

**Hymns:** 190 Angels from the realms of glory  
216 See him lying on bed of straw  
222 Who would think that what was needed  
513 Take this moment sign and space  
205 It came upon a midnight clear

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**Readings:** Colossians 3:12-17,  
Psalm 148  
Luke 2:41-52

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### Prayer

Friends, happy Christmas – and a reminder that we get to celebrate a whole twelve days – until the 6<sup>th</sup> of January we are still in Christmas – Celebration is a discipline, you know – the discipline meant to resist the dark, in northern cultures to remind us at the coldest and darkest time of the year that we are not alone – to make a noise to drive back our sense of isolation and remind us that the days are beginning again, inexorably, to lengthen.

I put it in this context – our celebration, our praise of God today, because today also our home secretary is cutting his family holiday short, we are told, to deal with an upsurge of folk trying to cross the English channel – and today the folk of Bangladesh are going to polls amidst sporadic violence and allegations of corruption, and many other things that would counsel that this is not a time to celebrate or to praise God.

Celebration – all about what the Psalm has to say today – the praise of God, by all creation humanity included. This is no escapist party to which only the lucky few are invited, no – listen to the Psalm – all creation together praises God – our celebration is an act of resistance against evil. And our celebration is the school in which we learn to act for a better day tomorrow. Give thanks and vex the Devil, Shakespeare wrote. And here we are. Not perfect on this Christmas Sunday, but here. Present and together.

And into the midst of this celebration, we have Luke showing us a glimpse from Jesus' childhood – from this trip to the Temple for the Passover celebration, when Jesus is twelve. And I want you to hear that story not as scripture where we sort of know what the end of the story is, but as parents and uncles and aunts, as concerned adults of all stripe, who hear that a young adult has gone missing. Because this is a story sharp with all the innocent blissful ignorance of a real, very human if old for his years 12 year old, and the panic of parents who have lost their son.

This is about Jesus fully human, fully divine from the beginning – and having something to say from the first. And about all of us together obedient to the wisdom of God as it grows us, and changes us, and brings us forward.

Remember, Jerusalem is not a friendly place. Remember, Jesus has been, with his family, a refugee, under threat from a baby - In fact, the only bit of the story that jars for me, is that Jesus himself has so little anxiety – he has not seemed to clock that he will cause fear, or even wondered how he will eat and sleep. Typical wonderful twelve year old utterly thoughtless in that beautiful gift of youth for being ignorant of what we cannot do, and thus able to do almost anything.

This is not about Mary and Joseph as bad parents – of even as distracted parents. Jesus at 12 is just on the cusp of manhood, in their culture – and so might as equally be travelling with the women and children, going ahead, as with the men catching them up. We are talking about a 3-4 day journey, travelling 15-18 miles a day on foot.

Mary and Joseph realise at the end of the first day – he is not with them – and turn back immediately, together – have a sense of their fear, their anxiety – they search three days we are told – before they find him. And then this very human exchange – you can hear Mary – what are you thinking!!!! And Jesus, in the wonderful retort – did you not know I would be in my father's house?

I am thinking any of us who was ever a difficult teenager, or has ever dealt with a difficult teenager – we might recognise deep reality of this exchange. Mutual incomprehension. And, Jesus beginning to understand who he is – a more sharp version of every healthy child beginning to separate from parents and find their own way, sometimes 3 steps forward and 2 back.

But this is not a story about obedience and disobedience – all the folk in it are deeply obedient – Jesus to his growing insight and delight in the Temple, Mary and Joseph to their tradition, risking the trip, and to their love for Jesus, and their deep protective instinct for their son. All are obedient, even when the claims on their obedience lead them into mutually incomprehending conflict. We who are a little older know, the hardest decisions are not usually between right and wrong, but between two competing rights.

This is a story about surprising communication - speaking and listening among individuals and groups who we don't expect to listen to each other – Jesus accepted in the Temple is a surprise! Jesus speaking to his mother, a surprise!

I take two gentle lessons from our passages today: first, we are never too young to speak. Second, we are never too old to listen.

First – we are never too young to speak.

