

“The House and Family”

Luke 2:1–7

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The House of Hope Presbyterian Church

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Sixth Sunday of Easter Confirmation Sunday

As is our tradition, each year on Confirmation Sunday, the confirmation class gets to choose the passage. This is often an exercise in exploring some of the more obscure passages of the Bible – the goofy and strange pieces of scripture that rarely see the light of day. Last year, it was King Solomon adjudicated a dispute between two mothers, in which he suggests the baby be split in two. This year, however, we get a prominent and familiar passage of scripture, though it is no less strange to hear it this time of year. Doug did make a valiant attempt at guiding in another direction – you know, no Confirmation class has ever chosen the lectionary passage assigned for this Sunday. You could be the first class to do that – but this was the choice.

As I spent time with this passage – on my back patio, looking up at the red buds on our maple tree, it offered something different than it would if I was at our table, looking out at the Christmas lights on the trees across the street. So I invite you to listen now to these familiar words from the Gospel according to Luke.

“In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.”

The word of the Lord,
Thanks be to God.

It does occur to me that if we’d had confirmation three weeks ago, at least we’d’ve had the snow for it. It is fun to be reading this text outside the boundaries we normally set for it – I’ve long wondered what is like to be the church in Southern hemisphere, with Christmas celebrated in the midst of summer, or Easter in the fall. So many of our traditions rely on the seasons, and they would be so different if they were celebrated another time.

Reading here, in May, far removed from the traditions of the Christmas season, what most stood out to me about this passage was the census itself – the journey to Bethlehem. It’s not as central when we are in the midst of December – after all, angels and sheep are more picturesque participants in the pageant than, say census takers and fellow travelers, and I don’t know of a hymn that mentions Quirinius or

registration. But this census, this travel to Bethlehem, is a big part of the passage. Luke wants to firmly establish that the story of Immanuel, God with us, begins in Bethlehem.

Now, there is little that happens later in the book with regard to Bethlehem – Jesus spends most of his ministry up in Galilee, or in Jerusalem itself, but it was important that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, because that was the home of the house and family of David, and it is through David's line that God promised a Messiah, a green shoot coming from the stump of Jesse, David's father. If Jesus is to be that new life, the promised Messiah, then his story should begin in Bethlehem, the home of the house and family of David. That is where Christ's journey with us began.

Yesterday, listening to the confirmands' statements of faith as they read them to the Session, so many of them began telling their stories from this place, this congregation. Many said they've been here since they were born, and after today, all of the members of this class will have been baptized here. For those who were baptized as infants, we went back and found the bulletins from the days of their baptism. They were baptized by Linda and Tom and Gale and Joann, many fourteen or fifteen years ago.

They may be our newest members, but they have been a part of this community for a long time. They mentioned sitting on the steps for Time for Children, watching the VeggieTales movies in the old theater room upstairs, and yes, being a shepherd in the Christmas pageant. This is where Christ's journey with them has begun. They have embraced the particular vision of church seen here at House of Hope as a place that has shaped them in their journeys of faith.

Several mentioned the importance of choir school in their life of faith – listen for this line from a statement: "I feel my strongest connection with God while singing in the choir...Choir school is a big part in my life, and I always look forward to going to rehearsals on Wednesdays. It's such a beautiful feeling to hear many different voices joined together to sing, and I love how it all just blends. It reminds me of the many different people in a congregation with different strengths and gifts, blending together beautifully to do God's work."

For others, it has been places of mission – they helped put on the Project Home Halloween party in October, as part of our mission with homeless families staying here in the building. One said "The faith that we practice gives light in dark areas... that the church's mission is to increase the quality of other people's lives through scripture and action." Another said that "God calls upon us to live our lives for not only ourselves, but for other people." One more saw the example in Jesus' own life, that "he has shown that all things be done with love, joy, peace, kindness, patience, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."

Still others connect with worship – "One of the phrases I hear almost every Sunday is "The Lord be with you," to which we respond "and also with you." It represents what I as a Presbyterian believe, that no matter who you are, and where you came from, you'll be accepted in the church." The creativity and openness extends beyond that too – to the ways we are bringing forward art and music with our children: "I feel closest with God when I am being creative, such as when I'm singing in the choir or when I'm drawing. I especially enjoy working with kids in Godly Play because I can see them learning quickly as we shape their minds and teach them about the Bible."

Through all their lives, these will be touchstones of faith. No matter where their life leads, they will be shaped by their experiences here at House of Hope, their experiences of God when they were children, and now as youth. One spoke about a new understanding of the presence of God following the loss of her grandmother, and how she would carry that memory forward in her life of faith.

In scripture, it was important that Christ's life began in Bethlehem, within the specific house and family of David. In the lives of our confirmands, it is important that God's call to them began here, within the

specific house and family of The House of Hope. I suspect for the rest of us, our journeys in faith contain such a place – perhaps even here – a place where we connected with a tradition and a faith that long preceded us, a place where our journeys began. Through situating Christ's beginning in Bethlehem, Luke connects Jesus to all that has gone before; through our specific moment here, our tradition and the heritage of our faith does the same. Here, now, in this place and in this time, journeys of faith are beginning, and God is calling them forth here, today. Just as Joseph and Mary went to Bethlehem, so we are all gathered here.

We often read another text in the Christmas season, Isaiah 43, "See, I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" As God brought Joseph and Mary to that stable in Bethlehem, it was not to simply fulfill the promise of scripture, but that through Christ's life, something altogether new would be born. We see this also in our lives, and in the lives and journeys of our confirmands. I am about to do a new thing. Christ completely transformed the promise of the Messiah. In our lives, we are transformed – in all the places we anticipate straightforward fulfillment of our expectations, there is always the potential for God to bear something new into the world. We speak of the beginning of the journey of faith, but this transforming newness is central to the whole life of faith. Some of our confirmands' statements of faith reflect this unknown journey:

"All in all, I am very much looking forward to joining such an amazing place for growth in my faith and to learn more about my faith." And especially the mystery of faith, the challenges where doubt and faith emerge side by side, where being surrounded by community is all the more important. "It's hard to understand how [the Trinity] can all be the same, but I think it actually makes more sense that you shouldn't be able to understand everything about God."

And seeing the role the church plays in the journeys we encounter through our lives. One quoted from Stairway to Heaven by LED Zeppelin: "Yes, there are two paths you can go by, but in the long run, there's still time to change the road you're on", and related that to church, saying that "the church helps people choose what path to be on, whether it's getting off one path and getting on another, or just choosing one to be on."

One even shared the longer perspective of confirmation being a step on a lifelong path: "Confirmation helps build a community of confirmands that have known each other, [some] since they were in preschool and will know each other through their wedding day and up until death - it is very cool to have that long lasting community."

Over the past months and years, our whole lives long, we have been on a journey of faith, beginning where we were first called by God, continuing throughout our life. God keeps faith with us, bearing us forward into fulfillment, always doing a new thing, always transforming the expected into the miraculous, bringing forth new life in all our lives.

Today, we give thanks for that journey, and especially for these fellow travelers on our journey, who already provide a reflection of God's light on our path. Thanks be to God. Amen.