

A SERMON PREACHED ON THE FIRST SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS,

DECEMBER 31, 2017 AT BETHANY BEACH CHRISTIAN CHURCH, BETHANY BEACH, DE

Alice was taking an afternoon nap on New Year's Eve before the festivities. After she woke up, she confided to Max, her husband, 'I just dreamed that you gave me a diamond ring for a New Year's present. What do you think it all means?'

'Aha, you'll know tonight,' answered Max smiling broadly.

At midnight, as the New Year was chiming, Max approached Jemima and handed her small package. Delighted and excited she opened it quickly. There in her hand rested a book entitled: 'The meaning of dreams'.ⁱ

And here we are once again, folks, at the end of the year, looking back on all that has passed these 360 some days and looking forward to what's in our dreams for 2018. We're told that we're supposed to make resolutions, but I'm of the mind of Oscar Wilde who is said to have written "Good resolutions are simply checks that men draw on a bank where they have no account."ⁱⁱ Although it is admirable that we try to better ourselves and the world around us! I think if even a few of us were able to follow through on our good intentions, we and the communities in which we live would fare so much better. It makes one wonder where all those wonderful messages on Christmas cards go: if not into our minds and hearts, where have they landed? Somewhere I believe there is a big pile of wishes that need to be dug into, little by little, and as the singer/songwriter John Lennon imagined, "the world would be as one."

Today is the 6th day of Christmas, the time of six geese a-laying in "The Twelve Days of Christmas." [The fact that this is the gift for the sixth day does not seem to have any particular meaning, unless one buys into the now debunked theory that the song was meant to be a way for young children to remember the church catechism. If anything, it was probably an old children's game or an adult drinking song.] The gospel lesson for today in the Disciple's lectionary text shows the early life of Jesus and the recognition by the elders, especially the temple servants Anna and Simeon, that he is the one long awaited. It's a bit confusing because they jump ahead to dates and holy days that we will remember in the months ahead; but as next Sunday talks of the baptism of Jesus as an adult, the lectionary does what it can to get out of the way of itself and let the story of the sacramental life of Jesus be told. So first we learn that Joseph and Mary are devout Jews, and they do what

devout Jews of their day did; after 40 days, they went to present their first-born child at the temple and to perform the ritual cleansing following the birth of a child. According to Jewish law, the firstborn male child belonged to God, and the parents had to "buy him back" on the 40th day after his birth, by offering a sacrifice of "a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons" in the temple. Mary and Joseph kept this law, even though, since Mary was said to have remained a virgin after the birth of Christ, she would not have had to go through ritual purification. While at the temple they encountered the elders Simeon and Anna, each of whom has a part in naming the child, with Simeon proclaiming Jesus as our salvation, the light to lighten the Gentiles, while Anna adds her own voice, prophesying that he will be the redeemer of the world. Both characters are important to the story told by Luke, the gospel's author, as their voices demonstrate that Jesus came to save all the world (not just the Jews, as in *Matthew* and *Mark*), or a specialized few believers (as in *John*). Plus their old age plays a part here as well. Having waited so long, they represent an expectant Israel that too has waited centuries for redemption and freedom since the ancient of days. Now, they can rest in peace, for they have seen what they longed to see. This is a very early turning point in Luke's gospel, as it marks a leap from infancy to the adult Jesus.

The part that is missing from this morning's text takes place when Jesus is a teenager. Luke says, "Every year Jesus' parents went to Jerusalem for the Festival of the Passover. When he was twelve years old, they went up to the festival, according to the custom. After the festival was over, while his parents were returning home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but they were unaware of it. Thinking he was in their company, they traveled on for a day. Then they began looking for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they went back to Jerusalem to look for him. After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him, they were astonished. His mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you."

"Why were you searching for me?" he asked. "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" But they did not understand what he was saying to them.

Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. But his mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man."ⁱⁱⁱ

Next week we encounter Jesus as a thirty-year old waiting to be baptized by John (just who John was is a matter of discussion; Luke presents them as cousins and devotes an entire chapter (#1) to his early life, and a good portion of chapter 3 as well; some scholars, like John Spong, doubt they were related - - but that is a subject for another day...). Of course the first thing I wanted to know when I read this story is what happened between ages 12 and 30 (this is assuming that Jesus was 33 when he died, but it is more a number of symbolic convenience; any other number would probably do just as well; and if we realize that the calendar was off by four years and that Jesus was actually most likely born in 4 BC, that really messes things up. Again, a sermon for another day - - or perhaps an adult class for Lent?!).