This is the only childhood story in the Canonical Gospels – and it shows us Jesus a child speaking not just to his parents, but to the thinkers and commentators of his day. This is a marvel, surely. I wonder what he had to say – not just to his mother, but in his Father's house? Here Jesus shows that wonderful powerful ignorance of youth – sometimes if you

do not know what is impossible, you can do it. I am thinking of the students in 1960 in the American south who sat at racially segregated lunch counters at department stores – suffered abuse and harassment, arrest – most thought what they were doing would fail. Would be too costly to them as individuals, would not even begin to make the change they hoped for. And yet, these students, black and a very few white, persisted. And the world did not become perfect around them, but lunch counters were desegregated because they were faithful to the wisdom, to the insight they had.

Sometimes our children are the most articulate truth tellers about the state of the world. Pragmatists – observers of justice – and offerers of encouragement. If you were here last Sunday, you heard prayers of confession directed by our children – the things they thought to confess I think would be a guide to our whole world.

We are sorry for fighting, for lying, they said. For annoying each other, for not doing what our Mum said. For being late, for not doing our homework.

There is a refreshing directness to their confession, which is instructive. No excuses, no quibbling, a matter of factness to name without shame something we have done we know we ought not, in the expectation that there will be forgiveness and new relationship.

I think this is a lesson to our politics, our economics – certainly to our churches. Be obedient to the wisdom that is in us, the voice of the child in each of us – who finds God our first parent.

What other things do our children tell us, what public testimony do the lives and voices of children offer?

I have read a statistic offered by UNICEF in 2017 that 152 million children are engaged in child labour each day - 72 million in hazardous work like mining or working on a fishing boat.

I am thinking what this has to say to our international economy. And I'm thinking about the work of the early Methodists to moderate child labour, to make space for education, and rest, and the work of the reformers in this country who regulated our economy to protect children's schooling, and protect from being treated as a commodity.

We are never too young to speak. And this is good – this is part of the bubbling joyous gift of Jesus, that he is a model of this wisdom. And it does not just belong to the young in years – but to all of us. We are never too young to speak.

If we are never too young to speak, we are never too old to listen.

Jesus is, in our reading, coming to understand who he is, and having something to offer the thinkers of his day. And they, these older ones, are marvelling at his wisdom. Not just knowledge or facts – insight. New ideas and platforms for thought.

James Baldwin once observed that ‘Children have never been very good at listening to their elders, but they never fail to imitate them.’ That should give us pause for thought, as we contemplate our new years’ resolutions and our own actions.

Is our world, the older parts of our own spirits ready to be pushed just a little? Because without our age alongside our youth, our obedience is incomplete.

Saying we are never too old to listen, I am not convicting us, but offering each of us a promise – in a world that devalues and dismisses elders, that tends to make fun of them as stuck in the mud, or backward – we hear something different in this Gospel, which is good news.

We are never too old to listen, to receive and renew wisdom. Never think of yourself that you are too old for God to say something new in your life. Again, I’m not just talking years here, but the spirit of jaded experience, that knows too much of the reality of the world to sensibly risk too much. The promise of today is that we are never too old to listen - never think of our country, that our public culture, or our patterns of governance are too old, too spent for hope.

We can hear the testimony of those trying to cross the sea, the testimony of those struggling on low wages or lacking educational chances. We can hear the testimony of a child refugee or a child in a family homeless, and listen with the deep obedience of the Temple elders, of Mary and Joseph, and make a change. Together.

Never assume because of years of age or of belonging that someone will not listen in ways that surprise us!

We heard verses from Colossians about how to get along, how to behave with one another. And not with those they already agree with and have much in common with, but with those who on the surface seem the most different.

They follow immediately after the verse that says there is in Christ no partiality – no Greek nor Jew, slave nor free – in Christ. No hierarchy. So the way of communicating that flows from that, we have set out – forgive one another. Bear with.

Not because we will all agree – look at Mary, Joseph, and Jesus! But because God is mixing it up a bit in whom God calls into this global, supple, creative movement of people called Christians, and we’re going to need to challenge one another and be challenged if we are going to be fully obedient to God.

And we cannot be obedient to the full wisdom of God being revealed without old and young, rich and poor, slave and free.

The promise is that we are all loved. And God is still speaking in children and the young, God is still surprising the world with what the older among us can hear.

This is of course the whole point of Christmas – of the incarnation – and our celebration that resists evil? God, who is most other to us beyond what we could imagine, refuses to be other to humanity. Takes flesh. Listens to our lives. Speaks in them. God listens with the wisdom of age, the counsel of eternity. God speaks with the bubbling enthusiasm of a child.

God is the child speaking in us, the elder listening to us and hearing with delight our reactions to the world – the one teaching us by example how to be together, how to be obedient together to the wisdom of God in this world.