

**Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
The Reverend Dr Scott Everett Couper
Sunday, December 26, 2021
First Sunday after Christmas**

“Who Is This Child?”

Christian Scripture: Luke 2:41-52



I can understand how upset Mary and Joseph were. Anyone who has ever cared for a child knows the stomach-churning anxiety when he or she cannot be found. It matters not if it is on the streets of New York City or in a Macy's department store. And when they found him, I am sure Jesus got more than an earful.



I remember once many years ago our family was staying at a resort in Mauritius, an island country in the middle of the Indian ocean. The resort's pools were close enough to the hotel room that the kids knew how to get from the pools to the room. One-night Micah came back to the room and Madeline did not.



“Micah, where is Maddy?” “I don’t know.” “Micah, go to the pool and go get Maddy”. Micah came back. “She’s not there.” Panic. Major panic. Micah stayed at the room and Madeline’s mother and I split-up to look for her everywhere. After a frantic search for an hour or two we found her. Madeline met a new friend at the pool and her parents invited Madeline to play in their room. Upon seeing us, Madeline shed tears. Not because she thought she was in trouble. Not because we were angry with her. She cried because she could see that her parents were



about to vomit with so much worry. She knew how deeply we loved her. She could see from our emotions that our world would collapse without her.

Imagine how much worse it was for Mary and Joseph after losing their son for over four days in a city! They must have

been ready to tear-out their hearts. Jesus' cool as a cucumber response may have engendered some justified consternation from his parents. Jesus replied, so the story goes, "Where else do you think I was? I was in my father's house" (Luke 2:49).

We know that at the time of Jesus death that only his mother Mary seemed to be around. Therefore, this story about Jesus being lost, seems to me, came from Mary and thus is told from her perspective. Mary's memory of her son's AWOL incident likely softened after several decades. Hence, her recollections focus on how Jesus being lost foreshadowed his future vocation and even the searing pain she would experience when the Romans executed him.



Gosh. Children grow-up so fast. Just yesterday they were babies, and now they are both in college, one in South Africa and one in St Louis. And so, the lectionary rushes us along. Gosh. When was it, Friday, when Jesus was just a baby? Now only two days later, he is twelve years old!

Twelve is about the age I was confirmed into church membership. I remember for my confirmation assignments I read the gospels for the first time.



Also at the time, I was able to board the Trident nuclear submarine on which my father served. And I compared “Love your enemies” (Matthew 5:44) and ‘Twenty-four missiles, twelve warheads per missile. That’s 288 warheads. Each are eight times as destructive as the one dropped on Nagasaki, reigning death around the world and a nuclear winter.’¹ At this age, I began exploring my faith and had hints of my calling to the ministry. The pre-teen years can be quite formative.

Apparently, they were for Jesus as they were for me.

¹ “The U.S. Navy operates 14 of these ballistic missile submarines, each of which can carry as many as 24 Trident II missiles. Although the Trident II is designed to carry as many as 12 multiple independently targetable reentry vehicle (MIRV) warheads, current treaties reduce this number to four or five.” “Navy asks Lockheed Martin to build additional Trident II D5 submarine-launched ballistic nuclear missiles”, Military and Aerospace Electronics, January 23, 2020. Found at: <https://www.militaryaerospace.com/computers/article/14075290/nuclear-missiles-submarinelunched-trident-ii>, accessed December 26, 2021.

So, who is this prodigy child who was thought to be lost in Jerusalem but was actually lecturing at the Temple? Well, I believe Jesus was a child who, as he grew and matured, gradually emptied himself of his own ego and sin and thus allowed the Holy Spirit to fill the void. I believe that Jesus grew to speak with such authority that he became, fully and perfectly, God's representative on Earth.



Jesus is often also referred to as 'Christ', which is a title that means 'Messiah' or 'Anointed'. Neither 'Messiah' nor 'Anointed' necessarily meant 'God' in the Hebrew mind.

Stated in other words, I believe that Jesus was fully human and thus born of Mary and Joseph. I believe that Jesus during the course of his life so transcended human spiritual limitations that he, more than any other, perfectly resonated with God's spirit. Others heard and saw this resonance, thus enabling Jesus to speak authoritatively. Jesus spoke with such authority that he, for all intents and purposes, spoke for, or on behalf of, God.

One of the goals of the gospel writers was to link Jesus to the fulfillment of prophesy or to link him with a predecessor, like Moses or Elijah. Well, the lectionary calendar seeks to do the same.



Though we did not read it aloud, the second chapter of I Samuel tells of a story whereby Samuel is essentially given by his parents to the Temple as an offering to God. In return, Samuel's predecessor, Eli, blessed his mother, Hannah, that she may have more children to replace Samuel. The scriptures tell us that each year Hannah brought to Samuel a new set of ceremonial vestments to wear at the Temple. After his service to Eli at the Temple, Samuel became the the last Judge of Israel, a priest, and the first prophet of Israel (after Moses). The combination of our two scriptures therefore proclaims that like Samuel before him, Jesus is a judge, a priest, and a prophet who spoke for, or on behalf of, God.

My answer to the question 'who is this child?' may be for some 'not orthodox enough' while for others 'too orthodox'. I am a bit of a moderate in most things. But to what degree one understands Jesus to be fully human or to what degree one understands Jesus to be fully divine is quite frankly neither here nor

there. If you wish to argue about fourth century Greek philosophy, I will not object.

What is crucial for you and I to answer is *not* 'who you believe Jesus was' but perhaps more importantly 'do you seek to follow his teaching'?

'Orthodoxy' means 'right belief' and I personally doubt God cares primarily what you believe. Rather, orthopraxy is what may truly matter.

Orthopraxy is 'right practice', or 'right behavior'. Jesus said "I am the way, the truth, and the light (John 14:6)". The emphasis on 'the way' seems so crucial to me. It is orthopraxy, not orthodoxy that may matter the most. 'Do we follow the way of Jesus?' is a much better question to resolve than 'Who is Jesus?' Yet, it is true that one perhaps leads to the other.

This was the Word of God. And it was delivered to the People of God. And the People of God responded, "Amen!"