

Left-Overs
Luke 2:41-52
December 27, 2009

Well, it's two days after Christmas—the time for Left-overs!

You all know what I mean—there's the remnants of Christmas dinner—a turkey leg, a dab of Christmas pudding and the like--left over in plastic containers in the fridge;

--there's still traces of ribbon, wrapping paper, bows and tissue-paper left over on your floor;

--and there may be left-over expectations still lying around your heart.

Yes—we all have them when it comes to Christmas. It happens every year when we work ourselves into a frenzy getting everything just perfect for our friends and family—

--the perfect gift; the perfect dinner; the perfectly decorated home.

Some have even dubbed it the Martha Stewart syndrome. But, as one humorist puts it, most of our holidays turn out to be an Erma Bombeck Christmas.

The difference between the two is revealed in these two fictional letters exchanged by Martha and the dearly departed Erma. From Martha:

Hi Erma,

This perfectly delightful note is being sent on paper I made myself to tell you what I have been up to. Since it snowed last night, I got up early and made a sled with old barn wood and a glue gun. I hand painted it in gold leaf, got out my loom, and made a blanket in peaches and mauves. Then to make the sled complete, I made a white horse to pull it from DNA molecules that I had just sitting around in my craft room.

By then, it was time to start making the place mats and napkins for my 20 breakfast guests. I'm serving the old standard Stewart twelve-course breakfast, but I'll let you in on a little secret: I didn't have time to make the tables and chairs this morning, so I used the ones I had on hand.

Before I moved the table into the dining room, I decided to add just a touch of the holidays. So I repainted the room in pinks and stenciled gold stars on the

ceiling. Then, while the homemade bread was rising, I took antique candle molds and made the dishes (exactly the same shade of pink) to use for breakfast. These were made from Hungarian clay, which you can get at almost any Hungarian craft store.

Well, I must run. I need to finish the buttonholes on the dress I'm wearing for breakfast. I'll get out the sled and drive this note to the post office as soon as the glue dries on the envelope I'll be making. Hope my breakfast guests don't stay too long, I have 40,000 cranberries to string with bay leaves before my speaking engagement at noon.

Love, Martha Stewart

P.S. When I made the ribbon for this typewriter, I used 1/8-inch gold gauze. I soaked the gauze in a mixture of white grapes and blackberries which I grew, picked, and crushed last week just for fun.

Here is Erma Bombeck's reply:

Dear Martha, I'm writing this on the back of an old shopping list, pay no attention to the coffee and jelly stains. I'm 20 minutes late getting my daughter up for school, packing a lunch with one hand, and holding the phone with the other. I'm on hold with the dog pound, seems old Ruff needs bailing out again. Burnt my arm on the curling iron when I was trying to make those cute curly fries, HOW do they do that? Still can't find the scissors to cut out some snowflakes, tried using an old disposable razor...trashed the tablecloth. Tried that cranberry thing, frozen cranberries mashed up after I defrosted them in the microwave. Oh, and don't use Fruity Pebbles as a substitute in that Rice Krispie snowball recipe, unless you happen to like a disgusting shade that resembles puke! The smoke alarm is going off, talk to ya' later.

Love, Erma (Brett Blair, www.sermonillustrations.com)

Now be honest—how many of our Christmases really turn out to be more like Erma's than Martha's? And for some, disappointment can leave a stale taste in our mouth like day-old dried out dressing.

Well, we're in good company, friends.

The same thing happened at a holiday-time almost 2000 years ago. We heard about it in our scripture reading this morning—a text which feels like a “left-over” story after the rich and meaty stories that accompany the birth of Jesus. It’s only found in the gospel of Luke, and even then it’s overlooked by many in their study of Jesus’ life.

It skips ahead in time, to Jesus’ 12th holiday trip to Jerusalem with the family for Passover. Of all the holidays in the Jewish tradition at the time—Passover was the biggie. Families took their vacations together to get to the Big City, where like any family reunion there was good food and much merriment to share.

This particular Passover was significant because it would have been around the time when Jesus was preparing for his Bar Mitzvah, his entrance exam into the temple and into adulthood.

Can’t you imagine Mary and Joseph being so proud of their boy?!! And can’t you imagine their expectations of how this particular holiday season needed to be more special than others?

Luke doesn’t go into much detail about what happened during the Feast, only what happened the day after.

The families traveled home together—a pedestrian traffic jam on the roads outside Jerusalem. Like other years, the children of the families that traveled together flowed from group to group. They had slumber parties in different tents at night when they stopped along the wayside.

That’s why Jesus was not missed on that first day of travel. Mary and Joseph may have assumed that he was with his aunt Elizabeth and uncle Zechariah—hanging out with his cousin John. Or perhaps he was with some of his buddies who clustered together talking about the cute girls they had met at this year’s festival.

