

I don't know about you, but the days after Christmas often find me in a nostalgic frame of mind and this year was no exception. It was the gospel lesson this week that conjured up a memory of holding our firstborn, Evan, during a Christmas morning worship service. He was a month old, wrapped in a swaddling blanket as I rocked him back and forth in the pew. My heart was full. I don't recall what the sermon was about or what was going on around me because for me, everything was focused on the baby. But it was what happened next, which has stuck with me throughout the years and brings me back to the manger. You see, one of the elders of the congregation, her name was Edith, tapped my shoulder from behind and said, "Hold on to this time while you can, honey, because they grow up so fast." I don't remember if those words were comforting or encouraging to me at the time, but she was right. It was a quick succession from infant - to toddler - to teen.

This memory made me chuckle a bit while studying the lessons for today because the writer of Luke, moves at rapid speed from the birth narrative of Jesus to the tumultuous teenage years. And if you've ever raised or been around a teenager for any amount of time, it can be a bit challenging to say the least. But it's where we find ourselves today. We are *not* in the stable..anymore. We are *not* gazing into the eyes of a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes...anymore. We are *not* surrounded by sentimental scenery... anymore.

And in all honesty, I want to linger in the stable awhile. I don't want to lose my sense of expectation and live into the ordinary and oftentimes painful circumstances of life. I want to gaze into the face of humanity in its infant stages. I still want to hold the baby, wrapped in the security of swaddling clothes and safe. But if we are to live into the reality of life, we cannot, cannot stay in the manger. Jesus didn't and neither can we.

Birth...you see...is just the beginning. It is just the beginning of God revealed in the flesh of a newborn child. It is the beginning of newness revealed in us, too. But what happens when the swaddling clothes are removed and we are stripped down to the bareness of the birth? What happens when we remove the security blanket? What happens when we strip off our swaddling clothes - you know, those clothes, or things that keep us from stepping into the bigger picture of God revealed in "the baby?" You see, if we stay in the stable, we cannot, or perhaps don't want...to grow up. But Jesus did. Jesus did not live out his life in the infancy of faith but grew in insight, knowledge and relationship with the world. So...time to take off the baby blanket. And when we do, growth begins to happen. We do not merely gaze at a world filled with racism,

division, war, occupation and atrocities beyond human comprehension - we are in the midst of it. But if we stay wrapped up in our own insecurities and self-righteousness, we cannot grow. These swaddling clothes, you see, can become cumbersome and restrict our movement.

The writer in Colossians today, gives an insight into what new clothing might look like *after* we step out of the stable. “Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. And above all...above...all...love. Wow! If you ask my opinion, this is a tall order to fill. Especially, when we are stepping out of the stable into a world where divisiveness “appears” to reign; homelessness is only one rent payment or foreclosure away; justice doesn’t seem to be justice for all people; political ideologies tear at the very fabric of families and a nation, and the genocide of an entire population is seen in the face of a child...starving and waiting to die. And the list goes on and on and on... Truthfully, it’s no wonder that I (and perhaps you, too) want to stay in the stable where it’s safe and doesn’t require a lot of us. But we must not forget that Jesus wasn’t born into a time when the world was at peace. The empire and occupation ran rampant and the marginalized were taxed and trampled everywhere they went.

But the baby...this baby... calls us to live into the promise of Christmas all year long. Yes, the *gift* that is given on “Christmas” is the same gift which enables us to bear *with* one another in the midst of the chaotic circumstances of life. That’s growth. Mary Hinkle Shores says, “It is the gift of Christmas that clothes us with the ability to imagine what God imagines: release to the captives, healing for those who are suffering, and abundant mercy for sinners of *all* shapes and sizes.” All. All. All.

You know...maybe our growth outside the stable enables us to *bear* with one another, *forgive* as *Jesus forgave*, and let the *peace of Christmas, the peace of Christ* rule deep, down in our hearts. But I believe that in order to do this, we *must, must* shed our own “rightness”, our own self-serving agendas, our comparisons, complaints and criticisms of one another and bear the naked truth that we cannot keep Jesus a perpetual baby.

The gospel of Luke today surely doesn’t. Jesus was growing up. In fact, we go from zero to twelve in the blink of an eye and quite frankly, this used to bother me. Many of the picture books I read as a child gave what I *thought* was a glimpse of the missing years. You know, Jesus in the carpentry shop with Joseph and playing with other children on the playground, amazing his classmates with sub-human powers. This gap also bothered me as I grew in my faith journey because, as William Loder puts it, “Our modern interests want to know about Jesus’ upbringing, family systems,

education, life changes, adolescence, sexual development, early employment, leisure - and all we have is one episode and it is likely to be recreated history of the kind.”

But the boy Jesus is human enough and the heart of the matter today is *where* we find this adolescent Jesus. We find him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions; building relationships and experiencing community. We find him dressed more as a young man coming of age rather than in the dependent safety of the manger.

And like any other teenager, Jesus tests the boundaries and gives his parents a panic attack when they cannot find Jesus among the caravan leaving the Passover festival in Jerusalem. I can relate to this story when our son Nathan was missing for several hours when we thought he was with friends. To make a long story short...I get Mary. And now...I also get Jesus' response to Mary, although it seems harsh at the onset. *“Once found inside the temple, Jesus says to his mother, “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know I must be in my Father’s house?”*

The word “must” used in this context reads more like..absolutely. It’s absolutely necessary, it’s inevitable, it’s what I *must* do. It was necessary for Jesus and it’s necessary for us, too. You see, growing in insight and relationship within a faith community is what we *need* to do if we are to live into the newness of Christmas. To be clothed in the type of clothing the writer in Colossians is talking about, needs nurturing. “And above all...needs love.” Love that begins with the raw vulnerability of relationship clothed, IN the Christchild.

A love that is sometimes filled with anxiety...and wonder. Trust and doubt. Failures and grace. A love that helps us dwell in the richness of gratitude and grows the body of Christ. A love that remains when the hope, love, joy and peace of Christmas fade into the struggles and reality of life.

So today, the adolescence of Jesus is where we need to be right now.. as we move into a new year. Growing pains are real and living into the aftermath of Christmas is not an easy task as we anticipate transitions in our lives and as a nation. But we *must, must* keep growing, keep seeking new ways to be in relationship with the brokenness of the world. We must (imperative) keep growing and learning in and through the gift of the baby. We must leave the stable.

I guess my friend Edith was right, a baby doesn’t stay a baby...it goes by fast. Perhaps it’s time to unwrap those swaddling clothes, step out of the manger, and change into something more “grown up.” Amen.