

“A Strange and Fascinating Story”

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So far as I can remember, I have never preached a sermon on this strange and fascinating story from the Gospel of Luke. And yet, I've come to love it this week as I have gone back and forth with the text, and so what I want to do this morning is to talk about a couple of things that jump out at me.

I.

First and foremost is that I'm fascinated by the fact that this is a boyhood story of Jesus. We only have a couple of boyhood stories of Jesus in the Bible, and they're both found in the Gospel of Luke. Matthew, Mark and John say nothing about his boyhood, and only Luke and Matthew mention his birth.

What happened a hundred years or so after Jesus is that the early church wanted more stories about his childhood, and so, I don't know how else to say this, people began making them up! Almost all of those stories turned Jesus into this little miracle-working kid. In a document called the Infancy of The Gospel of Thomas, Jesus comes across like a Macaulay Culkin from Home Alone and the character Chucky from that uplifting series of Chucky horror movies!

In one story, for example, Jesus makes a bunch of clay pigeons, as if an art project for Middle School, but in order to show off in front of the other kids, he miraculously brings them to life and they begin flying around in the sky. In another story his parents say something that offends the little ten-year old Jesus, and so to teach them a lesson and show them who's boss, he strikes Mary and Joseph temporarily blind. And then one day he is horsing around with a friend, but the friend falls off the roof and dies. But not a problem, because Jesus resurrects him on the spot so he can keep playing with his buddy! Needless to say, these stories did not make it into our Bible.

Now, what do we make of all this? I really don't know, and honestly, I'm not sure it has much to do with a sermon this morning, now that I think of it, but maybe the insight is this: In the earliest tradition around Jesus, the point was not to turn Jesus into a little superhero. Performing miraculous deeds and showing off for his friends in the neighborhood was not the genius of Jesus. Being able to do supernatural actions was not the genius of Jesus.

Instead, it was that he could go to the temple and have prodigious insights into the Torah. That is to say, he was possessed by an intellectual / spiritual / moral force that impressed even the most scholarly members of the Jewish community, and thus he brought insight into how to live life. He could think and argue and question. He could offer alternative interpretations to the tradition and offer new insights for his time and

his age. But in the end Jesus was about helping people understand how to live the journey of faith and not impressing with supernatural fireworks.

What I love about this is that it reminds me that this is what Jesus does for us. To contemplate the life of Jesus, whether through a biblical text or art or liturgy is to open ourselves up to that enduring intellectual / spiritual / moral energy that continues to radiate through his life. That's not the same as knowing a lot about Jesus. I'm talking about allowing the force of his goodness to shape and form our lives. That's different than having a lot of beliefs about Jesus.

You can have a lot of beliefs and doctrines and dogmas about Jesus, but that's not the same as consciously opening ourselves up to be shaped by the focused energies of his life. Jesus is an influence. Jesus is a force of consciousness. And I would argue that opening ourselves up to that influence is the essence of faith.

Now, I had an interesting experience this week that has really made me think about what it means to be shaped by Jesus Consciousness. I was over at my second office, the Starbucks on Hoover and Sixth Street. I was waiting there for a friend. As I was waiting, a young girl, probably strung out on drugs, I don't know, but to be sure she was mentally ill, anyway, she started talking to me. And then she sat down at my table. Her speech was slurred, so I couldn't really understand everything she was saying. I tried to be polite.

I was looking at my phone. I didn't know what to do. I had a blueberry muffin, one for me and one for my friend. She opened up my blueberry muffin and began eating it. I couldn't believe it. She started eating my blueberry muffin. And then she asked me to give her a ride somewhere. I knew that was not going to happen. And then she started crying. And then she put her arms around my neck. Right there in Starbucks. And then she stopped and tried to talk to me again. This happened in a matter of ten minutes.

Now, while all of this was going on, and I'm not proud of this, but I was feeling so uncomfortable. I wanted to get up and move to another table. I didn't. But I wanted to. I felt nervous and anxious. I tried to read my emails and not be rude to her. Yet, I could feel this Jesus presence inside me saying, "Scott, this is one of God's children, you can't just be good to people who are like you, treat her with respect, don't make a scene, just relax and be kind, and it's not a big deal, and put your phone down and just go with it" So I tried to relax, and of course we all know how well "trying to relax" works, but I did my best to give her a little human touch.

