

Luke 2:41-52

<sup>41</sup> Each year his parents went to Jerusalem for the Passover Festival. <sup>42</sup> When he was 12 years old, they went up to Jerusalem according to their custom. <sup>43</sup> After the festival was over, they were returning home, but the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. His parents didn't know it. <sup>44</sup> Supposing that he was among their band of travelers, they journeyed on for a full day while looking for him among their family and friends. <sup>45</sup> When they didn't find Jesus, they returned to Jerusalem to look for him. <sup>46</sup> After three days they found him in the temple. He was sitting among the teachers, listening to them and putting questions to them. <sup>47</sup> Everyone who heard him was amazed by his understanding and his answers. <sup>48</sup> When his parents saw him, they were shocked. His mother said, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Listen! Your father and I have been worried. We've been looking for you!"

<sup>49</sup> Jesus replied, "Why were you looking for me? Didn't you know that it was necessary for me to be in my Father's house?" <sup>50</sup> But they didn't understand what he said to them.

<sup>51</sup> Jesus went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. His mother cherished every word in her heart. <sup>52</sup> Jesus matured in wisdom and years, and in favor with God and with people.

## **Sermon**

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator, our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit: Amen.

Merry Christmas! You might not know it from quick turn to New Year's parties, or the return to work, but the Christmas season has just begun! Even though the decorations are now at bargain basement prices in the stores nearby, Friday, Christmas Day, is only the first day of the festival. The song twelve days of Christmas begins on December 25<sup>th</sup>, meaning there's almost two full weeks of Christmas joy meant for us. As we're here together in the midst of the Christmas season, our Gospel today helps us to come to know more of the Christmas story, helps us to know more about who this God is that became human in Jesus.

And so, along with Mary, we just might stand befuddled as we hear of Jesus' behavior at the temple. Perhaps, along with Mary, we cry out: "Who do you think

you are, child?" I imagine those words came across Mary's mind, if not her lips, after Jesus pulls this latest stunt at the temple in Jerusalem. What must Mary be thinking, the one who bore him into the world, who gave birth to the God of the universe? How unbelievable is this, that her child is now destined to save humanity, to restore creation, to redeem all things? This must have been an overwhelming moment, an overwhelming thought, that her baby is the hope of the world. That's weighty enough, but now he's unpredictably fled her side and mingled with Israel's religious elite? Child, who do you think you are?

This video gets at the heart of this seemingly precocious twelve-year-old, at the core identities of Jesus. How can one sit amongst Judaism's theological heavy hitters and not just debate, but dispute? Unless, of course, the one putting questions to the priests is the one whom Israel's been seeking all along. The names this video uses for God, most of

them in Hebrew, help us to get into the mindset of the temple leadership that Jesus confronted in those days.

Take, for instance, **HaShem**. This simply means the Name. The God who names us is the name above all names. In Proverbs 8 we hear the name of the Lord is a strong tower, the idea that HaShem carries strength and authority just at the mention of the Name. And of course, Proverbs is the wisdom that would have guided the discussions of these priests who Jesus confronted, and yet, they didn't see HaShem in front of them. They also would have called God **Adonai**, a word for master, and though an adolescent Adonai stands before them, they miss the moments with the master of the universe.

Some names get more specific. **Elohim** means something like Lord Creator or Lord Judge, while **El Shaddai** means God Almighty or All Sufficient God. On Christmas we sang together of **Emmanuel**, God with us. Notice that each

of these names has an “el” sound in it, which is a Hebrew word for God or Lord. In Elohim and El Shaddai, scripture points to the power and providence of God, that God not just rules over us but cares for us. Emmanuel takes a step further, saying that God exists not far off or above us, but instead in the midst of us, as one of us. The power, the providence, the presence of God was amidst these priests that Jesus confronted, and yet they couldn't comprehend it.

Notice, though, Mary's words. Not disbelief, so much as discomfort. “Child, why have you treated us like this?” The angel announced the conception of this child. A star guided the way to his birthplace. Angels harkened to him in song, and shepherds guarded him with the comfort of rod and staff. She knows he's the promised one, the messiah, her child and yet the Son of God.

But that doesn't mean she's comfortable with this whole situation. What she learns here, what we learn here too, is that Jesus isn't under our control. He's **YHWH**, a mysterious name, with no certain meaning but many possibilities. Perhaps it means life, for the two syllables seem to represent the breath of life, Yah in and Weh out. Perhaps it means wind of God, for God's wind enters our lungs to give us life. But like any wind, we cannot control YHWH, for the will of God and the movement of the Spirit is far beyond our control.

Here in this Christmas season, when we've just welcomed a baby into our midst, we might assume that Jesus affects our life like any other child. An infant takes a lot of our time and energy, but also relies upon us to do everything. And like any baby, Jesus required uninterrupted attention from Mary. Though babies cry and complain, we ultimately remain in some semblance of control. But at this

moment, perhaps for the first time, Mary sees that she can't control this child that she's reared, that the Christmas baby instead comes to bring order in the midst of our chaos, to bring life in the midst of death, to bring grace in the midst of our judgment. This is no innocent baby. Jesus is guilty, not of sin but of turning the world upside down.

Perhaps the other question we ought to ask is who we want Jesus to be? Are our desires shaped by God's identity, by who God is, or are we constantly trying to manipulate God to be more malleable, more moldable, more shapeable. Are we trying to make God in our image rather than letting God make us in the divine image?

This is one of the areas where our cultural celebrations of Christmas far deviate from the Biblical content of the holiday. We often focus on the theme of God's gift to us in Jesus, which inspires us to give gifts as well, and then allow the conversation to end there so that we can give copious

amounts of gifts, quite ostentatious and yet all telling one simple lie: that we're the gods of our own lives. But like any gift, Jesus brings a particular identity, a particular purpose, an intention that we can't control.

When I was in high school, my brother gave my parents this kind of gift. Her name was Cassie, and she was a twelve-week old purebred boxer puppy. Now, no matter how much you train a dog, they still have requirements that they place upon our lives. They need to go outside to do their business. They need fresh water and food. As social creatures, they need attention, care, touch. They need love. They have their own identities that come through even the best training. We can't force dogs to become something they're not. And though Cassie was well trained, we were never fully in control of her.

That's a microcosm, a shadow of the image that we have with the gift of God in Jesus. Every name we've

mentioned tells us that God's identity is beyond our control. Unlike dogs, that the gift we receive in the manger isn't under our authority. We can't even train God, because God's identity is what it is. That's what this last name, **I AM**, means. I AM is one English translation of *Ehyeh asher ehyeh*, the name God gives to Moses. It likely means something like, I will be who I will be, one who is not controlled but controls the outcomes of all things.

In this name, God says to us, before any of you were, I AM. Long after you pass on, I AM. In the darkness and the fear, I AM. In the light and the joy, I AM. Jesus will be who Jesus will be whether we like it or not, and whether his mother likes it or not.

What begins in the Christmas season is our learning of what this means, of God's identity, of God's intention for creation. We not just receive a gift, but we receive a God, who comes not to make the world the way we think it ought

to be, but to make it the way God intended it to be from Eden to eternity.

Who do you think you are, child? In the names of God, the question is turned back to us. Who do we think we are? If Christmas tells us anything, we're God's children, God's chosen, that we're beloved by God. That doesn't mean we can make God in our image, but it does mean that God will make us in the divine image, will reshape the realms of this world to look like the Kingdom of Heaven.

Yes, that's what this precocious twelve-year-old intends to do, to be the one constant I AM in the midst of our confusion, our questions, our quandaries, and when everything is out of our control, to make all things new.  
Amen.