**Message for January 2, 2022**

**Luke 2:41-51**

 It was the day when I learned the true meaning of the word ‘fear’. Rebecca and I along with my sister and her family were at the Highland Games at Fergus. There was a sudden downpour that didn’t last long, just long enough to make the ground very muddy. After the rain had stopped my niece’s stroller kept getting stuck in the mud and at one spot it really got wedged. I told Rebecca, who was about four years old at the time, “to stand right there and not move”. Then my brother-in-law and I set to work to wrestle the stroller free. We finally freed it and I turned around but … no Rebecca! Frantically I looked around but there was no sign of her. With my heart pounding, my brother-in-law and I started looking for her. After what seemed like an eternity, although it was only a few moments, I saw her little blond head. There she was, a slight frown on her face, standing by one of the booths while a middle-aged woman held her hand and was obviously looking around for her parents. I rushed over, picked her up and hugged her but I didn’t know which feelings were going to win out; relief and thankfulness or anger and fear. Fear followed by relief described how I felt that day and, I suspect, they also describe how Mary and Joseph felt when they found their own straying son.

 The episode described in today’s scripture passage is fairly straight-forward. In Jesus’ day, as today, all religious Jews were expected to try and celebrate the festival of the Passover in Jerusalem. When Jesus was about twelve years old he and his parents made their annual trip to Jerusalem. They celebrated the festival and then it was time to return home to Nazareth. Whenever possible, people back then traveled together in large groups or caravans for safety since the countryside was infested with robbers. Mary and Joseph didn’t see Jesus when they left the city but they weren’t unduly concerned reasoning that Jesus would have been somewhere there in the caravan. When it came time to set up camp for the night though they realized with horror that Jesus was no where to be found. They promptly returned to the city to find him but as the days passed, there was no trace of him. No doubt by this time they were in an absolute panic. They finally found him sitting in the Temple talking with the teachers of the law.

 The teachers were quite impressed with Jesus’ questions and answers but for their part Mary and Joseph were less than impressed. Indeed their relief, fear, and anger comes across in what Mary said to Jesus: “Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you”. Jesus’ response was to tell them that they shouldn’t have been worried; why didn’t they realize that he had to be in his Father’s, that is God’s house? Up to this point what happened is straight-forward; Jesus wandered off, his parents searched for him and finally found him. He then explained his behaviour. There is nothing unusual about this whatsoever, but then comes the next line: “But they did not understand what he was saying to them”.

 It is so easy to pass over this line without giving it a second thought but think about what Luke is telling us; Mary and Joseph didn’t understand Jesus’ need to be in his Father’s house. Clearly the implication is that they did not realize or understand who and what Jesus truly was despite what had happened twelve years earlier!

 The angel Gabriel appeared before Mary and told her that she, a virgin, was going to conceive and bear the Son of the Most High. Mary then went to see her cousin Elizabeth who told her how special the child would be. And of course there was also what happened after the actual birth itself with the shepherds crowding into the stable in the middle of the night to see her newborn child. After that came the visit to Jerusalem where the prophetess Anna told Mary and Joseph how special their child was. So too did Simeon, the man who had been told that he would not die until he had seen the Messiah. Leaving Luke’s account of Jesus’ birth, Matthew’s gospel tells us the story of the wise men who came from afar to see Jesus. There were all of these special signs and wonders surrounding Jesus’ birth and yet, twelve years later, Mary and Joseph acted as if Jesus’ true identity was news to them! It doesn’t seem to make any sense at all, and yet, in a way it does.

 Despite all of the signs and wonders that surrounded that first Christmas, it appears that Mary and Joseph thought of Jesus as being a normal child and only as time passed did they come to appreciate how special he really was. Mary, and presumably Joseph too depending upon how long he lived, grew in their knowledge and understanding of Jesus but this was a process, a process that went in fits and starts. At the wedding reception in Cana of Galilee for example, Mary urged Jesus to perform his first miracle and change the water into wine so that the hosts would not be embarrassed when the wine ran out. Mary was obviously well aware of, or at least strongly suspected Jesus’ special abilities. Later though when Jesus was teaching one day, Mary and other members of his family showed up and tried to take Jesus home. They did so because, as they said, he was beside himself which was a nice way of saying that he was mentally ill. Jesus’ brothers and sisters certainly didn’t think of him as being the Messiah; to them Jesus was simply their older brother who gave up a living as a carpenter to become a traveling preacher. We can think of Jesus’ brother James for example.

