

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
Don't be Afraid to Encounter Jesus  
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Luke 2:21-35

I want you to think about the last drive you took from point A to point B. It doesn't matter what points A and B are. They could have been from home to work, or the store to home, it is not all that important. What matters is that along the way you passed by homes, stores, shops and perhaps parks, and yet, if you are like me, they were just markers along the way. They were simply the stuff you had to pass by to get from point A to Point B. They were of no particular interest to you and so there was no reason to give them a second thought. Ever done that? If you have then you understand how I feel about this morning's text. I say this because this is the way I have always thought of this scripture about Jesus' family and its adherence to Jewish rituals, as well as the story of Simeon and the baby Jesus. These are interesting but are merely markers along the way from point A, -Jesus birth to point B, -his ministry and nothing more. They are hardly worth examining because we need to get to the meat of the Gospel as Jesus teaches, heals, dies and is raised. But what if there is more here than meets the eye? What if there is something here that we should not miss because it turns out to be critical not only to the rest of the story, but to our lives as well? This morning then, I invite you to put your car in park, get out and take a closer look at this story.

I realize that at first glance there is nothing of note here. As good Jews, Mary and Joseph know what is expected of them at the birth of a child. First, they have him circumcised on the eighth day. Second, after Mary is declared ritually clean following the birth, they bring their child to Jerusalem in order to redeem him for God, meaning that they are to make an appropriate sacrifice at the Temple. In this case the sacrifice of the poor which was a pair of turtle doves or two young pigeons. So far there is nothing unusual in the story. But even when things take a turn toward something out of the ordinary with this guy named Simeon, we readers know that what happens next isn't unusual at all. As a reminder, Simeon is a man who regularly comes to the Temple looking for the messiah and believes he will not die until he sees the savior. When Simeon sees Mary, Joseph and Jesus, he takes Jesus out of Mary's arms and gives thanks to God for sending this child, whom Simeon believes to be that messiah. Again, while this is a bit out of the ordinary, it doesn't surprise us at all because we know who Jesus is. Again, nothing out of the ordinary except one word...Amazed. *"And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him."*

The word amazed in the Greek means to wonder greatly about, or to be astonished out of one's senses, or perhaps to marvel about something that is completely unexpected. It is this response of marveling amazement that should cause us to take a closer look. I say this because Mary and Joseph should not have been amazed by this at all. In order to remind ourselves why this is so, let's recap Luke's story. First, Mary meets an angel who tells her that she will become pregnant

by the Holy Spirit and give birth to a child who will be a king in the line of David and will rule forever. Next, Mary visits Elizabeth who asks, “Why should the mother of my Lord come and visit me?” In Matthew’s telling of the story it is not only Mary who receives an angelic visit but Joseph has one as well when he is told that his son will save the people from their sins...a messianic task if there ever was one. Then, on the night of Jesus’ birth shepherds arrive with the same message that Jesus is the messiah. And finally, there is the visit of the astrologers from the East who bring gifts fit for a king. We might figure then that Mary and Joseph get it; get it that there is something special about their son and that he will be the savior of his people and of the world. So why are they still amazed, astonished and marveling at what was said? Perhaps because that is the reality of Jesus...he is always someone who is supposed to amaze.

We can see this in that Mary never fully understands her son. She is amazed when he wanders off in the Temple to visit and learn from the teachers of the Law. She is so amazed when he begins his ministry that she and her other children go in search of Jesus in order to bring him home because, as the Gospel of Mark puts it, they believed him to be out of his mind. The disciples don’t do any better. The disciples are always amazed. It doesn’t matter how many times he eats with the wrong people; they are amazed. It doesn’t matter how many times he feeds the hungry; they are amazed. It doesn’t matter how many times he speaks of humility and forgiveness that they are amazed that he means it. It doesn’t matter how many miracles he does; they are amazed. And finally, regardless of how many times he speaks of his resurrection they are amazed when it happens. No this is the way that Jesus is...he is the one that amazes.

The problem with many of us, me included, is that we have become so accustomed to Jesus that we miss how amazing he really is. What I mean by this is that we have domesticated Jesus. We have turned this amazing, life transforming, world changing messiah into someone that doesn’t make us nervous, that doesn’t challenge us, that doesn’t push us into being more faithful God followers. If we are conservative, we have made him into a conservative. If we are liberals, we have made him into a liberal. If we desire to be comforted, he becomes a warm blanket. If we need a friend, he becomes our buddy. If we need someone to forgive us, we turn him into someone who doesn’t really care about our sins, but just let’s them slide. And in the process, we are no longer amazed. We are no longer amazed that Jesus changes lives, transforms lives, recreates lives; that Jesus is capable of doing far more in us than we can imagine. We are no longer amazed when Jesus changes and resurrects churches; that Jesus can give new hope and meaning to what it means to be a community of believers. We are no longer amazed when we experience the absolute height, breadth and depth of God’s love that can change the entire world; that is capable of offering reconciliation across lines of race, gender, language, sexual orientation, nationality and ability. A domesticated Jesus cannot amaze. But the fact is that Jesus is still the one who can and does amaze. Jesus is the one who has done, is doing and will continue doing what should amaze us all.

My challenge then for each of us in this coming new year, is to set aside our domesticated Jesus and go in search of the Jesus who still amazes; the Jesus who can do amazing things in us and in the world, asking ourselves this question, “How is Jesus amazing me?”