

December 30, 2012

## **BACK TO NORMAL?**

by Charis Mitchell

**Samuel 2:18-20,26, Psalm 148, Colossians 3:12-17, Luke 2:41-51**

Just the other day, a friend said, “Hey, Christmas is over, I don’t need to pretend to be nice anymore!” He was just joking, but it still struck me.

One, is that all Christmas is? Pretending to be nice?

And two, is Christmas really over? Yes, the day is come and gone, the presents have been opened and the wrappings cleared away, excessive amounts of food have been eaten, pounds have been gained, and the annoying relatives have been tolerated. It’s back to work, back to life, back to the hum-drum. But does that mean Christmas is really... well... over? Jesus has been born, God is in the world, and now things just... go back to normal?

I don’t have children of my own, so maybe some parents here could enlighten me. Does life really just go back to normal once the pregnancy, the season of expectation, the *advent* of new life, is completed, and the baby is born?

Yeah, I didn’t think so.

Reading the Luke scripture again, though, it almost sounds like things did reach a certain normalcy for Joseph, Mary, and young Jesus. Just this past week we celebrated Jesus’s remarkable birth: a long journey, a giant star, angels, shepherds, a manger-cradle, livestock hanging out in the birthing suite, a whole lot of very not-normal for the birth of a baby, in that day or this.

And now we read of Mary and Joseph hunting down their wayward son, and searching high and low before finding him in the temple. If God had chosen to manifest corporeally as an adult right off the bat, nobody would have been surprised to find him in the temple teaching, preaching, and answering questions. And yet as a 12-year-old boy, it took Mary and Joseph 3 days to look for Jesus there, and when they did find him, everyone was astonished by what he had done and what he knew.

Jesus *was* born as a baby, not an adult. After having 3 kings show up with gold, frankincense, and myrrh and after the family was forced to flee to Egypt for 2 years to escape the homicidal King Herod, this little family had 10 years to settle into normalcy in Nazareth. No foreign dignitaries randomly appeared for tea, nobody was turning water into wine, feeding the entire neighborhood with the lunch he brought to school, or healing the sick kid down the lane (that, of course, didn't come until later), and there was a very distinct lack of glowing visions giving news of impending doom or complete life-altering upheaval. Just life. Normalcy. Complete normalcy for 10 years. Certainly that's long enough to start thinking of this growing little boy as just their son Jesus; long enough for the memories of heavenly hosts to begin to fade.

Can you imagine what was going through Mary and Joseph's minds when they were searching for Jesus for 3 days? "Great. God gives us this child to take care of, and he just wanders away! You'd think the SON OF GOD would be better behaved! What kind of 'heavenly reward' can there possibly be for the parents who manage to screw it up with God's Son?"

How often do we go looking for Jesus, for God, in all the places *we* expect Him to be, and when we don't find Him at work in the ways we expect, are left frantic, upset, or disappointed? When we try to limit Christmas to food, wrapping paper, tinsel, pretty lights, and presents, on December 26 we're left with nothing more than a bag of crumpled wrapping paper, a huge credit card bill, a few more things to try to fit in the closet, and a rather hollow feeling that "I thought there was more to this whole Christmas thing."

Likewise, in looking for the 12-year-old boy, do we lose sight of the Son of God? Or conversely, in looking for the Son of God, do we lose sight of the little boy? Do we try to fit God into our idea of what God should be, rather than allowing ourselves to experience God for what God is?

Just for a moment, contrast young Jesus and his parents, with the story of Samuel and his parents. The scripture for today is a short excerpt, but it paints the picture of devoted parents, a devoted son, and a grateful priest. Doing some research, I discovered that the fact it's even mentioned that Samuel is wearing what is referred to, depending on translation, as a "sacred linen apron", a "linen priestly vest," or in super-churchy historical terms, an "ephod". Ephods were garments specifically set aside for priests to wear. It's unclear from historical writings how much children would have typically been allowed to wear them, but some places I looked suggested that ephods may have been reserved for higher-level priests or even

young royalty. Samuel was certainly keeping up on his studies and distinguishing himself in the temple if he was allowed to wear an ephod at such a young age.

