

**2 January 2022, Second Sunday after Christmas Day**  
**Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa**  
**James K. Knutsen**

[Jeremiah 31:7-14; Psalm 84; Ephesians 1:3-6;15-19a; Luke 2:41-52]

*“Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.”*

Or, in a translation I prefer, “Your father and I are in horrible distress seeking you.”<sup>1</sup> I imagine most parents—if they’ve been parents long enough—can relate, can describe a moment, an experience of deep panic and anxiety over the well-being if not also the whereabouts of a child. I imagine many such moments might suddenly be running through many minds here right now. Remember it. Feel it. What was that like?

While I’ve never been a parent, I have been a twelve-year-old. I can’t lay claim to a story quite like this one about Jesus, but I imagine that many of us can recall that age as a time of beginning to feel within us at least the desire and search for an identity beyond and different from what we feel our parents can understand, that season of life when, if we haven’t been feeling it already, we begin to feel that our parents just don’t “get it” don’t “understand me,” a divergence between what I experience within myself and what my parents seem (to me) to be able to see or understand.

Again, I imagine this may trigger some memories. Remember. Feel. What was that like?

So: Jesus is coming into and moving through and making his own the full range of being human, and Luke tells us,

*His mother treasured all these things in her heart.*

This is probably Luke’s way of letting his readers know where he got the story, that either directly or

indirectly it came to him from the memories of Jesus’s mother Mary. This is the one story that we have in scripture about the early years of Jesus in which he has any *agency*, in which we see him *doing* something—this is the first time in Luke’s Gospel that Jesus *says* something—and we can see that already he is making waves, that he is a challenge. This is not the last time Mary will find herself horribly distressed because of him.

It’s also not the last time that his words will cause amazement. In this story, we can see him on the way to becoming his adult self in his absorption with the scriptures of Israel, the Law and the Prophets, for those texts and their interpretation are undoubtedly what he is discussing with the priests and scribes in the temple, where his questions, his responses and his intelligence are so impressive to the elders. It is clear from the teaching of the adult Jesus that his mind was saturated with scripture.

He rarely quoted it in the conventional way, but it’s there throughout his teaching, thoroughly absorbed, interpreted and reinterpreted with striking depth, originality, and, as people remarked, authority. Where that learning came from in this laborer, and son of a laborer from a rural village, is something of a mystery, but this story gives us a taste of his youthful immersion in the Law and the Prophets, the learning and reflection that will gestate in him another 18 years before he begins to teach publicly.

*“Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?”*

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<sup>1</sup> David Bentley Hart, *The New Testament: A Translation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 109.

With those thoughts on today's gospel, I want to pivot to reflect on the Second Reading today from Ephesians, and conclude with a passage from Thomas Merton.

There's a remarkable thing about this section from the 1<sup>st</sup> chapter of Ephesians. I haven't researched this exhaustively, but I'm pretty sure there's no other passage in the entire Bible that our lectionary turns to so frequently. It's not always exactly the same selection of verses, but the core of it (verses 15-19a) comes up on several significant occasions: It's appointed every year for Ascension Day, for All Saints' Day, and for today, the Second Sunday after Christmas Day. (It's also read once in the three-year cycle on the Last Sunday after Pentecost, sometimes known as Christ the King Sunday).

So, Christmas, Ascension, All Saints. These are major and quite distinct celebrations in the course of the Christian year (as is Christ the King Sunday), and yet the lectionary keeps coming back to these verses from Ephesians. Either the lectionary is just lazy, or there's something important here for us to hear and ponder and remember.

Here again are those verses that are appointed on all these significant occasions:

*I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe.*

Or, in David Bentley Hart's somewhat more literal and (I think, eloquent) translation:

*Hearing, therefore, of the faithfulness in the Lord Jesus that is among you, and of the love for all the holy ones, I too do not cease giving thanks on your*

*behalf, making a remembrance in my prayers, so that the God of our Lord Jesus the Anointed, the Father of glory, might give you a spirit of wisdom, and of revelation by a full knowledge of him, the eyes of your heart having been illumined, so that you should know what the hope in his call is, what the riches of his glory's inheritance among the holy ones, and what the extravagant glory of his power toward us who have faith.<sup>2</sup>*

So, the scripture that the lectionary returns to most often is this prayer for the illumination of the eyes of our hearts, this prayer for wisdom and revelation, that in the deepest core of who we are, that we might perceive and know and understand who God is and what God intends for us. *That*, it seems to say, is what will make the difference, when we are illumined in the core of our being to see who God is and what God is up to, the healing and sanctification and transformation of all people and the whole creation.

Christmas, Ascension, All Saints: all these feasts are about the union of God and humanity: God becoming one of us in the Incarnation, the ascended Jesus uniting our human nature to God forever, and the all the Saints as unique, unrepeatable instantiations and icons of the union of God and humanity intended for each and every one of us.

If God has joined Godself to our humanity, then we can never really be separated from God, or from one another. To me, the most striking modern account of this transforming vision, this illumination of the eyes of the heart, is from Thomas Merton.

He was a monk, of course, but it seems his most powerful and life-changing—indeed visionary—experience happened outside the monastery, when on March 18, 1958, he was running errands in downtown Louisville, Kentucky. He wrote about it in his book *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, and I'll conclude with an excerpt from that account. At least parts of this will be familiar to some of you, but I think this is worth hearing and pondering again and again:

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 381.

*In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers.*

*It was like waking from a dream of separateness... The whole illusion of a separate holy existence is a dream. This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud...*

*It is a glorious destiny to be a member of the human race, though it is a race dedicated to many absurdities and one which makes many terrible mistakes: yet, with all that, God Himself gloried in becoming a member of the human race. A member of the human race! To think that such a commonplace realization should suddenly seem like news that one holds the winning ticket in a cosmic sweepstakes.*

*I have the immense joy of being [hu]man, a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now that I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.*

*[I]t was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God's eyes. If only they could all see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed...*

*... At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God... which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will. This little point of nothingness and of absolute poverty is the pure glory of God in us... It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody, and if we could see it we would see these*

*billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely...*

*I have no program for this seeing. It is only given. But the gate of heaven is everywhere.<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Doubleday, 1965), 153f.