

The Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd

Austin, Texas

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II Christmas, Luke 2:41-52

For he is our lifelong pattern; daily, when on earth he grew,
he was tempted, scorned, rejected, tears and smiles like us he knew.
Thus he feels for all our sadness, and he shares in all our gladness. *Amen.*

I have a tendency to be a person concerned with details. Increasingly, I recognize that while such attention can elucidate, so, too, can it cripple.

As a child I collected baseball cards and paid careful attention to the character of every cardboard scap's corners and edges: Were they crisp? Were they dull? Did they show the telling white lines of a straightened crease? On a raised, flat surface I would carefully sort the cards by team, and then by year, and then by number. I can still identify a 1981 Donruss from a 1979 Topps without so much as a blink of hesitation.

As a teenager, I collected movie and television memorabilia, and I would scavenge through piles of old toys at flea markets and garage sales in search of an Arnold Horseshack figure who had not lost his emblematic hat and scarf, or an Incredible Hulk metal lunchbox whose Thermos still bore the image of Bill Bixby ripping off his shirt as he became a giant, green, Lou Ferrigno. For better or for worse I still know that the demand for Star Wars toys caught J.C. Penny's off-guard in the fall of 1977, and the company issued a supplementary catalogue of action figures and playsets in late November, including an advertisement to purchase a nearly empty box to put under the Christmas tree. The box contained only cardboard cutouts of the action figures that would later be mailed to the lucky child, and that cardboard box became a highly desired collectible, one which I once found and later sold because one of its paper seams had begun to tear.

Burdened only by the preoccupations of youth, in those days the pursuit and study of detail was a satisfying undertaking. I sleeved my LP's, then catalogued my cassettes, and, on one grievous afternoon, even Windex-ed my Compact Disc cases, and I felt richer, not poorer, for the enterprises.

Then, as an adult, I began restoring cars, initially out of necessity. I could not afford much of a vehicle, so when a friend of mine called with the news that his 1969 Cadillac Sedan deVille was going to be towed to the junkyard by Mr. Al Carroll, whose service station parking lot the Cadi was currently clogging, I offered him what the junkyard had been willing to pay: \$245. Now, this Cadillac had recently sustained a modest under-hood fire, but my father and I rebuilt the carburetor, replaced the fuel pump, changed the plugs and melted wires, and she started right up, roaring and purring all at once.

Initially, the satisfaction of simply hearing the engine turn was enough. In fact, it was more than enough – it was as much wizardry as mechanics, and it felt very good to use my hands. Soon, however, I noticed three, small holes alongside the right rear quarter panel. A bit

of research taught me that the three holes testified to the emblem that was once there, and so I decided to find what had been lost, and replace the missing “Sedan deVille” script. I bought the small part from a mail-order company, fit the script into its place, and that quarter panel looked like it did on the new car lot back in 1968. But soon the sparkle of that emblem had me concerned about the shine of the bumpers, which now looked dull and tired in comparison. So I removed those bumpers and had them re-chromed. And when I fit them back on that ’69, you couldn’t even look directly at the car in the sun without the threat of being blinded, the sparkle and shine of the new chrome was so powerful. Trouble was, that same sparkling chrome was now making the paint look awfully faded, so I decided to remove the new chrome emblems and freshly re-chromed bumpers in order that the car could be fully and properly repainted. And the pristine “Arctic White” ride soon looked like it belonged on a stage. But I discovered that the dust of new paint finds its way into the interior of a car, and every inch of the Cadillac’s black fabric was dusted in an overspray of white powder. So, obviously, I needed to remove the whole interior in order that I could properly clean the mess the paint shop had made and replace everything that had been ruined.

And rather than providing me a rich sense of satisfaction, my attention to detail eventually consumed me, taking the life it had once given and leaving me instead with a sense of loss and frustration.

The Gospel of Luke hastily carries us from the babe in the Bethlehem manger and the angels’ visiting the shepherds “keeping watch over their flock by night,” events we remembered on Christmas Eve and on Christmas Day, the Feast of the Incarnation; to the naming of Jesus and his presentation in the Temple, events we remembered last Friday, January 1, the Feast of the Holy Name; to the transitional sentences immediately preceding our lesson today: “When [Mary and Joseph] had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him” (Luke 2:8,39-40). A story rich with the details shaping this season of celebration pans out, if you will, from the close-up frames describing Jesus’ birth and the days thereafter, to a bird’s eye image, a single sentence capturing the next twelve years of his life.

Today’s story of the adolescent Jesus lingering around the Temple is the only such tale of Jesus’ upbringing contained in any of the Gospels. In the Gospel of Luke, the pericope concludes the childhood narrative arc, leaving us with only these precious details concerning the thirty-some-odd years between Jesus’ birth and recorded ministry. We can, however, mine the extant bits and pieces for some important generalizations about Jesus’ life in the house of Mary and Joseph.

