CONTINUING THE CELEBRATION

Did you know that we’re still in the season of Christmas? Well, at least according to the Christian church calendar.

It’s funny. Our society has been building up to Christmas, probably since a little before Halloween; but now the big day has come and gone, stores and businesses are reviewing their sales figures and balance sheets, people are lined up at customer service desks across the country to return things like their vegetable slicer that works on TV but not when you get it home, and it’s time to move on to the next commercialized festival: Valentine’s Day. For our secular society, Christmas Day, December 25th, is the finale, the end of the celebration.

But for the church, the celebration is just getting started.

It makes sense, really. When one has a baby, there’s nine months of gestation in the womb and preparation for the birth beforehand, and a lifetime of having one’s whole existence affected and transformed by that baby’s birth after it occurs. That’s how the birth of Christ is understood by the church: we spend weeks getting ready for it, but God’s plan DOESN’T END at the manger. It has only just begun.

Christmas Day itself has gone by for another year, but the church is still celebrating the great spiritual truth of Christmas—the truth of the Incarnation; the truth that God became flesh in Jesus Christ. Almighty God, who hung the stars in the heavens and flung the planets on their courses, has come among us as one of us. And today, on this first Sunday after Christmas, we catch a glimpse of Emmanuel, God with us, in action.
The story we read in Luke’s Gospel is the only account we have from the childhood of Jesus, and it’s quite a remarkable and memorable story. It’s also a very believable event—a recognizable human story. In fact, it almost sounds like something that could have happened to my family or your family.

In the previous verses of Luke’s Christmas story, the author told this strange and wonderful tale of a visitation by a divine messenger, a surprising and unexpected pregnancy, a birth in a manger, and hosts of angels filling the skies and singing “Glory to God in the highest.” Few of us can actually relate to those events. But now it’s back to normal for Mary and Joseph and their infant son. The amazing spiritual happenings at Bethlehem were behind them, and the holy family returned to a not-so-holy place: “to Galilee, to their home town of Nazareth.”

That sort of rhythm happens in OUR LIVES, as well. We enjoy spiritual highs here in church, where the curtain between heaven and earth is lifted for a time; where, if we listen carefully, we can hear choirs of angels singing, and God comes oh-so-near to us. But then we must go back to our homes, back to the pile of laundry that needs to be washed and the bills that need to be paid and the family that has to be cared for; in other words, back to the ordinariness of the everyday. Well, Mary and Joseph, with little Jesus, the child who was born in a manger, in tow, had to go back home, too.

Maybe there’s a parable in that for us. After the glitter and glory of Christmas, we go back to the normal, the commonplace, back to business as usual; but it really isn’t the same normal as it was before Christmas. Yes, it’s business as usual, but THIS TIME it’s with Jesus.

And what difference does that make?

We’re about to find out. Luke recorded that it was the custom of the holy family to go to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. In other words, Jesus’
family did much the same thing that you and I are doing right now: they went to
their house of worship to offer praise to and celebrate the saving activity of
God. And here WE are, two thousand years later, also praising God and
celebrating God’s saving activity in the birth of Jesus.

Joseph, Mary and the not-quite a teenager Jesus went to worship, they
prayed and listened to words from the Holy Scripture and sang songs of joy,
just as we’re doing here this morning. And then they returned to their business
as usual, back home in dreary old Nazareth.

A day later, Mary and Joseph discovered that young Jesus was missing.
They thought he had been among the entourage of family and friends, but he
wasn’t. So the distraught parents returned to Jerusalem to search for their son.
They eventually found Jesus in the temple, putting the highly educated religious
elders through their paces and having a theological debate with them. Those
learned theologians were “amazed” that, even though he was just a young boy,
Jesus was full of spiritual understanding and wisdom.

