



**Lawrence Park  
Community Church**  
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**Ordinary People**

Texts: Luke 2: 8-19, 41-52

*Preached December 24, 2009 by Alison L. Mock*

It hasn't happened yet, but I know the day is coming that we'll be out in a crowded place somewhere, and Sarah will wander off and get lost. The world is a very interesting place for a newly-minted three-year old, and the game of hide-and-seek has reached an all-time popularity high. While doing the Christmas shopping, I can't help but watch the other parents as they also struggle with their kids in the crowded malls. It's most entertaining to see the kid-wrangling solutions that people come up with, whether it's strapping them into a shopping cart or stroller, eliciting good behaviour with the promise of ice cream or French fries, calling across the store through gritted teeth for your kid to "get...back...here...NOW!", or heaven forbid, resorting to one of those kid leash things that literally tethers the child to the parent. With the exception of the appalling harness, I admit to employing these tactics myself when tired and desperate, so I'm prepared to cut parents a lot of slack. Getting separated from Mom & Dad is just about inevitable, a rite of passage for a child, and I'm sure you can all tell me stories about the time your kid got lost at the mall, in an amusement park, an elevator or some such. For now, we're just trying to teach Sarah what to do when it happens, and hope that when the moment comes, I won't panic too much.

We're told that Jesus is twelve years old when he ditches his parents at the Temple and heads off to question the Rabbis. This is the only biblical story we have of Jesus as a child, and it is found only in the Gospel of Luke. It was Passover, so the young family made their annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem, to visit the Temple like all good Jews. At the end of the festival, Mary & Joseph left in a group of family and friends, and assumed Jesus was with them. This story is a little different from the kid at the mall, because it takes them a full day to realize he's missing! ("Where's Jesus? What? I thought you had him. I don't have him -- I thought he was with you!") Defeated, the parents head back to Jerusalem to search, and after three days of looking, they found him sitting pretty in the temple talking to the teachers. Now, I remember when I was twelve, and I once forgot to phone home to tell my parents where I was. My mother had to phone all over, and by the time she found me, she was some kind of mad, and I was some kind of grounded. So, after four days of searching for this kid, Mary understandably loses her temper, and demands, "Where have you been? We've been worried sick!" Jesus answers like a cocky twelve-year old, "You should have known I was here!" Mary doesn't understand, surely not the first time in human history that a mother and her adolescent son don't see eye to eye. They went home together, and we're told that Jesus later cleaned up his act, and remained obedient to his parents from then on. And Mary "treasured these things in her heart."

By now, you're likely wondering if I've got the right date – why am I talking about Jesus at age 12 on Christmas Eve, when even the most casual Christian knows that tonight, Jesus is a baby, lying right over there in that manger? Well, the part I want to focus on is that last line of the story, after Mary gives Jesus a telling off and takes him home to Nazareth. She considers everything that has happened, everything that Jesus has said, and reflects on what it might mean. She “treasures them in her heart.” Remember that line – and now we can rewind, and go back to the stable where it all began. It's the first Christmas. Mary has just given birth in undeniably trying circumstances, and just as the little family are catching their breath, a bunch of shepherds show up. They have come to see Jesus, and they have news. The angels had told them that this baby is the Messiah, a Saviour sent from heaven. “Glad tidings of great joy”, they say. With that, they are gone, off to spread the news about the baby king they have just seen for themselves. And Mary, exhausted from birth, “ponders all she had heard in her heart.” There's that line again. What is Mary thinking? What's going on in that heart of hers?

Mary can be a confusing figure – she is the most well-known woman in the New Testament, but her character is subject to such wildly different interpretations that it's hard to get a good sense of who she really was. It is interesting to note that Luke is the only evangelist who gives us any insight at all into Mary's character. If not for Luke, our Christmas celebrations, especially our Sunday School Pageants, would look very different. In Matthew, Joseph is the hero of the Christmas story – Mary does not utter a single word, not one, in the entire gospel. In Mark and John, who do not give us any version of Jesus' birth or infancy, Mary is scarcely mentioned, and mostly painted in a negative light. It is Luke that really gives us the figure of Mary as we have come to know her. I love the two stories we hear tonight, and I love the phrase they have in common. When Mary “ponders in her heart”, we get a concrete image of Mary as Jesus' mother, his parent, his caregiver. For Luke, and consequently for us, Mary is first and foremost, Jesus' mother. This is very important. Luke's Mary is not some kind of holy-baby-vessel, obediently bearing a child by the Holy Spirit and leaving the rest to take care of itself. She is not some kind of esoteric, holy angel, a mother above all others, somehow divine because of the child she bore. Mary was a young woman trying to be a parent. She did her best for her child in the same way that we do our best for our children, and that our parents did for us. She searched for a place to give birth to him safely. She gave him a name. She fed him and kept him warm on a cold night. As she rested, surrounded by visitors, she gazed at her child and wondered who he would become. She made a home for him, and protected him from enemies. When he wandered away from her at the Temple, she got angry. And when he told her what he was doing, she didn't understand – who was this child of hers? Twelve years old and talking circles around the rabbis! He's growing up, you see. He's not her baby anymore. The angels told her he was the Son of God, and that he would do great things. Now that he's almost a man, she can't protect him from the world. What's going to happen now? What is he going to do? She was his mother. She pondered these things in her heart.

In doing this, Mary becomes tangible to us. She becomes an ordinary, relatable mother, a human being instead of an angelic goddess. This is crucial, because it brings us closer to this idea of the incarnation, of the “word made flesh”, made visible to us. In her completely human way of mothering, Mary gives us a Jesus who begins his life in an ordinary, human way. He does not float down from heaven, a full-grown adult, to live a transcendent life on earth with his feet barely touching the ground. Instead, he is a human baby, carried and cared for by his utterly ordinary mother. He is born to ordinary parents, who care for him like any other parents care for their son. In this act of incarnation, this act of complete and total humanity, we see the love of God. In this baby, God’s love is made visible to us.

Which brings us to communion. It may seem odd that on the night we celebrate Jesus’ birth, we also remember the last supper, and his death. But actually, it makes perfect sense in the context of this idea of incarnation. The humanity that is so present at Jesus’ birth becomes abundantly clear again at his death. The symbols he used at the last supper demonstrate this – regular bread and wine, the common drink. These were staples of everyday nourishment, the basic elements that every family would have in their homes. They bring us close, once again, to a man who lived a human life, here on earth – the life of a poor carpenter’s son, from the impoverished, insignificant town of Nazareth. However many extraordinary deeds characterized his existence, his life was bookended by such humanity. A childhood like any other, raised by poor young parents. At the end of life, a simple supper with his friends. The man who was so extraordinary throughout his life and ministry, becomes comprehensibly human at his birth, and at his death.

It is a new church year, and in the time between now and next Advent, we will have many opportunities to explore the many ways in which we know Jesus as remarkable, divine, confusing, and even transcendent. But tonight, we celebrate the ways in which he was a child and a man like any other. A helpless baby, born to ordinary parents, who loved him – not as the Messiah, but as their son. It is that love that comes down to us tonight.

God is here. And we give thanks.

Amen.