Taking the story of the boy Jesus in combination with the details preceding it, we learn that Jesus’ family faithfully followed Jewish law and custom. Jesus’ family “finish[ed] everything required by the Law of the Lord” after their child’s birth, including bringing him to the Temple for circumcision, and they visited “Jerusalem every year for the festival of the Passover” (Luke 2:39,41). We readers can then infer that Jesus knew the elders’ traditions and grew up in a house where those traditions were honored, an idea reinforced both by his curiosity and his capacity in the company of the Temple teachers.

More importantly, I propose, the sparse details offer the opportunity for us to enjoy a deep, human resonance with Jesus, both by what the Gospel reveals, and by what the Gospel

conceals; the story the Gospel tells, and the story the Gospel does not tell. As the Markan Evangelist identifies Jairus' daughter, Luke identifies Jesus as twelve-years-old. The age of thirteen marked adulthood, and the identification of Jesus as a child invites us in the community of readers to consider our own stories of causing our parents "great anxiety," the stories of *our* childhood. Jesus' moment of misbehavior humanizes him, and as much as this common experience draws Jesus to us, we are drawn to Jesus: this one who is Son of God, is also child of Mary and Joseph; the one born as Savior, knows, too, our fragile human experience. And while we may have conditioned ourselves to more easily find salvation in the chubby, cherubic cheeks of that newborn child, surely the pimply stubble of that same Savior's teenage countenance bears the gifts of God, as well.

In our world, in which we increasingly have access to the minutia of public figures' lives, how do we receive the absence of details in the story of Jesus? I propose we receive this absence as gift rather than grief, for in this sparse narrative there is room for us, for *all of us*, in the tale of the One who came to save us from ourselves.

In the 1920's, Russian film theorists proposed that motion pictures "captured" the viewer in films' stories through the use of "cuts," that is, the visual switches from one camera shot to the next. Our contemporary, computer language of "cut and paste" has its roots in the Cutting Rooms of the early cinema, when the assembly of movies involved, literally, the cutting of film strips' cells and their subsequent re-pasting together to create the seamless narratives to which we are accustomed. Thirty years later, the French termed this process of montage and capture "the system of the suture" by which we as movie goers become stitched into the worlds of the stories we watch.

Consider how this works, imagining we are watching a movie about a man waking up one morning: the first image we see is of the man sleeping in his bed, the morning light already filling his bedroom. Then we hear the alarm ring, and watch as the man rolls over, slaps the top of the clock, and sets his alarm to Snooze. And then – *cut* – the next image we see is of the same man and the same bed, this time he sits up and switches off the alarm on the same clock, which reads nine minutes later. And then – *cut* – we see this man standing in his bathrobe, in front of his bathroom mirror, brushing his teeth. And then – *cut* – we see this man sitting on an ottoman in the den, tying his shoes while he holds a piece of jellied toast between his teeth. And then – *cut* – we see this same man climb into his car and set his briefcase on the passenger seat.

As experienced movie viewers, we understand that each of these cuts indicates the passage of time. Presumably, the man has not teleported from one scene to the next, but rather, like us, he's groggily showered, shaved, brewed his coffee and toasted his toast, grabbed his keys and headed out for another day at the cracker factory. Each of us, according to our own particular experience, fills in the omitted details. With scarcely a deliberate thought, we imagine the man follows our own habits, or those of our father, or those we imagine of a neighbor like him. And so it happens that in these "spaces" between the pictured narrative, we fit ourselves and our stories in the story of the movie, becoming "sutured" in the film's "text."

The “gaps” in written narratives similarly stitch us into the stories we read, the Gospels being no exception. While, more often than not, film’s sutures bind small openings into which we can fit ourselves and our stories, the Gospels’ absence of detail with regard to Jesus’ childhood provides us the opportunity for a fuller fit into Jesus’ life between Bethlehem and the River Jordan. In this spacious setting we may populate the scenes of Jesus’ childhood and his teenage years: how he kept to himself or cut class to race his old man’s chariot down in the Kidron valley. We may imagine his days as a young man and as an adult, his wrestling as we wrestle with vocation and what it all means; his hope and his hurt; his afternoons spent with the girl next door or the guy down the street or helping his mom with his sisters and brothers. And as we faithfully engage the Gospel this way, becoming sutured into its story, we become a part of Jesus’ life and he a part of ours. It is the *absence* of detail enabling and inviting such engagement, offering the gift of the God who, “when on earth he grew, he was tempted, scorned, rejected, tears and smiles like us he knew. Thus he feels for all our sadness, and he shares in all our gladness.”

Soon enough the story of Jesus will distinguish itself from our own. Jesus’ vocation and experience will separate from ours as he turns water into wine, heals the sick, and raises the dead, even before he chooses to give his life and God fulfills the promise of Resurrection. But for today and in this Christmas season, the gift of Emmanuel offers us the one whose mama fussed at him and for good reason. The one whose life makes room for our own, who knows us and our experience, and whose story invites us to be sutured into the very purposes of God.