

A Sermon for DaySpring

by Brett Gibson

The Unexpected

Luke 2:41-52

January 2, 2022

What are the Gospels? That's the sort of question we wrestled with in seminary. What genre are we dealing with when we read something like Luke? Is this a biography, the way we understand biography now? A letter? Something akin to a magazine profile? Some other sort of genre we don't really have today?

In the world of New Testament studies, comparisons are made between the Gospels and other ancient examples of biography or hagiography, with plenty of dispute about just how similar and different the gospels are from these other writings. It's always helpful to think about genre when trying to understand a text because what we read helps determine how we read it. Obviously, we read the poetry of Isaiah differently from the way we read the holiness code of Leviticus. We read a letter to the church in Philippi differently from the apocalyptic literature of John's Revelation. How do we read Luke? What are we dealing with?

It's not so straightforward even within Luke's Gospel, we find a variety of genres: an infancy narrative, a passion story, direct address (Theophilus); there's poetry in there, There's one of Jesus's favorite literary devices: the parable. But overall, at the risk of simplification, I like to read the Gospels as portraits of Jesus in the context of God's coming kingdom. Each Gospel writer has his own angle, his own emphases, to use this image of the portrait--his own palette, his own mixture of colors, his own canvas.

Luke's portrait of Jesus is detailed, orderly, lots of subtle nuances that you might miss on a first glance, one that rewards deep and sustained attention. As a piece of literature, just as with all the Gospel writers, Luke employs clever literary devices that do more than what a plain report of a person's life could do. In our passage this morning, we are given details that add shade to Luke's portrait of Jesus, but the question I want us to sit with is not just who is Jesus, which is proclaimed loudly throughout the first two chapters of Luke with the Christmas story...but another fundamental question that I think Luke is leading us to ask: where can we find Jesus? For we who know Jesus, where can we find him?

In our reading this morning, we're given a treat: it's the only time in the Canon of scripture that we get glimpse into the character of Jesus before his ministry began. A 12-year-old Jesus has gone with his parents to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover---and I've brought 12-year-olds to worship before. We're told this was a regular pilgrimage for the family of Joseph and Mary. We're also given a glimpse into how foreign this culture is from our own. It boggles the modern mind that Jesus could be missing for over a day, and his parents just assume he's with someone else in their traveling company. The reliance on extended family and kinsfolk and friends all living together in relationships of support and mutual trust is unfortunately as foreign to us as a Temple with animal sacrifices. It takes three days---an amount of time ever significant for Luke and other early Christian writers---three days for them to find Jesus, but they do find him in the Temple, conversing with the teachers there.

Up to this point in Luke's Gospel, we've met several important characters: Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary and Joseph, Anna and Simeon, a group of shepherds and a multitude of angels. All of these characters are focused on this one that is coming: Jesus. Up to now, Jesus has been promised or discussed or celebrated or worshiped or proclaimed, but now...now we finally meet Jesus. If you have a red-letter Bible, Luke just got colorful for the first time.

When reading it's instructive to pay attention to a person's first words: how are we introduced to him? Here, we have Jesus' first words in Luke's Gospel, and they tell us what he will be about. Mary, undoubtedly relieved and angry all at the same time, says to him, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been looking for you everywhere."

And Jesus's response turns it right back on Mary: "Why were you looking for me? I'm sure you knew I would be about my father's work."

A New Testament scholar, NT Wright suggests that this story is the front end of a frame around Luke's Gospel. At the end of Luke's Gospel is another story that is unique to Luke—not found in any of the other Gospel accounts—the story of two people also sharing anguish about the three days that have elapsed. Two people journeying from Jerusalem, this time assuming they had left Jesus in Jerusalem, unaware that the risen Jesus is actually with them.

The language in the two stories from Jesus's childhood and on the Road to Emmaus are remarkably similar. Wright suggests we pair these stories under the title, "On Finding the Jesus You Thought You'd Lost." If this is a frame for Luke's Gospel, then it has something fundamental to tell us about who this Jesus is. Perhaps Luke is writing for people who have some idea of who Jesus is but find he is more elusive than they had imagined.