Picture those stuffy, rather arrogant, professorial old men who had
dedicated most of their lives to studying the Scripture, stupefied at the wisdom
of this stranger, and just a young boy, to boot. It must have been quite a shock
to them. “How in heaven’s name could this boy, who didn’t even have to shave
yet, have such deep spiritual insight about God? Where did his insight come
from?

Mary and Joseph also received a shock. They were astounded to find
their young son standing up before the religious leaders and discussing religion
with them. Hadn’t they only just enrolled him in Sunday School last year?
Jesus’ parents scolded him for making them sick with worry by his not leaving
with the family. Maybe they told him he was going to be grounded when he got
back home, so he shouldn’t expect to be playing games with his friends any
time soon. But young Jesus then turned the tables and scolded his parents, telling them they should have known that he had to be “in his Father’s House,” doing God’s work.

Jesus ultimately and obediently traveled back to Nazareth with his parents; but for Mary and Joseph, it must have been an experience they would never forget. Luke wrote that Mary “treasured these things in her heart,” which may just be a polite Bible way of saying that Mary never really got over the shock of discovering that she had lost their firstborn son, found him standing up to the elders of the temple, and then received a scolding from him for her lack of understanding.

I think this is a story most of us can identify with—at least those of us who’ve had children or grandchildren and have been on the receiving end of their sassiness at times. Every family has its trials and stresses; and even though our family members care deeply about one another, we often get frustrated, saddened and angered by those we love the most. And our children and grandchildren can bewilder us with their unexpected behavior, good or bad. And although many of us have been going to church for most of our lives, and we have at least a basic understanding of the Bible and talk with the Lord every day, sometimes the young people, the children and the youth in our midst, have their own kind of deep and amazing insight when it comes to spiritual things.

There was a woman—the wife of a seminarian—who was alone with her two young sons for four days while her husband was attending seminary 70 miles away. During that time she found herself shouldering more responsibilities than she knew how to handle. Her older son sensed his mother’s weariness and the extra burdens she was carrying, so he added to his nighttime prayers, “Help Mommy get her work done.”
One night after this boy’s usual request for God to “help Mommy,” his younger brother suggested, “If you think Mommy needs help, why don’t you help her? That’s what God wants you to do.”

Yes, sometimes God gives young children spiritual insight and truth that cries out to be listened to and learned from.

You know, we come to church to have a religious, spiritual experience; but many times God surprises us and manifests Himself outside the walls of church sanctuaries, in the ordinariness of our everyday lives--or in the comment of a young child. And I think this story from the childhood of Jesus, the story we heard this morning, is Luke’s way of saying, “Now that God has been born into the world in Jesus, expect to be surprised; count on being startled; get ready for a jolt. Because you haven’t seen anything yet.

We come to church yearning to encounter God Almighty. This morning we have encountered God in a young boy. And that has tremendous significance for us and for our lives. Because as we face the trials and tribulations of everyday life with our ordinary families, we believe that since God has become God with us in Jesus, the trials and tribulations of everyday life have a spiritual, redemptive significance because God is present in the midst of all of them.

So, this Gospel story, which contains bewildered religious experts, worried-to-death parents and a smart-mouthed twelve-year-old who, if it was anyone other than Jesus, would probably find himself confined to his room for a week without a TV, his cell phone or IPod, is a pretty good reflection of real life for us. And so is something else in the story: the fact that God has come among us, redeemed us and our ordinary world, and will even throw in a few unexpected surprises as well. That’s what we celebrate at Christmas. I hope
and pray we don’t pack away the wonder and awe of this holy season along with the Christmas decorations and lights.

I would end my message this morning with a question: Do you want to get close to God?

Well, here’s the good news in this season of joy: God has come close to us. We don’t need to find God, because the God of the Incarnation has already found us. In the child who was born in a stable in Bethlehem and whose bed was a feeding trough for animals; in the young boy who confused his worried parents and astounded the know-it-all in the temple—in him, God came near.

So, let’s continue to celebrate Emmanuel—God with Us—for the rest of this Christmas season, and every day of our lives. Amen.