 James became a very important leader in the early church and the letter bearing his name in the New Testament is attributed to him. James however didn’t follow Jesus while he was alive. James grew in his faith and only became a disciple after his brother’s death and resurrection. In other words, faith didn’t come to James all at once as if it were, rather it was a gradual process that took decades. And perhaps this is something that we ought to remember as we welcome the gift of a new year.

 Many if not most of us have long known who and what Jesus is. Some of us in fact have known Jesus virtually all our lives going back to the days of our childhood when we were in Sunday School. But of course we were not granted understanding, faith, and commitment in a lump as if it were when we were baptized or confirmed. Rather it has been an ongoing process as we’ve made our way on life’s journey. And just like Mary, Joseph, and the rest of Jesus’ family, perhaps our progress hasn’t always been upwards and onwards either. Perhaps there have been times when our faith has wavered, and our discipleship and commitment have been only lukewarm or half-baked at best. Perhaps there have been times when, full of pain and grief, we’ve even had our doubts as well. Certainly the past twenty-one months have challenged the faith and commitment of many.

Such questioning is normal though and is a part of the journey of faith. The important thing is that we carry on, continuing to try and grow in our understanding, faith, and commitment. And perhaps this is what we ought to dedicate ourselves to doing in this new year just begun. To keep on growing after all is a part of our Presbyterian heritage; to be reformed and always reforming. This simply means that we should do our best to grow and never rest content with things the way they are. This in fact is what God wants of us or, as a poster once put it: “God loves us just the way we are and loves us too much to let us stay that way”. There is a lot of truth to this, and if we really love God then we will always strive to do better and be better, secure in God’s love and forgiveness.

 With this in mind, I would like to conclude this message with a favourite prayer of mine, the words of which inspired the song “Day by Day”. This prayer was written back in the Middle Ages by St. Richard of Chichester. It goes:

 “Thanks be to Thee, my Lord Jesus Christ

 for all the benefits Thou hast given me,

 for all the pains and insults Thou hast borne for me.

 O most merciful Redeemer, friend and brother,

 may I know Thee more clearly,

 love Thee more dearly,

 and follow Thee more nearly.”

Amen

**Pastoral Prayer**

 Hear us we pray as we turn to you in prayer on this, the first Sunday of a new year.

 When we look back at the year just ended, we know that it was a difficult one for so many people. The pandemic continued to drag on and inflicted so much damage on so many people in so many ways: people were sick, people died, businesses struggled, and many were forced to close. There were all of the restrictions as well and the resulting isolation felt by so many. The cost of living rose too, posing a challenge for so many.

 Truly 2021 was a challenging year and yet, there was still so much to be thankful for. There were the healthcare workers who gave so much of themselves in the struggle to look after those who were ill. There were the scientists who developed the vaccines which have lessened Covid’s impact on the health of many. There were the people who worked tirelessly, ensuring that the supply chains remained open providing us with enough of life’s necessities. To this we can add the farmers and manufacturers who supplied these good things in the first place. In our uncertain world, we were also blessed with peace and security, and for this we give you thanks.

 On a more personal level, there is also the health and abilities that we have, as well as our families and loved ones. Truly, even if we don’t always think so or even realize it, we were blessed last year, and we still are today.

 As we welcome the gift of a new year, we pray that the current wave and upsurge in Covid cases, and indeed the very pandemic itself, may come to an end sooner rather than later.

 We pray for all who are ill, all who mourn, and those who live in fear even as so many search for booster shots, hoping to get one sooner rather than later.

 We pray for the people in the west of our nation as they try to cope with the bitterly cold weather, and we especially remember and pray for the homeless whose lives are at risk.

 We witnessed the crackdowns in Hong Kong and Russia this past week, and we pray for the sake of basic rights and freedoms in those countries and elsewhere.

 We give you thanks for the Christmas celebrations now over, praying that throughout this year just begun that we may never lose sight of the meaning of Christmas; that you are with us and that your love will never let us go.

 In your Son’s name we pray. Amen