

Straight from the "Hart"

Worship Service from December 26, 2021



Opening Prayer Lord, Bethlehem is just the beginning of our work! Help us see the mission you've put before us. We gather today because as the calendar turns, we know you are the God of new years and fresh starts, and we are always seeking to move closer to successfully living our lives in the holy name of Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

Apostle's Creed

Music (vv 1,2,3) There's a Song in the Air

Call to Worship (L - Lay Reader C - Congregation)

L: We still feel the afterglow of Christmas. Our thoughts remain filled with old and new memories of family and friends, of lights and ornaments, of traditions public and private, Our hearts remain full of the gifts of home, of joy and love --

C: We relish these times of union and reunion.

L: Our spirited imaginations are filled with the sounds and smells and memories -- of weary travelers, of hard-working shepherds, of the stable, of exhausted young, new parents, and the baby in the manger.

C: We wish we could linger at this turning point in history.

L: The time when those who understood joined with all the angels singing praise over the birth of Jesus.

C: For he came to deliver people who opened their hearts to faithful living.

L: But that page of the calendar is pulled off, to reveal another day... and another. We are called to push forward into a new day, into a new year.

C: We wish we didn't have to head back into the "normalcy of this world".

L: We don't have to. Just as we celebrated the story, we can continue to celebrate Christ's presence with us.

C: He takes us into the new year as beacons of hope, peace, joy, and love.

He can take us into the new year, and we can be beacons because, as the old English Carol says we have news of comfort and joy, and we don't be dismayed for even after we have gone astray, Christ was born to save all of those who trust in him, to save us from all of Satan's' power and might. God gives peace - - rests -- those who are happy in him.

Special Instrumental Music God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen



Piano Paul plays...

Theme

The day we celebrate Jesus' birth this year is concluded, and we have only a handful of other stories in the Bible about Jesus before he began his ministry around the age of 30. But we do have some clues about the kind of young life he may have had. Here are some things we are fairly sure about...

- * He grew up in a fairly large family. He was the oldest of quite a number of brothers and sisters. (Mark 6:3)
- * He helped his dad in the carpentry business. (in those days that word actually meant builder, so included not just woodwork, but stonework, metal work and anything to do with construction. It would include building homes, crafting furniture and other household equipment, and even the building of farming implements like ploughs, and yokes (the thing that hooks on animals so that they can pull things like ploughs and wagons...)).
- * At some point, Joseph died, and Jesus ran the carpentry business and became the family provider for his mother and siblings until he began his ministry.
- * So when Jesus talks about building houses on rock or sand, and taking up his yokes that make work light, and how to plow properly (not looking behind you) he was speaking from solid personal experience. He grew up a normal boy, trained well in the traditions of Judaism.

Later we are going to talk about Jesus' trip to Jerusalem for Passover. His parents went every year, it isn't clear when Jesus started going with them, or this was his first year. But some think this particular year was significant because it was the year Jesus would prepare for his bar mitzvah the next year.

From the day we are born, with each passing day and year, children learn more and more about how to live well (hopefully). When we start out, we need help doing that, and hopefully we receive it from God, and from parents, and from peers, and sometimes when we get older, from children. A simple example: A child learns to

brush their teeth every night. When they first start out, parents show them how, have to help them, have to teach them, have to remind them to do it; but eventually at some point, the child is supposed to know how to do it and to do it without even being told, right? -- or the child pays the penalty of parental discipline or the pain of cavities and the cost of fixing them, or all three. It is true that we never outgrow the need to learn and receive help in understanding God's teachings -- But at some point, we reach an age where we have learned enough that we are held responsible and accountable for what choices we make day in and day out -- to live right, or suffer the consequences for what we do or fail to do.

For the Jew -- that age is 12 for girls and 13 for boys, and Bar Mitzvah (which means "son of the commandment") is the ceremony that signifies that child is now old enough and wise enough to take full adult responsibility for living out their life of faith.

Today we honor the day Jesus went to the Temple to get ready to prepare for that new stage of life -- when he would become responsible for his spiritual growth. (By the way, New Year's is coming, that is another day that many of us try to take a greater responsibility for at least one area in our life that we want to do better in the next year ...)

There is a similarity between the diligent training of Jesus' early years and the early years of Samuel, a judge of the Old Testament and one of the first notable prophets. Both of them are described as people who grew up, in favor with both the Lord and with the people. Hear responsively, the beginnings of Samuel's story and his mother Hannah, who was unable to have a child until, in deep anguish, she vowed that if God would give her a son, she would give him back to the Lord's service in the Tabernacle.

