

“The Elephant in the Midst of the Manger Scene”

A sermon shared by Rev. Catherine Somerville with the congregation of
St. Andrew's United Church on Sunday December 30, 2018

Text: Luke 2: 41-51

It's a story we have heard a hundred times, a thousand times. A young person goes missing in our city. A description is offered. Usually, there is a picture attached to the newspaper story. And when things go well, there is a small follow-up news item a few days later, telling citizens that the search has been called off. The person has been located.

On December 10, there was a picture in the local paper. A young man has not come home since the 3rd of December. It's reported that he is 25 years old, five feet ten inches tall, 155 pounds, with brown hair and brown eyes, a round face, and he is sporting a bandana around his head. His phone was found on Pine Street, in the Big Brothers-Big Sisters parking lot. Posters are up all over the city. About a week ago, some grainy images were released from Vale; security cameras had picked up someone wandering on their property out by Froot Road. The police are asking people in the West End to check their sheds and garages. As of this morning, he is still missing.

What makes this story different for me is that I knew this missing person when he was a little boy. His grandma brought him and her other grandchildren to church at St. Stephen's on the Hill just about every Sunday. He was baptized into the Christian community in September, 1993. When he was little, this boy had freckles across his nose, a pointy chin, and a funny, toothy smile. One year, he portrayed a wise man in the Christmas play. He got to carry in a GPS, for in this particular play the wise ones were seeking the Christ Child by satellite tracking.

His grandmother is gone now, but I know this young man's mom, the one who keeps issuing pleas for help. “He is a good boy”, she tells the media. “He is a troubled boy who needs medical attention.” “He is my boy.”

Two thousand years ago, another mom said the same sort of thing. Her boy had not shown up when he was supposed to appear at the end of the day. His mom and dad raced back to the last places they had seen him, frantically searching the inn where they had slept. The owner was grumpy and short-tempered because one of the cleaning staff had sent word that he would not be coming in – he was sick with a stomach ache. The owner knew hangover when he heard it. And then these parents, right in his face, had peppered him with questions; they were so insistent for a bit of good news. “Can't you even keep track of your own kid?” he mumbled as he went back to his work.

Mom and Dad ran through the streets where they had shopped for souvenir postcards and t-shirts they planned to take back to the people at home, proclaiming that they had been to Jerusalem for the Passover and all they got was this lousy t-shirt. They scoured every stall in the market where they had purchased treats you only get to eat when you are traveling, things like ice cream cones and caramel corn and hot dogs

(something like that – but probably more like figs and dates and crusty bread in their case). They stopped at the coffee place where they had lingered and visited with neighbours from back home. How they had laughed and marveled at how small the world was, that you could travel all this way, and somehow in the midst of a crowd of a million people, you would walk right up to the folks who live next door.

They went back to the well where they filled up the water containers, and even to the city parks where they had stopped for a few minutes to listen to the street performers, even while they had kept watch against pick pockets who would surely rob a tourist blind. And finally, they went to the last place they imagined him to be, to the temple, the sacred place of worship. That was where they found him, engaged in deep and complex conversations with the learned ones.

“Child, what were you thinking? We were worried sick.”

We are told that Jesus responded to their fears with puzzlement and questions of his own.

Biblical scholars have long wondered why this particular passage is placed here, and why it is inserted into the lectionary on the first Sunday after Christmas. They point to the fact that it doesn't exactly fit anywhere in the gospel narrative. Up to now, we have heard of a miraculous birth and Joseph assuming the role of step-dad. It's the only account we have of Jesus as a youth, and those scholars tell us how this story may have come for a later outside source, as they point us towards later traditions that created narratives of the young Jesus, many of which are collected in a book entitled “The Infancy Gospel of Thomas”. Those stories range over an eight year period, following Jesus from five to twelve years of age. They portray him mostly as a miracle worker. At five he makes birds out of mud, and then claps his hands so that the birds fly away; later when he helps his dad in the carpenter shop by stretching out a board cut too short for its intended use. Obviously someone forgot the wisdom of measuring twice and cutting once.

