

“Where Did Jesus Go?”

a message by Dr. Bruce Havens

BASED ON THE THEME, “THE COMFORTS OF CHRISTMAS”

Arlington Congregational Church, U.C.C.

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Luke 2:41-52 [NRSV]

⁴¹Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. ⁴²And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. ⁴³When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. ⁴⁴Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day’s journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. ⁴⁵When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. ⁴⁶After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. ⁴⁷And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers.

⁴⁸When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, “Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.”

⁴⁹He said to them, “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” ⁵⁰But they did not understand what he said to them. ⁵¹Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart. ⁵²And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.

Sermons have a way of taking their own course and direction sometimes. Sometimes the preacher can think of too many alternatives to choose from and the focus gets confused among them and so does the hearer. The Sunday after Christmas all the carols and bells are quiet. The Sunday after Christmas all the angel choirs seem like a distant memory. The preacher’s challenge is to figure out where to go with the message so that the few that might have come out might know what direction life goes after Christmas. There are several directions we could go with this title, “Where did Jesus go?”

The first direction would be to bemoan the fact that Jesus often gets lost in the Christmas blitz. Preachers are famous for harping on “keeping Christ in Christmas.” Well, the truth is you can’t take Christ out of Christmas. You can’t have Christmas without Christ. Oh, you can have something that looks a lot like Christmas without Christ, but it is only Christmas to the degree that we remain centered on where Christ is present in it. Besides, most of you are doing your best to keep Christ in Christmas and don’t need a sermon about that. That would be “preaching to the choir,” as the old saying goes. Those that might need such a sermon aren’t

going to be here, so we don't need to follow that tack.

Another approach is the whole personal evangelism question. My daughter likes to joke about the evangelists that visited our door one day and asked "have you found Jesus?" She claims to have responded, "You lost him?" Aren't we all tempted to be so clever when such an encounter happens to us? But that isn't really what I find most interesting about the question, "Where did Jesus go?"

Some are terribly interested in the so-called "lost years" of Jesus. The gospels only give us this brief glimpse of Jesus at age 12 in the temple between his birth and the beginning of his ministry at age 30. Some have speculated that he traveled to India or the far East and learned from other religions and their wisdom. It is an interesting speculation but it is only that and in the end not what I am interested in either.

I am far more interested in what we know about Jesus than what we don't know. So think with me for a few moments on what we do know about "where Jesus did go" after his birth. The gospel writers believed Jesus to be the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy and looked for ways to demonstrate that in the retelling of his story. They built on this as they told the story of "Where did Jesus go?"

Matthew says that Joseph and Mary and Jesus had to flee Israel because of the threat from Herod the old king serving as a puppet for Caesar.

Matthew portrays this as fulfilling Old Testament prophecy. In the end, it tells us that Jesus was a refugee, an immigrant in Egypt there because of a political threat in his homeland. It invites us to consider his call to care for the alien, the outcast, the stranger as we would if it were Jesus himself. So the first way we would answer the question, "Where did Jesus go?" would be to say he went among the foreigners, the refugees, the alien immigrants. We often look at such people not as our brothers and sisters who are hurting and need care, but as a problem to be eliminated by building walls or deporting them back to the dangerous situations they left behind. The Herods of the world didn't end in the 1st Century.

Once he returned to Israel and began his ministry the gospels tell us he went into places to bring good news to the poor, the ailing, the outcast, to people everywhere who were alienated from God going where they were. He went into places where he encountered the kinds of life issues that we face and his response can help us know what to do now that the frantic frenzy of Christmas have passed.

Where did Jesus go? He went to those who were hurting. Many of them were hurting physically. Others were hurting spiritually. The two were often combined. He came to a woman who had suffered from a flow of blood for years and when she touched him he told her that her faith had made her well. He didn't blame her for a lack of faith, he

reminded her how much faith she did have! How many people today don't realize that they have the faith to be well? Rather than a condemnation for a lack of faith, Jesus words remind us that whatever little faith we have can help us find a greater degree of health and wellness than we would ever know without it.

He went up on a mount and sat down and taught people who were outsiders because they didn't have the money, the power, or the status to be insiders. He told them they were blessed. He told them that the meek would inherit the earth, those that mourn would be comforted, and the peace-makers would be called children of God. Today he still goes to those who are outsiders and tells them they are loved by God, blessed by God, and that God is with them even though the world's powers may be against them and they suffer for it. He reminds them and us that wealth and health and happiness are not signs of God's favor any more than the lack of them are signs of God's enmity. God loves outsiders no less than those who think of themselves as "insiders."

They brought a man to him who was lying on a pallet and unable to rise and he told him to rise, for his sins were forgiven. How many people today are paralyzed by their sins and feel unable to rise and walk away from them? Jesus goes to them and offers his forgiveness.

He went to a little man who had let wealth become his God and his job become his life and was hated for it.

And truth be told, he hated himself for it, too. Jesus went in to eat with Zaccheus and his presence so changed Z's life that he pledged to repay all those he had taken advantage of and give away half of his wealth as a sign of his changed life. Jesus still goes into people's lives whose priorities are messed up and turns them around. Jesus still goes to people today and challenges them to rethink the gods they are serving in their lives.

He went to a woman at a well whose personal relationships were so messed up she wasn't even sure what it meant to be married. She debated who he was with him and what he could or could not really do. He offered her living water – a relationship based on authenticity and integrity and she wanted it more than anything in the world. He still goes in to those whose relationships are messed up and offers them his love as a way to find authenticity and integrity. If we are searching for what way to go in our relationships let us ask ourselves if we are living with authenticity and integrity and live by those principles in all of our relationships.

He went in to the religious authorities and challenged them to stop parroting the political party line to appease the powers of Rome and start serving God and God's people, especially the poor, the widow, the outcast, and the foreigner in need. They hated him for it and they wanted to be rid of him and finally they thought they were when they and the political powers

nailed him to a cross. But he rose again and he still goes in to those who would pervert power and abuse privilege and encourage injustice and challenges us all to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.

Maybe you can identify with some of those to whom Jesus goes. If so, take heart, the message of the gospel, the message of Christmas, is that Jesus is still going to those who are hurting. He goes to those whose priorities and relationships are out of order. He goes to those who are longing to know that God is for them not against them and he brings them good news. He brings the promise of strength to face the pain and the promise of healing – if not now then in the life to come. He goes to the place where you and I most need to meet him and he says to us what we most need to hear, even when it isn't what we want to hear.

This morning I asked, “where did Jesus go?” to remind us all that, yes, there is life after Christmas Day, and yes, Jesus is still the center of the story. Too often we finish with Christmas and it seems we set Jesus aside just as much as we do the wrappings, the leftovers, and the decorations. But Jesus goes where he will. And I have to think that wherever he is there is perhaps the quietest sound of the bells of Christmas and the angels of heaven proclaiming his presence. Jesus goes wherever he is needed most, both to those of us who know they need him and to those of us who think we don't need him at all.
AMEN.