Why am I telling you this? I'm just trying to say that the presence of Jesus – his intellectual / spiritual / moral energy of love – is something real to me. I know it's real for you too. I could not be Jesus for her. But I could give her my "good enough" version of Jesus. A little smile. A little listening. A little talking. To me this is the essence of the spiritual life. We want the energies of his life to shape us and move us and help us as we bring that presence to others.

I see that in our story of the boy Jesus. There was a divine force working in him and through him, and it still pulses in the heart of every human being who welcomes that presence in a conscious way into his or her life. It may not move through us perfectly, but it moves through us in a way that is good enough. And it's real. And when it happens, even imperfectly, it makes the world a better place.

II.

But there's a second thing that fascinates me from this text. Jesus is presented for blessing at the temple, a sign, by the way, that Jesus was completely and utterly part of the Jewish community. And that's important, because every attempt to "de-Jewish" Jesus always, not sometimes, but always leads to anti-Semitism. In this boyhood story of Jesus, we see his radical participation in the Jewish faith.

And it's in this context that an old man by the name of Simeon sees the boy Jesus at the temple. Simeon holds the child in his arms. I can imagine laughter bellowing from his body and tears exploding from his eyes. He blesses the child. He celebrates that God is doing something wondrous in the life of this child. It's a moment of profound mystery and joy and insight. For Simeon, Jesus represents nothing less than the presence of God. Or another way of saying it is that in presence of this child Simeon experiences the sacred / the holy / the source of life. Past and future meet, and it becomes for him an experience of depth and feeling and insight.

Now, why is this important? Well, the spiritual life is about discovering this dimension of our humanity. God. Life. Source. Universe. Any experience that moves us into our depths is an experience of God. And that's what I see with Simeon, he is so moved by the boy Jesus, that he sees him as a fulfillment of his personal faith, so much so that he declares that Jesus will bring light to the Gentiles and renewal among the Jewish people. For Simeon this is what might be called "an incredible nearness."

I'm going to be very honest here. I'm distressed over what I see happening in our country right now. I'm worried about the refugees of the world. I am worried about the rhetoric against Muslims. I am worried about the talk of nuclear weapons. I am worried about what will happen to women and their health care choices. I am worried about the environment. I am worried that ultra-right wing groups are now feeling empowered in America. I have never been more distressed about our country as I am right now.

I realized this week that I need a strategy. I am not going to be pessimistic about my life for the next four years. I am not going to give up on living for the upcoming years. So I've decided I'm going to keep speaking up for human dignity as much as I can and I'm going to keep speaking truth to power as much as I am able. And then I'm going to practice love and compassion toward my neighbor, including my new muffin-eating friend over at Starbucks. Her name is Karen. I tried to do a Jesus thing and asked her name. Her name is Karen.

But the other part of my strategy is embodied in this story of Simeon – I am going to do everything I can to pay attention to the depths of my experience. Wherever it can be found. Wherever it can be experienced. Whenever it presents itself to me. I am going to defy the superficiality of our times and the despair of our times and the meanness of our times, and I’m going to take my life to a deeper place – like Simeon – because the deeper places of my humanity is where I find God.

*I’m going spend more time in the Temple of Soul.
I’m going to put the philosopher’s stone in my pocket.
I’m going to take more trips to the Elysian Fields.
I’m going to sit on the mountain with my silent friend.
I’m going embrace the Beatific Vision.
I’m going to read more poetry
I’m going to read more novels.
I’m going to ponder more art.
I’m going to take more walks.
I’m going to watch less television.
I’m going to listen to more music.
I’m going to spend more time with friends.
I’m going to listen to what I feel.
I’m going to act upon my best impulses.
I’m going to live with more courage.
I’m going to embrace more mystery.*

And then I’m going to prospect for the gold of what makes life worth living, and I’m going to grow wild whiskers on my face and drink black coffee from a campfire and I going to shake my tin pan in the mountain streams of my living until I find a few gold nuggets to put into my pocket, little nuggets of wisdom and insight and joy, and I’m going to hang onto them and until the moment is just right, and then I’m going to share them with someone, not because I’ll get anything out of it, but because you don’t really know what you have until you learn to give it away to somebody else!

*I want more Simeon moments!
That’s what I want for you too!*

III.

Friends, this is a strange and wonderful Bible story. But sometimes the strange and wonderful can save our souls. I love you all. I really do. Let’s love one another. Amen.