Responsive Reading (L - Lay Reader C - Congregation)

L: Once Samuel was weaned, she brought him to the tabernacle in Shiloh and to Eli the priest saying, "I prayed for this child. The Lord answered my prayer and gave him to me. Now I give him back to the Lord. He will belong to the Lord all his life."

C: They worshiped the Lord there.

L: Then Hannah said: "The Lord has filled my heart with joy. I feel very strong in the Lord. The Lord has helped me. There is no one holy like the Lord. There is no other God. There is no Rock like our God."

C: He protects his holy people.

L: Samuel stayed with Eli in Shiloh and obeyed the Lord. Every year Samuel's mother would make a coat for him. She would take it to him when she went with her husband for the sacrifice. Eli blessed them, praying that God would repay them for the boy they gave to God. They returned home and the Lord was kind to Hannah. She became the mother of three sons and two daughters.

C: And the boy Samuel grew up serving the Lord, pleasing God and the people. (Adapted from 1 Samuel 1:25b - 2:1-2,9,18-21,26 (ICB))

Prayers

All babies are miracles, but now we have two babies, born miraculously by God's design and favor -- Jesus to Mary, Samuel to Hannah, and three if you count John the Baptist to Elizabeth. In our context, Jesus is the primary baby -- and there is a song called "A Child is Born" which, when lyrics were put to it, talks about the miraculous beauty of these human creations.

Special Instrumental Music A Child is Born

Pastor's Prayer We praise you, heavenly Father, author of the Word made flesh, for in your Son Jesus, you visit us and reveal yourself to us, first as a baby child born into the world, and as a teacher, a prophet, as an example, and as a martyr who could not be defeated by death -- because he was so much more than only a wise teacher, more than an enlightened prophet, more than the perfect example, he was indeed, divinity, God, in flesh. Open us to your Spirit, that as we worship and pray today, we may be comforted, and convinced, and changed as we encounter your coming to us again in Christ. Wrap your arms around us that we may experience your blessing, your peace, your fullness of life.

Lord, all nature praises you for its creation simply by its beauty and functional design. We see it in babies, we see it in nature all around us. As sure the sun burns by day and the moon and stars by night, the light of your Son has flooded our world with your love and grace. We have received your light in our hearts -- may it shine out in our living day by day as you empower us, as you heal our hurts, as you guide us in the way of peace and compassionate care. **Praises and Petitions** It is for this reason that we lift up those we have named before you in recent weeks: * the family and friends of Jerry Weaver's friend Lou Goleb and * Jan Martin's friend Tim Tidmore, who both passed away recently; * for the family of Brian Martin who has a child with covid -- * for those for whom whatever reason the Christmas season has been difficult, * for those who are traveling, * and for young Claire Gordon with

cancer. * and for those requests that have not been spoken but are in our hearts, and yet we experience them, and you know them and just when and what we need... Hear the cries of our hearts and you speak to us. Empower your people, heal our pain, and guide us in the way of peace. Continue to bathe us in your love, seen not only in the Christmas story, but in every stage of your life with us on earth -- as we turn our lives and vision toward you, may we always be growing in your grace and in your favor, through Jesus Christ who shows us your ways, and teaches us to pray **Lord's Prayer**

And if it is Jesus who teaches us to pray, and shows us the ways of the heavenly kingdom, then we will want to turn to him without full attention -- let's sing...

Prayer Response (2x) Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus

Introduction to Bible Reading

We celebrated at the manger two nights ago. Some years we follow the chronology and hear about Jesus at the Temple at 8 days old, where we hear Simeon take the baby and say he has seen God's salvation with his own eyes, and the prophetess Anna confirming it, the Magi coming from the east, and the flight to Egypt to escape the King Herod's paranoia induced killing spree. But this year we jump to one of the few other major bible stories told of Jesus before he received baptism by John and began his ministry around the age of 30.



Some people believe Luke included the detailed birth story and this story because back then, people only heard bits and parts of the story -- and some seemed to assume that Jesus was born, lived, and was *then* adopted as God's chosen at baptism when the Spirit descended upon him.

Luke's writing is telling us no. While Jesus is completely human, he was also special, he was the divine Son of God from conception. And the following story shows that Jesus was aware of that fact from at least a very early age.

