

THE DAYS THAT REALLY MATTER

Luke 2:40

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Avon Lake UCC
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(online worship only)

There are portions of the Bible that are very familiar to us - like the Christmas story we heard on Christmas Eve. Even if you're not an avid Bible reader or someone who considers yourself any kind of a Bible scholar, you probably can recite many of these verses: Luke 2 begins, "In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus...". And a few verses later, "While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child, and she gave birth to her first-born son and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn." Maybe you hear Linus' voice from the Charlie Brown Christmas special reading these words. We know the first 20 verses of Luke 2.

But the chapter goes on to talk about what Mary and Joseph do next, after the child is born. Luke reminds us that they are faithful Jewish parents. They have the child circumcised and then they bring him to the temple. The story of what happens in the temple is interesting and curious, and very unfamiliar. An old man named Simeon and an old woman named Anna see this baby, and recognize him. They both know that this is not just another baby being brought to the temple. There is something about this baby that is different. They recognize him as the Messiah.

And then it's time to go home, according to Luke. Verses 39 and 40 say, "When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to

their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.”

What does Luke tell us about Jesus’ childhood? We have one story. Jesus is twelve when his parents take him back to Jerusalem - you know this story. He is inquisitive of the rabbis, so engrossed in a conversation with them that he forgets to join his family on the trip back to Nazareth. He spends three days and nights engaged with the teachers at the temple, asking them question after question.

That story ends with these words, “And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.”

That sentence, and one story are all we have of the childhood of Jesus. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom, and the favor of God was upon him. And the next time we see him, he’s 30 and ready to be baptized and begin his public ministry.

I like the simple way Eugene Peterson puts it in the Message version: “When they finished everything required by God in the Law, they returned to Galilee and their own town, Nazareth. There the child grew strong in body and wise in spirit. And the grace of God was on him.”

Luke doesn’t tell us any other stories from Jesus’ childhood. Presumably nothing newsworthy happened. Nothing terribly dramatic occurred. But in those years, Jesus’ character was being formed. As he lived each day in this little village of Nazareth, Jesus was becoming a person of wisdom and strength and grace. I would love to peer into Nazareth and see a day in the life of Jesus. How do you imagine he interacted with his parents and his siblings? Do you see him wandering off by himself, much to his

parents' consternation, but he would have been drawn to the nearby Sea of Galilee, to the hills surrounding his village. He would have explored because he would have felt God's spirit there. Did the boy Jesus notice people more than other children did? Did he take the time to listen to the stories of the village elder who perched every day on the edge of the well in the middle of the town? Did Jesus have a particular fondness for a grandmother or maybe an older aunt? Is that how he grew up to be appreciative of the gifts of women? I love to think of Jesus at the local synagogue, listening with rapt attention to the rabbi's stories, formulating an understanding of the history of his people - Abraham and Moses, the words of the prophets. He memorized the words of the psalms. I like to think of him walking around the village and noticing each person - he would observe the man who stood at the side of the road begging. Because of his illness, it's the only way for him to survive. Jesus noticed him. He noticed the fishermen and how hard they worked. He saw how the tax collector was feared and hated. He saw everyone, really saw them.

Perhaps it's true that only one newsworthy event happened from the time Jesus was born until the time he was 30 — only that one trip to Jerusalem — but every day of those 30 years was significant. The way Jesus lived his every day life, do we dare call it an ordinary life? in a very ordinary village? - the way he lived those days formed him, shaped him. Every day as he prayed, as he noticed God's presence in nature and in other people, as he interacted and observed, every day he was planting a seed. And we see those seeds come to fruition in his life. He would not have been the person he was during his 3-year ministry if it hadn't been for those 30 years of formation.

I call these days that we know nothing about the days that really matter.

We are in the middle of a holiday week. We have just celebrated Christmas, we are about to celebrate the New Year. Today is just an ordinary Sunday, one of the most ordinary in the church calendar actually. The official liturgical designation for today is this: "The First Sunday After Christmas". That's it. But what we do today matters. We devote considerable energy and effort into making Christmas special and meaningful for the people we care about, and we're understandably tired when it's all over. Most of us will do something to celebrate the end of this year and the beginning of what we all hope will be a better, healthier safer year. Celebrations and rituals are important in our lives, but most days are ordinary, and so it's the way we live those ordinary days that make us who we are.

We have a new tradition in our church that we call Star Words. The Star Words tradition is supposed to work this way. The first Sunday in the new year we pass around a basket in worship. The basket contains paper stars and on each star is a word - without looking, you take one star word out of the basket. We call it "letting the word choose you." And you use that word, during the course of the year, as a means of reflection. Last year I drew the word "simplicity" out of the basket. I kind of laughed because I had planned a year that was anything but simple. I had planned for 2020 a week-long retreat in Arizona in January, and Doug and I planned a winter vacation for early March - those trips we were able to make. We had two family weddings - one for his youngest son and one for my daughter. Those weddings happened, but not in the ways originally planned. We'd also planned a trip to Scotland, a family reunion in Michigan, I had registered to attend a conference...I remember that I had planned so

many trips that I knew ahead of time that every single one of my vacation days was going to be used.

2020 didn't go as planned for any of us. This year gave me numerous opportunities to reflect on the word "simplicity." What would it mean to live a simpler life? In what ways would I grow closer to God if I simplified my life? What does that even mean, practically?

There were many days in 2020 when the pace of life was slower for me, the rhythm of my week changed, and I appreciated that gift. I enjoyed more dinners at home. I sat on my back deck and read more often. Doug and I hiked and walked, exploring parks all over northeast Ohio. Simplicity.

We can't distribute star words in worship this year, so instead we mailed star words to everyone on our mailing list. Dinah Hunt cut out 800 star words by hand! Lynn Miller, our office manager, put a star word, completely randomly-selected, in each envelope along with our Christmas offering letter. Somehow we ended up with three words in our envelope. Doug chose one and I have two. "Quietness" and "communion" will be the words for my reflection in 2021. These words will help guide my ordinary days. I hope that there will be extraordinary days in the coming year, too! I look forward to celebrations and parties - at least outdoor events. My family hopes that we can all get together sometime next year to celebrate my mom's life. We held a lovely memorial service for her, but there were only 14 of us in the church - spread out and wearing masks - and no reception of any kind. My son and his girlfriend drove to Columbus from Chicago. We elbow bumped and exchanged Christmas presents from one car trunk to another and then we all drove back home. We hope that we can plan a

time in 2021 when we can be together in a more relaxed setting, tell stories, look at pictures, eat and drink in one another's presence.

I certainly look forward to ways that we can find to worship together safely in 2021.

As we look forward to doing the things that we have missed, as we anticipate parties and big events, we also remember that it's the ordinary days that matter the most. The way we live in between the celebrations...that's when our character is formed, that's when the seeds are planted that make us who we are.

If you did not receive a star word in the mail and you would like one, send me an email and I will randomly select one for you and mail it to you.

I wish each of you God's richest blessings as this year ends and a new one begins.