

## **First Sunday after Christmas**

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast*

*Olentangy Church*

*December 27, 2009*

### **1 Samuel 2:18-26 NRSV**

Samuel was ministering before the LORD, a boy wearing a linen ephod. His mother used to make for him a little robe and take it to him each year, when she went up with her husband to offer the yearly sacrifice. Then Eli would bless Elkanah and his wife, and say, “May the LORD repay you with children by this woman for the gift that she made to the LORD”; and then they would return to their home. And the LORD took note of Hannah; she conceived and bore three sons and two daughters. And the boy Samuel grew up in the presence of the LORD.

Now Eli was very old. He heard all that his sons were doing to all Israel, and how they lay with the women who served at the entrance to the tent of meeting. He said to them, “Why do you do such things? For I hear of your evil dealings from all these people. No, my sons; it is not a good report that I hear the people of the LORD spreading abroad. If one person sins against another, someone can intercede for the sinner with the LORD; but if someone sins against the LORD, who can make intercession?” But they would not listen to the voice of their father; for it was the will of the LORD to kill them.

Now the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the LORD and with the people.

### **Luke 2:41-52**

Every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the Passover festival. When he was twelve years old, they went up for the festival as usual.

At the conclusion of the festival, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, while his parents were on their way home. But they didn't know it. Thinking he was among the travelers, they went a day's journey before they looked for him among their relatives and friends. When they didn't find him, they went back to Jerusalem to look for him. After three days, they found him at the temple sitting in the midst of the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. Everyone who heard him was amazed at his insightful answers. But when [his parents] saw him, they were astonished. His mother said to him, “Child, why did you do this to us?! Your father and I have been worried sick looking for you!” He said to them, “Why were you looking for me? Didn't you know that I have to be among those who are my Father's?” They didn't understand what he was saying to them. But he went down with them, back to Nazareth, and was obedient to them.

His mother kept all these things securely in her heart. And Jesus grew in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and with people.

### **Children's Story**

One day Richard Morrison decided to be a caveman. So he made himself some caveman clothes; he made himself a caveman beard; and he turned an old baseball bat into a caveman club.

The next morning, he dressed in his caveman clothes, glued on his caveman beard, and picked up his caveman club. Richard Morrison was a caveman!

Well, he sure looked like a caveman. But cavemen don't wear sneakers. Still he looked like a caveman. But cavemen don't brush their hair. Still he looked like a caveman. But cavemen don't eat with a knife and fork. Still he looked like a caveman. But cavemen don't do homework, especially not math homework. I guess Richard Morrison wasn't really a caveman, even though he looked a lot like a caveman. There's more to being a caveman than looking like one.

Once Jesus was born, God looked like a human being. But God didn't just look like a human being, God became a human being: first a baby, eventually a grown-up. And in between God became a kid – just like you.

### **Sermon**

Here's a challenge that Christians have faced from the beginning: Where to place Jesus on the divine-human spectrum? “Spectrum” isn't the right word, though. There is no spectrum, with divine and human

colors somehow meeting in the middle and blending into multiple shades. No. No spectrum. We could try “continuum.” But that’s not even close to being the right word. There is no continuum between being God and being human, with all of us — or even any of us — at some point or another in the middle. We are nothing but human. And God is nothing but God. That’s one of the key takeaways from the biblical creation accounts.

Then there’s Jesus. Very early the church confessed that Jesus is fully human. And very early the church confessed that Jesus is fully divine. He is not a mixture, some of each, a sort of hybrid vehicle on the road to the world’s salvation. Nor is he some new thing, not really human, not really divine. No, he is fully both human and divine at the same time. And the challenge that Christians have faced from the beginning has been understanding how that “both-and” works.

One crude way of putting the question is like this: *What did Jesus know, and when did he know it?* To put it a little more carefully: *How did complete and perfect divine knowledge fit together with incomplete and flawed human knowledge?* And similar questions could be put, and have been put, about power and wisdom (which is not the same thing as knowledge) and justice and love. And there is another layer to the questioning. *Do the human strengths and limitations of Jesus play a greater or lesser role, depending on how old Jesus is?* In other words, does the boy Jesus possess less wisdom than the man Jesus? Less human wisdom, no doubt, but how about divine wisdom?

Sometimes answers to these questions have been tried not in the form of academic theology, but through stories. For example, in the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, which dates prior to the 5<sup>th</sup> century, the divine nature of Jesus clearly overshadows his human nature, and from an early age.

- At age five, for example, Jesus brings twelve clay sparrows to life.
- Later in his childhood, he raises various people from the dead, including some he himself had killed.
- In those same years, he restores sight to various blind people, including some he himself had blinded.
- And this is my favorite: one day in the carpentry shop, Joseph cut a board too short and Jesus stretched it out to make it long enough!

Obviously in the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, the divine nature of Jesus eclipses his maturing human nature.

And it’s not just old-time Christians who gave that kind of answer. I’ve read contemporary comments on the young Jesus that lean in the same direction, seeing the twelve year old Jesus in possession of great wisdom and self-awareness, so much so that he understands his mission and schools his parents in what an amazing, blessed child he is. For many Christians today and down through the ages, Jesus at age twelve is a sort of boy wonder, whose divine nature nearly obscures his boy nature. But as I told you a few years ago, I’m not buying it.