Bible Reading [Jesus] began to grow up. He became stronger and wiser, and God's blessings were with him. Every year Jesus' parents went to Jerusalem for the Passover Feast. When Jesus was 12 years old, they went to the feast as they always did. When the feast days were over, they went home. The boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. Joseph and Mary traveled for a whole day. They thought that Jesus was with them in the group. Then they began

to look for him among their family and friends, but they did not find him. So they went back to Jerusalem to look for him there. After three days they found him. Jesus was sitting in the Temple with the religious teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. All who heard him were amazed at his understanding and wise answers. When Jesus' parents saw him, they were amazed. His mother said to him, "Son, why did you do this to us? Your father and I were very worried about you. We have been looking for you."

Jesus asked, "Why did you have to look for me? You should have known that I must be where my Father's work is!" But they did not understand the meaning of what he said.

Jesus went with them to Nazareth and obeyed them. His mother was still thinking about all that had happened. Jesus continued to learn more and more and to grow physically. People liked him, and he pleased God. Luke 2:40-52 (ICB)

Music (vv 1,2,4) We Would See Jesus

Sermon Don't Lose Sight of Home

While I was young, we made several trips from the west side of Lansing to Tiger Stadium. A lot of the parking consisted of unlit empty lots with a make-shift booth at the front of it. Do you remember those days? As we approached the city and the stadium the traffic gets heavier and heavier until it nearly became bumper to bumper. We finally found a lot we could get into, and then we walked -- who knows how long before we got to the stadium. In this particular night game, the Tigers took 13 innings to lose to Oakland 12-4. It was a really bad last inning for the Tigers. When we got back to the parking lot, it was still so packed that we had to wait for other cars to exit before we could get out. While we waited, my Dad noticed that while they key worked fine, it was not feeling quite right as he tried to turn it in the ignition. He turned on the dome light and discovered he had been given the wrong set of keys. They gave him the keys to another Mercury Brougham that was only a few cars away. His keys did not work in that car at all. So it is good we got all that straightened out before we actually left the lot. But the real point of the story is that as we started out from that parking lot, again it was bumper to bumper – and it was late, and we were tired and getting impatient, and it was just taking forever to get out of there - you know how that goes. Inching forward just bit by bit... but finally as we began to move further and further away and as people took exits to their different directions, the number of cars thinned out, the traffic eased up we were

able to speed up for the long journey home.

Remove the cars from the story and I suspect entering Detroit during game time must have felt a lot like that for Mary and Joseph as they attended Passover in Jerusalem every year. From the tiny north country town of Nazareth (people guesstimate the population was as about 120 to 400 people), double the size of our church and you've got the size of the whole town. (well, maybe triple). They traveled south on that 65-mile journey to Jerusalem, and in case you noticed the text, about going up to Jerusalem even though they were traveling south -- it is because everything is "up to Jerusalem" -- in part that is because Jerusalem was surrounded by valleys, and for another, it was the city of the most importance -- and they indicated that elevated importance by saying "up to Jerusalem" and "down from Jerusalem", it didn't matter whether you were going north, south, east, or west. So as they neared Jerusalem, more and more people would begin to join them because pilgrimage to Jerusalem was important -- you were supposed to do it every year, but not all could because lived so far away, but they were supposed to do it at least once in their lifetime. And so as they got on that "highway", hundreds of thousands of scattered Jews would join them to swamp Jerusalem that already had 80 to 100 thousand people residing there year round. I suspect if you live in a town of a maximum of 400 people, going into that kind of an event would be kind of intimidating -- it would be for me -- But they faithfully did it every year.

As I mentioned earlier, Jesus is nearing that age he could be officially recognized as a "son of the commandment", a full member of the faith community with all of its adult privileges and responsibilities and accountabilities.

When the week-long festival ended and everyone started going home, it would have been like us leaving Tiger Stadium. It would start out as a big crowd -- a massive amount of people, but as people started going veering off in different directions to reach their homes, it would thin out and it probably wasn't as bad after a day or two's journey. The difference being we were one family in one car -- they were probably walking with everybody from Nazareth, or at least several groups from there. Mary and Joseph would have been in one of those walking caravans from their hometown of known friends and townspeople. And so they probably weren't overly concerned about exactly where Jesus was amongst that group. Traditionally, these caravans -- and I've heard it both ways, so I'm going to tell it one way and say it could be the other way. The women were leading in front and the men were in the back -- because that is how they grouped as they walked as

they talked... read the men were leading and the women in the back. But the point is, Joseph was at one end and Mary at the other, and children, especially the older ones, were free to walk with either parent. So you can imagine Mary is thinking, he is up with Joseph, or back with Joseph; and Joseph is thinking he is with Mary, or at least with somebody in the group. After all, he was a mature 12 years old - he is responsible, he could care for himself.