It was at the end of a full day of travel when they realized he was gone. Panic kicked into high gear when they discovered he wasn’t with the usual suspects. Mary and Joseph made their way back to Jerusalem, their hearts in their throats.

For three days they searched the city, high and low.

For three days they barely slept at night, wondering what could have happened to their boy.

For three days they prayed to God for protective power to surround Jesus.

And on the third day—they found him!

What a relief! There he was, within the circle of the rabbis, the learned men of the temple, asking questions as if he was one of them.

They interrupted one energetic exchange with a shrill call: “Jesus, come here right this second.”

The pre-teen jumped up and ran to his parents, not even a bit sheepish.

Mary scolded, “Son, why have you treated us like this! Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you.”

Jesus’ response surprises no parent of a teenager, although we may expect something different from the Son of God. He asks, “Why were you searching for me? Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?”

Luke says that Mary and Joseph didn’t understand this response—but what they did understand was that Jesus was being impertinent. The gospel writer doesn’t report what was said to Jesus after his disrespectful attitude, but it does say from that point on, he was obedient to his parents. We can only imagine what Joseph and Mary said to him as they escorted him out of the temple and got back on the road to Nazareth again. Whatever they said, Luke tells us from that point on he was an obedient young man.

Expectations of a perfectly good holiday down the tubes.

Like so many of us who may have had such high expectations for our holidays, something may have marred the event so that we were disappointed, let down, perhaps even angered.

That’s just the way life works—we rarely, if ever, reach the pinnacle of the place where we pin our hopes.

I don’t know—it’s kind of comforting for me that even Mary and Joseph had to deal with a recalcitrant kid—and that Jesus had to grow and mature in his understanding of his role.

It's comforting to me to know that it was in the messiness of human relationships—of the communication (or lack thereof) between parent and child, that Jesus becomes really like one of us, because how many of us struggle with the mess of misunderstandings—especially at holiday time when we're all so busy and have such high expectations.

It's comforting for me that in the chaos of life, God still comes to us and makes the divine presence known.

It was after the fear and panic, after the anger at pre-teen impertinence, after the icily silent walk back home from Jerusalem to Nazareth that understanding and wonder came to Mary. Luke tells us that out of the chaos of emotions, she caught a glimpse of the man Jesus would become—a man of great learning, a leader, full of self-confidence and self-knowledge. We are told that she treasured all those things in her heart, and watched while Jesus grew in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and others.

So what can we learn from this "left-over" story for our lives today?

The first question it raises is "Is Christ missing from your family?" Now I'm not talking about the teenaged Jesus with the attitude. We all have someone like that messin' around in our lives. No, I'm talking about the Christ—God/With/Us—the Prince of Peace. Is the presence of the divine, the light of the world missing in your life? Have you just assumed He was there, not really paying attention to your spiritual life, only to have something happen and you realize that the faith you once had is gone?

Which leads us to the second question of the text for us, "When shall we begin searching for Him?" Do we wait until catastrophe hits? Does it take a hit upside the head to make us notice he's gone? Or can we pay attention to the still small silent voice of need for something greater than ourselves, the Omnipotent, Omniscient, Omnipresent God?

According to an old legend, when the Magi were following the star of Bethlehem, they came to the house of a certain woman. They said to her, "Come with us! We have seen his star in the east and we are going to worship him."

"Oh," she said, "I would love to go. I heard that he would be coming one day and I have been looking forward to it. But I can't come now. I must set my house in

order; then I will follow you and find him." But when her work was done, the wise men were out of sight, the star shone no more in the heavens, and she never saw Jesus. There is a lesson here. The truly vital matters of life dare not be put off.

And finally—the third question of the text for us is “Where shall we find Him?” Well, the text leads us to the temple—or in our case—the church. For most of us here, it was first through our Sunday School classes at church, or through the Christmas pageants, that we learned about Jesus.

And, in truth, it is still through church communities that we find glimpses of Jesus at work in the world. I know that many of us have found Jesus Christ through East Dallas Christian Church, and have continued to build their relationship with him through Bible Study and prayerful worship.

But we all know that the Christ, the Spirit of the Incarnate God, is present everywhere. If we but have eyes to see and ears to hear, we can find him in the most unexpected places.

Even amongst the left-overs of an imperfect holiday season, we find the perfect love of Jesus Christ—a gift that never gets dried out or stale or over-used—**eternally fresh, offered for you and for me.**(Thanks to King Duncan’s sermon :Searching for Jesus Collected Sermons, King Duncan, Dynamic Preaching, 2005)