biblical narrative. It's a text that reminds us of the power of the incarnation – that Jesus was once a child, too, like all of us. And it also appears differently to us depending on the lens through which we are viewing it. Biblical commentators have written about how children might view this text, about a timing and communication debacle, completely differently than their parents. In fact, one writer recently compared her experience of this text to re-watching the classic 90's Christmas movie *Home Alone* about the hijinks and shenanigans of a boy who gets accidentally left behind at home in the family's rush to get out the door for a special European Christmas vacation. As a teenager watching the film, she writes, "I thought it was a story about what a kid could do if left to his own devices," but it turns out, that through my lens now as the mother of a 12 year-old boy, "it's about a mother who has been separated from her son, doesn't know if he's OK, and wants nothing more desperately than to get back to him and hold him in her arms."¹ While Mary and Joseph thought that Jesus was lost, and may have feared the worst, that he was hungry, crying, hurt, or even dead, Jesus would certainly have not described himself as being lost . . . in fact this experience for him was one of being found, as he found his way to the temple, learned from the teachers and symbolically connected with God in his "father's house." When Mary and Joseph finally find Christ in the temple, his first words to them, indeed the first words that he speaks in the Gospel of Luke, are not an answer to their question about why he did this but instead another question, "Why were you searching for me?" . . . Perhaps said another way, "what are you looking for?"

In this time in between the times in our lives, on this Sunday between Christmas and the beginning of a New Year, this is the question, perhaps for each one of us and for all of us as a community of faith to consider. What are we searching for in our lives? Will we find what we're looking for in the New Year? The temptation of course is to follow the lead of the cultural signals around us, to breeze over this question too quickly, to pack the Christ child and his questions to us away with the Christmas paper and ornaments, to passively "get on with life" and whatever life will bring to us in the New Year. But I think this text dropped in here so beautifully between the manger scene and the beginning of Christ's adult ministry, is an opportunity and a wonderful invitation to slow down, to take a time out, to savor the season a little bit longer, to unwrap the gift

of Christmas a little bit more slowly, to consider what Jesus might be asking of us, what we might be looking for in our individual and corporate lives, as we consider what's next! It's certainly an important and timely question for us in our life together at Immanuel as we look forward to a year of continuing to navigate a season of pastoral transition together led by our interim pastor, Session, and leaders. We'll be invited to deeply listen to one another as we hold some listening sessions and town hall type meetings, perhaps answer some survey questions as we consider what we're doing well, what we could do differently, and what the community around us needs of this congregation - the first and oldest in Milwaukee! One writer re-frames the questions of the text this way: "When Christians and churches get comfortable with Jesus - when like his parents we presume to know where he should be and what he should be doing - Jesus [reminds] us with what should have been obvious. He is not where we think he is supposed to be, rather he is doing the work of [God]. At such times, Jesus goes all the way back to what he said at the very beginning. Jesus turns, looks us in the eye, and asks us one more time, 'What, exactly, are you looking for?'"²

In our searching together, I pray that we might, as the words of the beautiful Christmas prayer by Karl Barth on the cover of today's bulletin invite, that we might be "a true Christmas congregation," not only at Christmas but always, "amazed, rejoicing, and thankful" for all that God has done for us! In our own lives, homes, and spheres of influence let us consider: what might we each, as individuals, be searching for? If Jesus turned to you at the brink of 2025, and said, "what are you looking for?" How would you answer? Take some time today and in the coming weeks to think about your answer. It might be that asking the question is just as important, or more important, than how you answer it. Consider perhaps what you might need from your friends and family, what you might need from your church community, and from the community and your neighbors beyond these walls. Consider what the deepest prayers and petitions of your heart might be for God, how you might actually answer Jesus if you saw him face to face. Perhaps you might like to feel a little bit more loved or cared for, perhaps you need a little bit more financial security or stability in your life, perhaps you'd like to connect more with others . . . After you've given these questions some really good thought, consider flipping the questions around into a statement: I can *give* a little bit more love to my family or friends, or I can *help* provide some stability in the life of someone else, or I'm going to look for some new ways to *serve* and *reach out* to those in need. Near the end of today's text from Luke, the writer tells us that "Mary treasured all these things in her heart." Perhaps we might follow her lead, to treasure this invitation to hold on to Christmas a little bit longer, to contemplate the questions of faith and consider our own search for Christ this Christmas!

As we step out into that journey, the lectionary Gospel reading is perfectly paired with today's lectionary reading from the letter to the early Church at Colossi. The letter and its words of encouragement were directed to a community of new Christians to support and encourage them in their faith, to clothe themselves, he writes, with compassion, kindness,

humility, meekness, and patience . . . bearing with one another, forgiving one another . . . letting the peace of Christ rule in their hearts with gratitude for all that God has done. Like the Colossians we are clothed by God in this same way for the journey on which we embark, and we're encouraged to sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.

One of my favorite Christmas songs is one that I learned here at Immanuel, a song we've sung every Christmas for many years. Written by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow during the Civil War, *I Heard the Bells*, echoes the themes of that Christmas truce of 1914, and the peace and goodwill that can be found in the midst of pain, uncertainty and even chaos. It chokes me up every time I sing it as we're ringing bells in this Christmas congregation, proclaiming together that God is not dead, nor does God sleep, . . . but that in our ringing and in our singing that God is indeed with us, our Emmanuel! For through the love and grace of Jesus Christ, on this day and always, earth shall ring, for we have been found!

+ *Ring bells!!* +

AMEN.

¹ Moses, Lee Hull. In the Lectionary, December 29: First Sunday of Christmas. *The Christian Century*, December 2024, p. 29.

² Keck, David. Reflections on the lectionary, *The Christian Century*, December 5, 2018.