The unknown years of Jesus (also called his silent years, lost years, or missing years) generally refers to the period between his childhood and the beginning of his ministry, a period not described in the New Testament.

The "lost years of Jesus" concept is usually encountered in esoteric literature but is not commonly used in scholarly literature since it is assumed that Jesus was probably working as a carpenter in Galilee, at least some of the time with his father Joseph, from the age of twelve till thirty, so the years were not "lost years", and that he died on Calvary. The ages of 12 and 30, the approximate ages at either end of the unknown years, have some significance in Judaism of the Second Temple period: 13 is the age of the bar mitzvah, the age of secular maturity, and 30 the age of readiness for the priesthood, although Jesus was not of the tribe of Levi. Christians have generally taken the statement in *The Gospel of Mark* (6:3) referring to Jesus as "Is not this the carpenter...?" as an indication that before the age of 30 Jesus had been working as a carpenter. The tone of the passage leading to the question "Is not this the carpenter?" suggests familiarity with Jesus in the area, reinforcing that he had been generally seen as a carpenter in the gospel account before the start of his ministry. *The Gospel of Matthew* (13:55) poses the question as "Is not this the carpenter's son?" suggesting that the profession of carpenter had been a family business and Jesus was engaged in it before starting his preaching and ministry in the gospel accounts. The problem is that geological and historical records of the day do not support a lot of work for carpenters in the area of Nazareth, so it would have been hard to make a living unless one travelled to the nearby reconstruction of the city of Sepphoris. The truth is, like so much of the gospel, we just cannot easily fill in the gaps in the story. That has not stopped folks from trying, however. There is a rich tradition of legends that that attempts to do so.

In the late medieval period, there appeared Arthurian tales that the young Jesus had been in Britain. In the 19th and 20th centuries theories began to emerge that between the ages of 12 and 30 Jesus had visited Kashmir, or had studied with the Essenes in the Judea desert. Modern mainstream Christian scholarship has generally rejected these theories and holds that nothing is known about this time period in the life of Jesus.^{iv} This leads me to think what a good idea it would be in Lent to explore some of the traditions surrounding Jesus, both generally accepted and not, a move that would help us increase our faith. After all, the more we know, the more we can come to believe? Maybe so, maybe so. I do believe that learning more about the life of Jesus as the Christ in the new year would be an excellent resolution.

So getting back to those New Year resolutions, I was amused but not surprised a study from the University of Bristol discovered that 88 per cent of our resolutions fail, most often by the time Valentine's Day rolls around. I'd like to make a suggestion I discovered when thinking about resolutions for this week's sermon. We most often fail in our resolution-making because we try to do too many things, and/or our expectations are too high. For 2018, why not reconsider your New Year's resolutions. Scrap that long list of goals you won't remember three weeks from now anyway. Choose just one word, one word that sums up who you want to be or how you want to live, one word that you can focus on every day, all year long. It will take intentionality and commitment, but if you let it, your one word will shape not only your year, but also you. It will become the compass that directs your decisions and guides your steps. I think you'll be amazed at the impact one word can make. Here are some helpful starters: Resolve, Togetherness, Risk, Minimize, Ignite, Release, Uplift, Transition, Simplify, Balance, Choose, Appreciate, Push, Present, Reduce, Change, Create, Adapt, Transform, Different, Finish, Slow, Thrive, No, Believe, Persist, Rebuild, Joy, Optimism, Imagine, Enjoy, Focus, Commit, Open, Learn, Discover, Progress, Empower, Shine, Pause, Sacrifice, Listen, Love, Embrace, Revel, Connect, Trust, Organize, Celebrate, Today, Be, Invest, Soar, Diligence, Strength, Write, Relax, and my favorite: Dare. Try one word on for size. 365 days. It might result in the life change you were seeking...

And so when I see most of you again it will be in the New Year. It has been great to get to know you for just this short amount of time, and I hope the sermons I've shared with you in the past five months have given you something to think about and grow into in the days ahead.

One of my resolutions is to carry a bit of humor into the new year, so try this on for size: Two cannibals were eating a clown, and the one turns to the other and says, "Does this taste funny to you?" Keep your sense of humor in 2018; it's one thing to lose weight, another to lose the ability or willingness to laugh and smile.

Amen.

(The Rev. Dr.) Rayner W. Hesse, Jr.
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ⁱ http://www.guy-sports.com/humor/christmas/new_year.htm

ⁱⁱ <http://itsamoneything.com/money/quotations-new-years-resolutions-oscar-wilde/#.WkL1TbpFzIU>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke+2&version=NIV>

^{iv} https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unknown_years_of_Jesus