Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

First Sunday after Christmas

December 30, 2018

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JESUS, HUMAN AND DIVINE Luke 2:42–52

 Today’s reading from the Gospel represents the concluding story in Luke’s account of the infancy and childhood of Jesus. In today’s story, the baby that was born and laid in the manger is now twelve years old and in the temple. His parents, having lost him for three days, finally find him there among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. The teachers are astounded by the remarkable wisdom of the child.

 This is the only story we have of the child Jesus that is recorded in the four Gospels. The next time he appears he will be around thirty years of age.

 The child Jesus, as an infant and as a young boy, is the focus of our attention for only a Sunday or two out of the year. It seems that the Gospel writers were more interested in the adult Jesus. And so it is also with us. We love the story of his birth, and we are impressed by the story of the boy Jesus in the temple, but our real interest seems to lie elsewhere. We want to journey with him only after he becomes an adult.

 The years between Jesus’s birth and the beginning of his ministry have been called the hidden years. Actually, when Matthew and Luke set out to compose their birth narratives they knew very little about the child Jesus. They only knew that he had been born in the reign of the Emperor Ceasar Augustus. The stories about his birth and childhood they have given us are gifts of the imagination and yet they convey astounding truths about who Jesus was and who he might be for us.

 At the same time, these two Gospel writers felt it was important to include something of Jesus’s birth and childhood in their accounts. One wonders why.

 I have come to believe that they wanted us to have a glimpse of the child because it helps us connect ourselves with the humanity of Jesus, not just his divinity, but his humanity.

 Jesus was born as we all are born. He had a childhood just as we all have our own childhoods. It is as if we need to see the entire human life of Jesus, from birth to death, in order for us to identify ourselves with him.

 We need to begin with his humanity. We need to see Joseph and the pregnant Mary anxiously looking for some kind of shelter. We need to see him born not in a palace high on a hill, but in the backroom of an inn and laid in a feeding trough for animals. We need to see those rough and poor shepherds coming to the manger, and then the aged Simeon and Anna giving thanks for him in the temple. We need to see him getting lost at age twelve, just when we ourselves got separated from our parents when we were children. We need to witness the wisdom of this child, just as sometimes we are astounded by the wisdom of our own children and grandchildren.

 These stories establish the humanity of Jesus and that is so important, for his humanity is at the heart of the incarnation. We believe that God has come to us as one of us, as a human being just as we are human beings. Frederick Buechner writes,

 . . . incarnation means that all ground is holy

 ground because God not only made it but walked

 on it, ate and slept and worked and died on it. If

 we are saved anywhere, we are saved here. And

 what is saved is not some diaphanous distillation

 of our bodies and our earth but our bodies and

 our earth themselves. . . . One of the blunders

 religious people are particularly fond of making

 is the attempt to be more spiritual than God.

 —*Wishful Thinking,* page 43

To appreciate the incarnation, we need to begin with the earthly and the ordinary and the human. It is only later that we can begin to realize that if this human child Jesus who cried for his mother’s milk and had temper tantrums and got lost for three days is also divine because he is the Son of God, then we human beings can also come to participate in the divine and become God’s own sons and daughters.

 But first, we must focus our hearts and minds on the humanity of Jesus and the birth and infancy and childhood narratives help us to do just that.

 We have come to see Martin Luther, the instigator of the Protestant Reformation, as someone who was all too human. He reflected the age in which he lives. Like his contemporaries, he was deeply anti-semitic, but we should not allow that fact to cloud our appreciation for most of what he said and wrote. In a sermon on the Nativity of Jesus, Martin Luther said something worthy of our attention. This is what he said:

 Let us, then, meditate upon the Nativity just as

we see it happening to our own babies. I would

not have you contemplate the deity of Christ,

the majesty of Christ, but rather his flesh. Look

upon the baby Jesus. Divinity may terrify [a

human being]. Inexpressible majesty will crush

[a human being]. That is why Christ took on our

humanity, save for sin, that he should not terrify

us but rather that with love and favor he should

console and confirm.

 —from Martin Luther’s *Christmas Book*

 Thus, as Martin Luther advises, we should look upon the baby Jesus as we would look upon our own babies, so that we might come to appreciate his humanity. Only then can we begin with our own humanity and then take the journey towards the divinity of Christ and our becoming the sons and daughters of God.

 In honoring the childhood and humanity of Jesus, we honor our own humanity, but we do something even more important, and here this sermon will take a slight turn. In honoring the infancy and childhood of Jesus, we also honor the lives of our own children and grandchildren.

 We need to do this simply because our children draw us into the future. Because of the ways in which human life has become expendable (yet another child has died while in U.S. custody at the Mexico – U.S. border) and because of the way global warming threatens the lives of future generations, we need to terribly concerned about the children in our midst and the children of our world. We need to be deeply concerned about the world they are inheriting. Do we really want to be queath to them only a legacy of fear and debt and an earth at risk, or do we want them to inherit a world in which the threat of violence is minimized, a world in which sharing by all will mean scarcity for none, and an earth that is healthy and whole?

 I have this belief that before any decision is made that affects the lives of human beings or the life of the planet, before any decision is made to embark on a war or to do nothing to combat climate change, policy makers should first be required to speak with our children and convince them of the rightness of their decisions. So many decisions affecting the lives of human beings and the life of the earth itself are made according to some political ideology or to satisfy the desires of a political base. It would be far wiser to make decisions based upon the wisdom of the children in our midst. They, after all, are going to have to live in the world we leave behind.

Today, contemplating the baby lying in a manger and then the twelve year old boy in the temple, let us renew our own commitment to prepare for our children and our children’s children a world that will be healthy and whole, a world at peace and unafraid. May it be so. Amen.