**Luke 2, I think, offers an important perspective on questions about Jesus as both fully human and fully divine.** To this point in his gospel, Luke has made a set of clear statements about Jesus. First, he is a boy with a unique identity: he was conceived without the involvement of a human father; he is holy; he is Son of the Most High; he will be called Son of God. Second, he is a boy with a unique destiny: he will occupy David’s throne forever; he will be the savior of Israel and a light to the nations.

But at twelve years old, Jesus is still very much a boy. Oh, he does have an awakening sense of his identity, that he has a Father other than Joseph. It’s this growing awareness of his identity that prompts Jesus to stay behind in Jerusalem after the Passover festival, when his parents start for home. With a hunger to know the traditions of his people, he decides that his place is among the guardians and teachers of his Father’s Law. “I have to be among them,” he says. “They’re my Father’s people,” he concludes.

But the twelve year old Jesus is in over his head here. He’s trying to balance conflicting loyalties, to his Father on the one hand, to his mother and father on the other. He’s trying to balance those conflicting loyalties, and he’s not doing a very good job. Mary and Joseph are worried sick. To lose any son! But to lose this son! — and when he is so close to manhood. Mary and Joseph are worried sick, but Jesus is oblivious to

their fears. Now, that's not sin. Jesus is just very much a twelve year old. And in the end the "boy Jesus" (as Luke calls him), Mary's "child" (as she reminds him), returns to Nazareth, where he stays, obedient to Mary and Joseph, for another eighteen years.

I think the parallel with 1 Samuel 2 confirms this reading of Luke 2. In 1 Samuel 2 the boy Samuel has been dedicated to the Lord and is at work in the Tent of Meeting. But he still has some growing up to do. So at the conclusion of the episode — in language that Luke would apply to Jesus — the writer of 1 Samuel says that Samuel grew in stature and in favor with God and the people. While he was growing, Samuel would remain at the Tent of Meeting among Eli's sons, scoundrels that they were. This is rather like the twelve year old Jesus, who at the Temple innocently sees the teachers of the Law as the people to be with, clueless that in something less than twenty years these same people will be his chief adversaries, who will drive him to his cross.

Adding this up, Luke's picture of the twelve year old Jesus is clear. Jesus has a developing, but not yet mature, sense of his identity and destiny. He has exceptional understanding and wisdom — exceptional for a twelve year old; don't leave that part out! And that's the thing. When we meet him in Luke 2, Jesus is still a boy, a twelve year old boy, with some growing up to do — about eighteen years' worth, as it turns out.

Now, how does this address questions of Jesus being both fully human and fully divine? In this way, I think. Luke gives us in a story what the Apostle Paul gives us in a bit of theological song. Though Jesus is divine by nature, he empties himself when he takes on his human nature (Philippians 2:6f.). In other words, he sets aside the natural endowments and privileges of divinity so that they don't overwhelm or eclipse his humanity. As a result, Jesus is so fully human that as a boy he fails to balance conflicting loyalties or to recognize the latent hostility of the teachers of the law.

At age twelve Jesus is a boy, a real boy, not God in a disguise. Yes, he is also God, even at age twelve. But he has chosen to put limits on his divine nature, limits that keep his humanity real, through birth and infancy, through boyhood, all the way to his cross and beyond that to his throne at the Father's right hand.

**This picture of Jesus in Luke 2 is good news, very good news.** Imagine being confused and crying out to a God who has no experience of confusion. Imagine being alone and crying out to a God who has no experience of loneliness. Imagine being grief-stricken because your father has died and crying out to a God who has never lost anyone. Imagine being heartsick because you hurt someone you love and crying out to a God who knows what that feels like only in theory.

In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, a new technique for actors was developed. It was labeled "method acting." Method actors were known for immersing themselves in their characters, in order to take on their physical, psychological, and emotional characteristics. Later actors have gone farther. And so these days, an actor who is going to play a paraplegic may spend time with paraplegics to learn what life is like for them. She may even spend time in a wheelchair herself, to experience a paraplegic's struggles firsthand. My hunch is that this approach to acting would lead to a nearer understanding of, and through that a more deeply realized portrayal of, a character.

The good news in Luke 2 is that God didn't merely imagine what it's like to be human — even though God's imagination is beyond compare — but that God became human, fully human, even twelve year old human. God now knows what it's like to be human not in theory, not as designed and in a perfect world, but in this world — a world bent and twisted by sin, a world of competing claims on our loyalty, a world where the things that are Caesar's and the things that are God's overlap and intertwine in a way beyond sorting out, no matter how grown up we are. God now knows what it's like to try to balance competing loyalties and to get it wrong. Again, that wasn't sin; it was just something beyond a twelve year old's possibilities. Through the Incarnation, God knows what it's really like to be human. Because of that, as the book of Hebrews puts it, God can sympathize with us in every weakness. That's good news.

And here's one more piece of good news from Luke's picture. If Jesus is not just God wearing a disguise, but is God taking on human nature as his own — taking on human nature with its limitations, its neediness and hungers, with its weaknesses and vulnerabilities, with its uncertainties, its risks — if God empties himself

of the glory and power and privileges of divinity and becomes nothing for our sakes — that is a testament to an immense love, to a measureless commitment, to a boundless desire to save the world. That truly is good news.

**The Christmas season is a celebration of the Incarnation.** Incarnation is not just about God becoming a baby, a baby who in no time is announcing the Kingdom of God and dying for it on a cross. Incarnation is also about God settling into a human nature, settling in from infancy to adulthood, through every intermediate step along the way. And so before the baby Jesus becomes the man Jesus, he spends time as the boy Jesus. That is part of the wonder of the Christmas season.