It's Luke's Gospel that gives us Mary's encounter with Gabriel, the annunciation. Mary is aware from the beginning that Jesus, in the words of Gabriel, "will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

That's all before Jesus is born: Mary knows who Jesus is. Then she gives birth to him and she observes how shepherds come and worship him. How prophets worship God because of him. She knows him as a mother knows her baby. She knows Jesus, she knows he is special, he is the Son of God, but now...in the Temple, twelve-year-old Jesus doesn't do or say what she's expecting, just as, later on, he won't do or say what those disciples on the Road to Emmaus are expecting.

I think Luke is intentional in framing his Gospel this way. This is who Jesus is. This is really the life for those of us who walk with Jesus. "Every time we relax and think we've really understood him, he'll be up ahead or perhaps staying behind while we go on without thinking" (Wright), without noticing, without attending, without considering.

The people of God—Mary, Joseph, Jesus's disciples, Luke's first century audience, DaySpringers—the people of God are always on the road from having encountered Jesus. Have we left him behind? Has he been right here in our midst and we've just missed him? Like Mary, have we taken Jesus for granted? If she can do it, you better believe we can do it. We can't assume he is accompanying us as we go off on our business. We must be willing, when we recognize the lack of his presence, just like

Mary, to search for him, to spend days finding him, to hunt for him, to search for him in prayer, in the scriptures, in the sacraments, not to give up until we find him again. And of course, when we do find him again, let's not be surprised when he doesn't say or do what we expect him to do for he must be busy with his father's work.

Jesus, for Luke, is, yes, the Son of God, but do we know what that actually means? It's good for us to say and believe that Jesus is the Son of God, but James would remind us that even the demons believe, and they shudder. It's not enough that we use the right words to describe who Jesus is. We must encounter Jesus. When we do, we find that he is not quite what we expected.

It's arresting, almost breathtaking, when we encounter the unexpected. October 2, 2006, was a Monday, and word began to spread throughout Lancaster County in rural Pennsylvania that a man, Charles Roberts IV, had entered an Amish school with a gun. Roberts was a milk truck driver who serviced many of the Amish families in the area. He had a wife and three children of his own. By noon that day, CNN was carrying the news, and horrifically, Roberts that day shot and killed five young Amish girls and critically injured five others before taking his own life. This tight-knit Amish community, as you can imagine, was gutted: their children had been murdered.

The news of the shooting shook the world, but the swift response from the Amish community was really what startled everyone. Before the day was out, an Amish neighbor went to the Roberts' home to express forgiveness to Roberts' widow and family. One Amish man held Roberts' sobbing father for an hour, consoling him. The Amish community set up a charitable fund for the Roberts family. When the Roberts family held a funeral for the shooter, over half of those in attendance were from the Amish community. Why this unexpected response? This was not a coordinated PR move on the part of the Amish. This was the second-nature response of anabaptists who have for centuries committed themselves to nonviolence and forgiveness out of a commitment to Jesus and Jesus's teaching. These were people, just like their Lord Jesus, who were busy with their father's work, even in the darkest day of their lives.

It seems to me the best we can do is exactly what Mary does in response. First, Luke tells us she didn't understand what he said to them. It didn't make a lot of sense. We don't always have to understand the way of Jesus; we won't always understand. But then, she treasured in her heart who her son is. She let the unexpected posture of this 12-year-old Son of God reframe for her who God is.

So, who is Jesus? For Luke, he is everything Christmas proclaims to us: he is the Word made flesh, he is the Son of God sent into the world.

Where can we find him? That's a little trickier to get our arms around. He is most certainly about his father's work. Sometimes he's ahead of us, sometimes we've left him behind, sometimes we didn't recognize he's been with us the whole time, but rest assured that he is here, if we will but keep up our search.

