

A Sermon for DaySpring

By Brett Gibson

The Work of Christmas

Luke 2:41-52

Colossians 3:12-17

December 29, 2024

In Luke's Gospel up to the point of our reading today, the scene of the boy Jesus in the temple while Mary and Joseph search for him—up to this point there have been a lot of words about Jesus: from Gabriel to Mary, from Elizabeth to Mary, from Mary to all of us, from Zechariah to everyone within earshot, from an angel to shepherds, from shepherds to everyone within earshot, from Simeon and Anna to Mary and Joseph and all who were seeking the redemption of Israel. All these messengers and prophets and saints and sinners have a similar word about who is coming into the world at this point in history. While the announcements are not exactly identical, they certainly all rhyme: God is sending a savior, God's messiah. The people who have dwelt in darkness are having God's light shine on them. Those who need saving are being saved. This one's coming will have epochal reverberations of justice. As Mary might have said: chains shall he break, for the slave is our brother, and in his name, all oppression shall cease.

All of this, all of these announcements happen in just two chapters in Luke's Gospel: two long chapters. Prophecies, promises, expectations, prayers, songs... all declaring to us who Jesus will be, what he will do. Well, starting today, Jesus will tell us himself. If you have a red-letter Bible, the first crimson sprinkles have been spilled into Luke's story.

One of the lessons I learned in seminary that I still carry today was to pay attention in my Bible reading to a person's first words in a narrative—anytime a person speaks for the first time in a particular story—those tend to be important. To his understandably distressed parents, the twelve-year-old Jesus's first words in Luke's Gospel are: "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?"

The Greek is ambiguous and a little hard to translate. (*en tois tou patros mou*) "in the of my father..." That's why sometimes you see it translated "Did you not know that I must be in my father's house" and sometimes you see "Did you not know I must be about my father's business." I like the translation we heard this morning—"Did you not know that I must be dealing with the things of my Father?" I think it's good to preserve the ambiguity rather than settle in one direction since I think that's Luke's intention. "Did you not know," the twelve-year-old Jesus says to his parents, in his self-annunciation, "that I would be about my father's work and world? That I'd be in the temple, that I'd be doing precisely what I'm doing, that I'd be in our scriptures, in our temple, in our city?"

From now on, Jesus will tell us himself who he is, what he is about: "Did you not know that I would be about my father's work and world?"

What is the work of Christmas? That is to say, what is the work Emmanuel, the God who is with us, the-one-who-has-come is set on? Through Advent, we have heard the words of the prophets, telling us what God will do for us, we who walk in darkness. We have told the truth about the darkness; we have prayed for a savior. Now a Savior has been born. He is the Messiah, the chosen one of God, the Lord, the true king of heaven. We marvel. We give thanks.

And now...the extra chairs that we pulled out for Christmas Eve have been put away. There's plenty of room. Those who came for the feast are on their way home to get on with their lives. But Jesus is here. Jesus must attend to his father's house, his father's work, his father's world.

What is the work of Christmas? What is the work Christmas calls us to, the world to which Christmas calls us, the work that the precocious Son of God begins?

I thought this week of the story of Clarence Jordan, the 20th century Baptist minister. He went to Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, KY, in the 1930s and earned a PhD in Greek in 1938. In 1942, he and his wife Florence moved back home to rural Georgia. His undergraduate degree had been in agriculture, so the Jordans decided to start a farm that would be a place where blacks and whites could live and work together in Christian unity. Don't miss the setting: another good lesson from seminary. Always pay close attention to time and place. This is rural Georgia, 1942. Clarence and Florence Jordan start Koinonia Farm. They had three guiding principles for their life together on this farm:

- All people are related in God's eyes.
- We live in accordance with Christ's love.
- We practice common ownership and distribute according to the first century Christian principles based on need, not on profit.

As happens when the light shines in the darkness, the darkness could not abide it. Throughout the especially turbulent 1950s and early 60s, Koinonia Farm received threats, property damage, and grand jury investigations. Barns were burned down, crosses were burned, members were threatened. A neighboring Baptist church publicly excommunicated Koinonia Farm, given that "said members...have persisted in holding services where both white and colored attend together." One story that came out of Clarence Jordan's life has been important for DaySpring in a lot of ways, but especially the way we think about discipleship, formation here.

During the turmoil of the early 1950s, Clarence is said to have approached his brother Robert Jordan, a lawyer, to ask him to serve as legal counsel for the Koinonia community. Robert would later be a state senator and justice of Georgia's Supreme Court. Robert responded to his brother's request for help: "Clarence, I can't do that. You know my political aspirations. Why, if I represented you, I might lose my job, my house, everything I've got."

"We might lose everything, too, Bob."

"It's different for you."

“Why is it different? I remember, it seems to me, that you and I joined the church the same Sunday, as boys. I expect when we came forward the preacher asked me about the same question he did you. He asked me, ‘Do you accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior?’ And I said, ‘Yes.’ What did you say?”

“I follow Jesus, Clarence, up to a point.”

Clarence said, “Could that point by any chance be—the cross?”

Robert said, “That’s right. I follow Jesus to the cross, but not *on* the cross. I’m not getting myself crucified.”