Now the average day's travel was about 20 miles, that is a good hefty walk. if it wasn't Sabbath, if the weather cooperated, and if the traffic wasn't too heavy -- which we knew that at first, it probably was. They may not have gotten *that* far the first day, but they probably achieved some distance. It was also tradition that those groups caravanning like this would collect themselves together for the night at a pre-selected spot. It would be at that time that Mary and Joseph come together with the group and realized Jesus wasn't with them. and I can imagine the pit in their stomach from the panic...

We aren't sure how Luke counted this 3-day search. Night travel being dangerous, they may have had to wait until morning before they headed back for Jerusalem. So was it a day out, a day back; and then they found him on the third day, or was it a day out a day back, and then they looked for three days then they finally found him? (We aren't sure). But one day is too long -- 3 hours is too long - - I've experienced that myself.

Joseph and Mary had assumed he was old enough and responsible enough to know where he ought to be. What they did not realize was that in Jesus' mind, that was exactly what he thought he ought to be doing -- and where he thought he ought to be -- in the Temple doing his Father's business.

It was typical for the gathered Jewish scholars to remain after festivals like Passover and discuss the faith and all of its interpretations and implications with each other. Jesus listened to these arguments, and asked questions and was asked questions. Question and answer was the typical way of teaching for the Jews in those days. Ancient method, still doing it today. Ask and answer. Jesus wasn't trying to show off his knowledge, nor be an arrogant teacher of the teachers or anything like that. (Neither of these approaches or attitudes would have lead to "amazement". They would have thought something else of him if he had done it that way). But they saw in his sincere questions and answers an intelligent insight and a wonderful potential.

Mary and Joseph finally discover him, and Mary reveals to him how unhappy they

are. And I understand that, because -- I'm going to tell on Sara now. When she was a toddler (well maybe still) she was so easily distracted by anything that shines or glitters, and we would sometimes secretly call her the wanderer. We didn't do it to her face lest she try to live up to the nickname and make things even worse. But every trip to a mall or a campground or any new unfamiliar territory for that matter, made my stress levels skyrocket because there is no end to attractive enticements in those new, wide-open areas. So even though Jesus was 12 and not a toddler, I can kind of imagine what Jesus' parents must have felt like -- magnified by at least more than a full day of worry about where he might have been. One person suggests Mary's asking, "Why did you treat us like this?" suggests she thought Jesus was acting like a rebellious teen who deliberately stayed behind just to spite them and wound them. To me, it simply reveals Mary communicating to her son how anxious and worried they were because they didn't know where he was.

Now, remember Hannah in the first reading, mother of Samuel? She took him to the tabernacle and left him there. She knew exactly where he was -- she left Samuel in God's service which he learned day after day, and year after year. And she would go for the sacrifice every year and brought him a new coat that would make him look like the priest he was growing into as he went about his job. That has to be a good motherly instinct to see your child once a year and be able to guess just how much bigger to make the coat.

But Joseph and Mary's deep love for their son must have simultaneously produced both great relief for finding him, and a great frustration for having not known where he was for those few days. Yes, they knew he was the Messiah, they heard the predictions of Gabriel and all the rest -- yet they were human and so was Jesus and in spite of the angels and the shepherds and the wise men -- they didn't fully grasp what all that meant yet.

Jesus asked why they were looking for him. His reply should *not* be interpreted as a typical teen's rebellious retort -- "Don't interfere with me, I'm about *my* own business!" That is not what he was doing. It is kind of like the joke I heard. A teen approached his father and said, "I think I should be able to buy my own jeans this year." Father replied, "Sounds good to me." They stare at each other for a few minutes. The teen finally says, "What?!?" So the father says back, "What?" And the teen says, "Well, I need some money!" Father says, "I don't think we are communicating." (There is a difference between *choosing* your own clothes and *buying* your own clothes).

