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Christmas 1C
Peace, Seattle
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Luke 2:41-52, Col. 3:12-17

WHAT'S NEXT?

A cartoon from an old New Yorker magazine says it all:
- In the corner is a dried up, withered, Christmas tree.
- The calendar on the wall reads December 26.
- Dad sits in his chair with an ice pack on his head.
- Mom, in her bathrobe, wears a dazed look on her face.
- The floor is a mountain of torn wrappings, boxes, and bows.
- Junior is shaking his stocking to be sure he hasn't missed anything.
- In the background sits the dinner table with a thoroughly picked over turkey still there.
- The caption reads simply: **The morning after.**

Well, maybe some of us feel a little that way. The post-Christmas let down.
In a culture as obsessed with finding material happiness as ours, it's understandable; maybe even inevitable that, when all the Christmas hoopla is finally over, we feel a tremendous let down.

And we wonder, what's next? Another day, a few more football games, maybe a party or two, a change of the calendar, and the world goes back to the same old grind. Same old routine.
Is that all there is to it?

And what about we who are people of faith? The promised child for whom we've been waiting has arrived, and we have questions, too.

What happens now that God has come from heaven to earth? What's next?

Today we find ourselves in worship on the last Sunday of 2009 wondering what's next for us, for our lives, wondering what the New Year will bring.

I'd like to suggest that two of our texts give us some ways to respond to that question.

(1) The first is the story about Jesus and his parents in Luke's gospel.

The situation is familiar to any parent who has lost track of their child in the midst of a crowd, or whose child has wandered off when they were told to stay put at the mall, or the ball game or any one of a number of other places.

When you realize your child is missing, at first you feel annoyed—Junior was here a minute ago, where did he go? You start scanning the crowd, wondering, how worried should I be?

When you don't find him within a few seconds, **the next feeling** starts washing over you—**fear**. You start retracing steps, going back to the place where you last saw each other, all the while wondering if he is crying, panicking, frantic?

As the minutes tick on, worst-case scenarios start multiplying in your mind as your rational side tries to keep your emotional side in check.

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When, finally, parent and child are reunited, a powerful mixture of feelings—relief, anger, remorse, embarrassment—floods the scene.

I'd venture to say that most of us parents have or will experience something like this at some point or another in our lives.

So on one level, Luke's story about 12 year-old Jesus [which, by the way is the only story from Jesus' childhood in any of the four canonical gospels], **slipping off while he family is in Jerusalem for the Passover festival, is familiar to us.**

But instead of finding him in the computer game store, or the video arcade, or the restroom, Mary and Joseph finally find Jesus in the Temple, with the teachers, asking questions, listening, and impressing them with understanding and wisdom beyond his years.

Mary and Joseph approach their son with a "WE'VE BEEN SICK WITH WORRY—WHAT WERE YOU THINKING?!" kind of attitude. But Jesus, totally composed, answers back with words that leave his parents dumbfounded—

> WHY ALL THE WORRY? DIDN'T YOU KNOW I MUST BE IN MY FATHER'S HOUSE?

What we're left with as we prepare to leave the year 2009 and enter 2010, is the image of a boy who, at age twelve, has grasped something about the calling and identity that will shape his life.

- A young Jesus who, in spite of his parents' schedule, has all the time in the world.
- A young Jesus who knows what it means to take time to listen and to learn.

Perhaps one thing that's worth taking with us into the New Year is a confidence about the identity we have been given by God, an identity that has its origin in baptism.

- A baptism that connects us forever to a God who has all the time in the world for us,
- who will never leave us behind, who is forever coaxing us into a future which is hopeful in spite of the great losses and terrible disappointments that can mark our lives.

A God who we meet only on the Sunday mornings we happen to be in church isn't worth much. But a God who accompanies us in our daily lives,

- who shows up in the faces of spouse or friend, neighbor and even stranger;
- a God who gives us the inner strength to make life shaping decisions,
- a God who knows all our secrets – even the ones we dare not speak to our selves.

This God is worth everything. And this God is the One who claims as his own, who becomes our heavenly Father, in Jesus Christ.

The second text that gives instruction to us as we enter the New Year is the reading from Colossians 3:12-17.

> As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. [Col 3:12-14]

This is a favorite text of mine. Chris and I chose it for our marriage service, and it's been part of many of the weddings at which I've presided.

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As we come to the end of the year, it's a natural time to pause and look back on the 12 months past. We think about the joys of the year past, the accomplishments, the changes. But the disappointments, the losses, the regrets are there, too, at least in our minds even if they don't make it into our annual Christmas letter.

ABOVE ALL, Paul writes, CLOTHE YOURSELVES WITH LOVE, WHICH BINDS EVERYTHING TOGETHER IN PERFECT HARMONY.

Sounds a bit too nice…even hokey. How can Paul make such a statement? Does he have his head in the clouds?!

Hardly. Paul knew intimately the physical and emotional costs of bearing witness in a hostile world.

- He knew imprisonment, floggings, beatings, stoning;
- He knew what it was to be shipwrecked, hungry, thirsty, cold.
- He knew what it was like to be run out of a community, to be wrongfully accused, to live with the pressure of daily concern for the churches he founded.

It is the same Paul who endured all this and more who invites us to clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.

The wardrobe that Paul suggests wearing for the New Year seems odd and out of step with our culture's, and the world's, fashion. But never mind that.

The love and forgiveness God calls us to make part of our everyday experience are never out of season, never obsolete.

As we move from the old year to the new, let's make certain we take these along.

SO, WHAT'S NEXT?
In a word: remembering who you are... and remembering whose you are.

And if you're into New Year's resolutions, here's one worth trying on:

> FORGIVE EACH OTHER, JUST AS THE LORD HAS FORGIVEN YOU.
> AND ABOVE ALL, CLOTHE YOURSELVES WITH LOVE, WHICH BINDS EVERYTHING TOGETHER IN PERFECT HARMONY.

AMEN.