Clarence responded, “Then I don’t believe you’re a disciple. You’re an admirer of Jesus, but not a disciple. I think you ought to go back to the church you belong to and tell them you’re an admirer, not a disciple.”

Christmas is a time for marveling, for praising God for what God has done, for receiving the gift of God, with the shepherds praising, admiring the strange way God has of saving the world. But on this first Sunday of Christmastide, we are reminded that Jesus grew up quickly, and he had work he was going to be about. And Jesus, as we arrive at quickly in the Gospels, is not about gathering folks to admire him. Jesus is about gathering folks who will follow him.

Clarence Jordan, as a good Baptist, believed strongly in evangelism, in declaring the good news of Jesus to the world. But for Jordan, the heart of evangelism was incarnation. He said, “We haven’t gotten anywhere until we see the Word become flesh.” As another teacher of mine has said, “If we want to make disciples, we must first be disciples.” So Koinonia Farm became a crucible of discipleship, where men and women, black and white, were invited to live together, work together, serve together, worship together. Koinonia Farm was started as something of a foretaste of God’s future kingdom, a sign of the way of Jesus. Clarence and Florence must attend to their father’s house, their father’s work, their father’s world.

Thomas Merton said something similar in a Christmas homily he gave one year, in which he said, “We who have seen the light of Christ are obliged, by the greatness of the grace that has been given us, to make known the presence of the Savior to the ends of the earth. This we will do not only by preaching the glad tidings of his coming, but also, above all, by revealing him in our lives. Christ is born to us today, in order that he may appear to the whole world through us. This one day is the day of his birth, but every day of our mortal lives must be his manifestation, his divine Epiphany, in the world which he has created and redeemed.”

So how does the work of Christmas get rooted in us? How do we let the God who has come among us to be revealed through us? What shape does this participation with Christ in his world take? I’m thankful for the lectionary, which offers us a good starting point. In our Colossians text, Paul does what Paul does often: piles virtue on virtue, noun on noun. He loves those lists, lists that if you were raised in the Baptist church of my childhood you had to memorize at some point--lists like

the fruit of the Spirit or the full armor of God—virtues that belong to the community of Christ. Here in Colossians, we have a list of these beautiful nouns: compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forgiveness, love, peace, thankfulness, wisdom...

These are the nouns of the Christian life. These are the virtues the New Testament talks about over and over again, the fruit of a life that is rooted in the Spirit. There's a reason the New Testament—that Paul here implores us to go after these virtues: these are the qualities we saw in Jesus. This is the work that Jesus applied himself to: did you not know he would be about his father's work and world? compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forgiveness, love...

Sometimes, though, we hear litanies like these in Paul's writings—where noun is piled upon noun—and we drown in trying to comprehend all the aspects of character that we're to live up to. But put the nouns to the side for now and let's consider instead the primary verb of this passage, the dominant image Paul is working with: *clothe* yourselves. All these nouns: compassion, kindness, love, peace: put them on. Clothe yourselves. It's a beautiful image, isn't it?

Put it on--like a nice pair of pants or a comfortable sweater--clothe yourselves in love. If you want to be something, you have to put it on. There's nothing automatic about the work of Christmas—we have to put it on. Just like every day we put on clothes, so every day, we put on compassion. We look in the mirror and we pull on kindness. We wrap ourselves in humility.

Don't be mistaken. Paul isn't saying, "Play nice. Be civil." No, compassion, kindness, humility, love...these are hard-won in our world. Don't forget the darkness we've attended to in Advent. That darkness has not gone away. It takes a lot of work, a lot of intention, a lot of grace to be kind.

Kindness is, I'm afraid, undervalued in our world. To have a kind disposition in our world is to embody, not just Mr. Rogers's disposition, but the very disposition of Christ. To have a compassionate disposition in our world is to work against the forces of competition and violence and selfishness that are dominant in our world.

But of course, these are not just dispositions—postures that we take in the world. These are active movements that propel us as a community into our world. Note that all of these virtues that Paul mentions in Colossians 3 are community oriented. They require someone else with whom to be...kind, compassionate, humble.

The classical cardinal virtues of prudence or temperance or fortitude are important of course, but Paul here isn't talking about ordering our private lives. He isn't instructing individuals; he's instructing the community. He is urging us to put on virtues that will dictate our way of being with one another and with the wider world: compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forgiveness, and above all, love.

If we put these on, if we really clothe ourselves in the love that is ours through Christ, we may find that we are as unintelligible to our world as Clarence and Florence Jordan were to their community or as Jesus was to his parents. Others may well wonder what it is we are doing. And we will answer: Did you not know that we would be about our father's work, our father's world?

I was brought back this past week to the writings of Howard Thurman, another great 20th century Baptist, preacher, mentor to Martin Luther King, and godfather of the civil rights movement. He wrote a short meditation called “The Work of Christmas.”

*When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
 To find the lost,
 To heal the broken,
 To feed the hungry,
 To release the prisoner,
 To rebuild the nations,
 To bring peace among brothers,
 To make music in the heart.*

This kind of work is borne among people who choose, every day, to put on compassion and kindness and humility and meekness and patience and, above all, to put on love. Amen.

Copyright by Brett Gibson, 2024