Jesus at 12 was certainly strong and self-reliant. Our text makes that perfectly clear. But he wasn't "treating them" in any way, he wasn't trying to be rebellious, he was simply surprised that once Joseph and Mary realized that he wasn't with them, that they would not know where to look for him when he had "wandered". "Why are you searching for me?" Jesus asks -- not just to Mary -- it is a question for all of us -- Why are we looking for Jesus? What do we want from him? Why do we want him to come with us? Or why do we search so we can be where he is? Is it so we can join him in his Father's business?

Interesting thing, this "father's business". It is translated several different ways. The literal translation, one person says, is "I must be in *the* of my Father." "the". It is a vague term that could mean "things" or "stuff" -- as in "I have a lot of stuff to do -- or in Jesus' case -- I have to do my Father's stuff." The main idea that these words are trying to imply is that Jesus at age 12, is already quite focused on God's will above all else, and he knew he needed to be going about that kind of "stuff". The first words of Jesus we ever hear in the Bible, is his clear understanding of his divine Sonship and how eager and willing he is to begin his heavenly Father's business in his life, which for him was natural and obvious -- which was to reveal the knowledge and service of God in all things that he did, and he is also surprised that Joseph and Mary didn't know that about him.

But the parents were not as clear on Jesus' role as Jesus was. It takes a lifetime of never-ending learning to even begin to scratch the surface of the depth of what God has done and is doing in our world through his Son Jesus Christ. It takes a lifetime to plumb the depths of how to follow him in our lives.

Jesus was consumed with his heavenly father's business, and so we too are to covenant, to promise, to devote ourselves to thankfully living out the values of Christ in every aspect of our lives.

In the story, obeying godly parents is also within God's will, so Jesus went home with them without complaining or arguing...and then the text ends as it begins, just as Samuel's text ended -- he grew up in favor with God and with people.

He was in the center of God's will always, and because he was in the center of God's will, he found God's favor and the favor of the people. People who knew him knew he was a good kid, and they liked him for it. It wasn't until he began his public ministry, and for the greater good of humanity, he challenged the corrupt powers of status quo that some began to oppose and reject him. But whether people oppose or support; the essence of how to become the best human that we can

become is to stay in the center of God's will.

We celebrated Christ's arrival on Christmas. But it is certainly not the end of his story – his story, or our story -- it continues on. Today, like Mary and Joseph, it is too easy to assume Jesus is with us as we go on our merry way into our days and into our years, oblivious to the fact that we have walked away from him. Then suddenly, we realize we don't sense him, that we've lose sight of him, and even though we should know where to find him, even though we should see his work all around us, we are so consumed with life's circumstances, with setbacks and challenges, with fears and anxieties, with depressions and distractions, that we forget to see, we forget where to look – and when we finally do cross his path we wonder why **he** has done this to **us!** But he hasn't done anything to us – he has been about his Father's business in us all along, just as Hannah knew Samuel was from the days he could eat solid food.

Like Joseph and Mary, continue to search, for in the searching we find, and in the finding we treasure (she treasured what she heard in her heart), and in the treasuring, we don't lose perspective, we keep our sights focused on him -- as Hebrews says: fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith... [we] throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us... (Hebrews 12:2a,1b (NIV)) He shows us how it is done. Let's continue to set our sights on Jesus and continue to grow in our understanding of how to follow him -- from the manger and into the new year...

Prayer Let's pray. Lord, we set our minds on you. We need you to show us and strengthen us to put away what does not fall within your will, and to help us walk in your ways, to live by the principles of life that you once lived.

It is easy to see you in the manger, in the gifts under the tree, in the love of family and friends; but once the festival and its festivities have concluded, it is also easy for us to wander away from our home in you and not realize you are "still in your temple". So as we move into the new year, help us to envision you not only in the manger, but also in the village, in our daily doings, and to be done with lesser things and to follow you. We desire you to rule in our hearts, we desire that your message of peace with God and people to be more than just a Christmas sentiment, but to dwell in us and among us as we go out to share your message of love and grace and peace and joy, to the glory of your Son Jesus Christ, and it is in his name that we pray. Amen.

Let's sing our final hymn, which is a prayer to keep Christ central in our vision, in our focus.

Music Be Thou My Vision

Blessing Now as you go, [strive to grow in favor with God and with people] Give yourself fully to the worthwhile work of the Lord. Be an example of how to longingly, expectantly, open the doors of your heart's home for God's presence, welcoming his arrival with the rise of each day. Amen.