The stories become even stranger; he causes a boy who jostles him in the marketplace to die and then strikes blind those who subsequently complain. He raises to life a boy who fell off a roof so that he could testify that Jesus did not actually push him off, as some had claimed. The Infancy Gospel of Thomas ends with this story of Jesus in the temple and the amazement of the priests who had never heard such excellence and wisdom.

Now I am by no means a Biblical scholar but I know exactly why this passage is placed here in Christmas week. And it all has to do with elephants. For all of us have just come through a week where the strangest things have happened, like watching the person you spent such time and money buying the perfect gift for, but he barely makes eye contact because he is too busy texting on his phone, or the relatives who came in and plopped themselves down on the couch and expected everyone else to wait on them hand and foot, or the drama that the cousins brought in along with the cold outside air, that started to feel about as bad as an itchy Christmas sweater, and all the late

nights, too much food, too much drink, too much gossip; the frustration of having to make the perfect Christmas and knowing even as you are trying your hardest, that it is all going to fall too short; the kids who act up because they are strung out on sugar; the ones who forget to show up, and the unexpected ones who do, and everything that happens despite the best laid plans.

This story is here because we all know that family life is messy, especially when we are celebrating holidays. Feelings get hurt. People say cruel things. Truth is spoken. Secrets are kept but you can't say a word or else people will shatter. Life doesn't unfold as you dream it to be. Mary and Joseph lose their son and they almost lose their minds with worry. He doesn't get it, but he shrugs his shoulders and goes along to keep the peace or maybe to get them to stop their hassling.

It's like an elephant in the middle of the living room. Elephants are big. They take up a lot of space. And they leave things behind – things that are messy and you have to clean up. You know what I am referring to...

Elephants sneak in to the most orderly of ordered lives, when you know there is something not right but you can't acknowledge that a strange beast has taken up space in your space. Elephants are all the things you want to say, all the truths you want so desperately to voice, all the fears you wish you could acknowledge, all the hurts you carry, all the secrets lodged deep inside, and you can't say a peep about the elephant in the room because it's not the right time and people won't know how to react.

Sometimes we can't speak truth out loud because life is so fragile and balanced so precariously that if you do say the wrong thing the whole façade just might come tumbling down. Family life is messy and that's why, if I had my way, I would make a bit of room in my nativity scene for a dose of truth. Maybe it's time that we planted an elephant right in the middle of this beautiful scene, because we are telling the world, and more important, reminding ourselves, that despite all of our best hopes and dreams, life can be messy.

But, when we have the courage to acknowledge the messiness, then we also allow a breath of real air to flow in. We just might call it the work of God's Holy Spirit. We can allow room for the grace of God to enter our manger-homes, and we can permit the One known as Creator to craft a new story out of our shepherd-stories. We can make room for the real and true life of Christ to begin to build what he intends for all people in the stables of our hearts. That's what the Holy Spirit does. It makes room.

So yes, family life is messy. It can't be anything less because we are human and relationships are tough work. Children break their parents' hearts. They run away from home. Parents break their children's hearts because their own hearts were broken apart when they were young. People can't always be at their best.

But when we do something audacious, like placing an elephant right in the middle of an expected scene, or say "enough", or simply decide not to try to keep up for the sake of

keeping up appearances, then we are telling the world that we dare to live a bit different. We are allowing God to make a space in us.

We are allowing for something new and unexpected to be born in the manger places and shepherd stories of our living. We dare to know the love that grounds us and lifts us.

And so, rather than trying to pretend by keeping the peace, or be doing and doing and doing in a whirl of busyness, instead, we can say a simple “yes” which enables us to be the people God wants us to be, elephants and all, in spite of it all. That is grace and that is love, and that is the real gift of Christmas given to us. We live in the world God has made for us, and we the beloved followers of the one who brings light and guides the way.

Sources Used:

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Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 1, pages 164-169