The story of Hannah and Samuel always tugged a bit at my heartstrings. Here is a woman who begs for a child – the only way she can finally be on equal standing with Peninnah, her husband’s domineering other wife – and when God finally grants Hannah a son, she dedicates him back to the church out of gratitude. How difficult must it have been for Hannah to weave a new robe for her son every year, to leave it with him at the temple? Did she wonder how much he’s grown this year, how much bigger she needs to make his little robe this time? What strength of character she must have had.

Today we’re told the story of two childhoods in Biblical times. Keep in mind that at that time, children were completely powerless. Boy children were only valued once they had strength to work in their father’s business. Before such an age was reached, they were to be kept in the domain of their mothers -- in the house and silent. Girl children were property to be used for social or political ends, to establish good marriages for the family. Until they were old enough to be useful, children were pawns and liabilities, completely without power or rights beyond what their parents deigned to grant them. There were no Child Protection Agencies at that time, no social workers, no foster care system. In the liturgical calendar, December 28<sup>th</sup> is the day to remember the Holy Innocents – all the children under 2 years of age who were slaughtered in Herod’s mad quest to retain his throne and thwart the prophecies of a new king.

This just goes to highlight what a fragile form God really took, in coming to Earth at that time and place, in the form of a baby.

So how will we take care of these children? How will we foster the Christ-child? How will we decide to go forward from Christmas and into the New Year? Is the journey to the manger the extent of our journey with Jesus? Our journey with God?

At the dawning of this new year, what kind of world are we creating for this Christ-Child, and for our own children? As Hannah made a new robe for her son every year, what type of robing do we create for ourselves and our children? Colossians says to clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. As we are the people of God, we need to work to make sure that what we show the world, and what we teach the next generations, matches what God has instilled in our hearts. Be tolerant with one another and forgive one another, just as

the Lord has forgiven you. Then, we're told to add a healthy dose of love to bind everything and everyone together in unity.

But in the face of everything that has happened, how can we do that? You might be thinking, "Hey pastor(ish) lady, what about all the mindless, senseless, horrific violence in our world today?"

That's when it gets hard. Nobody said this Christian stuff was easy.

This past week, I went and saw the new *Les Misérables* movie, and something struck me that I'd never realized. For those not familiar, the underlying story through the whole is about Jean Valjean, who became a convict by stealing a loaf of bread for his dying nephew, and his relentless persecution by Javert, a police inspector who is singular in his belief that convicts are and will always be evil. When released from prison, Valjean can't find work due to his released convict status, until a priest is willing to give him a helping hand and, rather than press charges for stealing silver from the church, gives Valjean more. At that moment Jean Valjean vows to live a life for God, no matter what. Even though Valjean makes a new life for himself, Javert manages to undermine everything repeatedly, throwing Valjean's life in turmoil over and over again. Through the twists of the rest of the story, Valjean has several opportunities where he could discredit, injure, or kill Javert. He never does. Every time Javert vows that he will never cease in his single-minded persecution, and still every single time Valjean shows mercy, no matter what.

It struck me anew when I saw the movie the other day. That is exactly what we're called to do. Show compassion, demonstrate gentleness, live tolerance. Not just on the good days, but when it seems like the world has gone to hell in a hand basket, everyone is out to get you for something you didn't even do, and there's no point in even trying anymore.

Compassion is an easy word to say. Kindness is a really nice idea. Patience and gentleness are easy in theory, but they all can be really tough in practice. Tolerance is something that needs to be taught every single day, even and especially in the face of everything wrong in the world today.

But that's why Jesus's birth is celebrated during the darkest part of the year. God broke into the world in the middle of darkness, when we start to lose hope that the sun will *ever* come back. And now, Jesus is still a young child. The year is new.

This is a time of rebirth, renewal, and starting the journey again. Take the time this year to travel with the boy-child Jesus. Allow your faith to grow as He did.

Unlike New Year's Resolutions that are broken and forgotten in a week or a month, God will always allow us to try again, to grow again, becoming richer in faith and wisdom each time. Rather than allowing ourselves to fall back into the old "normal", God gives us the opportunity, every single day, to try again. Faith, like a child, needs to take time to learn, to grow, and to mature. And even grown children occasionally fall down, get bumps and bruises, screw up and need help from their parents. Thanks be to a good and merciful God who, no matter how many times we fall down, is willing to pick us back up, and hold us in his arms until we regain the strength to journey on again.