Sunday, December 12, 2004
EVERYBODY LOVES A BABY
Matthew 11:2-11

"Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" That was the question that kept bothering John the Baptist as he sat in prison. Had he made a mistake in believing that Jesus was the promised Messiah? John the Baptist had been put in prison because, in his preaching, he had criticized the moral behavior of King Herod. In his cell, he had a lot of time to think, and he kept getting reports about the ministry of Jesus, and he didn't like what he had been hearing.

Jesus was healing people of their diseases. He was forgiving sinners. He forgave a woman caught in adultery. He let another woman pour costly ointment on his feet and then wiped his feet with her hair. He was eating with outcasts. He was accepting Samaritans and women as equals. At a wedding reception, he had turned water into wine. His ministry was centered around big dinner parties where everyone was welcome. He was known as a wine-bibber and a glutton. He was teaching people that the kingdom of heaven was all around them and that God's kingdom is like a joyful banquet where everyone is invited. He told people to love their enemies. He taught that because God is compassionate, you are to be compassionate. He said, "Life is good, be happy now, let it go."

So John sent some of his followers to investigate Jesus and ask him directly, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus gave this answer to the question: "Go and tell John what you hear and see. The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk. Lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear. The dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. All the things you heard about me are true. You and John will have to decide for yourselves on the basis of what is happening."

Why was John the Baptist confused about the ministry of Jesus? Because he had a completely different concept of what the Messiah would be. He expected the Savior to be a fiery preacher threatening people with God's judgment. John had lived a totally different kind of life. He had taken a vow of poverty and lived in the wilderness. He never attended wedding receptions or dinner parties. He never drank wine. He assumed the Messiah would follow his pattern.

He was discovering that there is often a wide difference between your idea of a thing and the thing itself. Perhaps you've had an idea of a person that you were going to meet for the first time, and then when you met that person and got to know him or her, you were surprised because the individual did not fit your original idea of what he or she would be.

When I was in college a long time ago, one way to meet students of the opposite sex was to have a "blind date." A fraternity brother would say, "My girlfriend has a friend that I'm sure you'd like to meet." He would then describe the young woman and arrange for you to have a date with her on Saturday night. Sometimes the description that was given to each partner going on the "blind date" did not exactly live up to your expectation, and sometimes it exceeded your expectation.

When John's disciples reported back to him the answer that Jesus gave them, the gospel stories do not reveal his response. But from later history, you can assume that John changed his assumptions and accepted Jesus as the promised Messiah, even though he didn't fit his original idea.

But what about you? Most people have some sort of idea of the kind of person Jesus was. You also have your own ideas of God. As you grow and mature, these concepts change. That should not surprise you because you can never know all there is to know about God or Jesus.

A few years ago, I led a series of seminars based on the book Finding Your Religion: When the Faith You Grew Up With Has Lost Its Meaning. The thesis of this book is that there are identifiable stages of spiritual development that people go through, no matter what their religious tradition. In the same way as you grow emotionally and intellectually over the years, so you also grow spiritually, if you allow yourself.

You might remember that in last week's sermon, Heaven Is All Around You, I suggested that one meaning of the word "repent" is to not be afraid to consider new alternatives and to explore new possibilities. Your idea of God is always too small, as is mine.

I suspect that one reason our culture loves Christmas so much is that almost everybody loves a baby. During this season, the emphasis is on Jesus as a baby in a manger, and that is part of its inexhaustible pull on the minds and hearts of people. If you walk into any group with a baby in your arms, that baby will quickly become the center of attention. A baby is so harmless, so helpless, so dependent, and so vulnerable. It's easy to become charmed with the story of a baby and grow quite sentimental about it. That's okay as long as you also grow up with Jesus and do not keep him as a baby.

However, there's always the temptation to keep him as a baby. Then you can forget about his teachings. Christmas is often called the "birthday of Jesus." Most birthday parties, however, do not require the one being honored to revert to being a baby. I suspect that at your birthday parties, you do not each year get back into the crib so people can gather around you and celebrate. Most of you probably don't even display your baby pictures. Maybe you should do that each year to demonstrate how much you've changed. Everybody loves a baby. So if you have some people who don't like you now, they might respond positively to your baby pictures.

During this season of Advent and Christmas, it's easy to lapse into total infatuation with the baby Jesus and forget that as an adult, he challenged you to love your enemies. Part of the problem is that the Bible tells you nothing about the life of Jesus from the time shortly after his birth until he reached the age of 12, and then there is only one brief incident recorded about him at that age.

The next time you meet him in the Bible stories, he is 30 years old. Perhaps those who remembered him did not consider this part of his life to be important. Or maybe the gospel writers wanted to keep your minds open to the fuller truth of Jesus as an adult. The gospel of Mark, considered by scholars to be the oldest of the gospels, mentions nothing at all about his birth or his early life. The Apostle Paul, who wrote most of the New Testament, never wrote about Jesus as a baby or young man.

In spite of this, there is the temptation to keep Jesus as a baby. Everybody loves a baby. A baby is easy to worship. Ethics do not proceed from the mouth of a baby. Babies are so innocent and helpless.

All of this is not to deny the importance of the Christmas story — the story that reminds you that God entered into your life and mine as a newborn baby in the same way that all of us entered this world. But you also need to remember that he grew into an adult. It is his whole

life, including his death and resurrection, that continues to call some of your priorities and values into question.

Jesus was not a sentimentalist. He was a realist. He said that everything opposed to the love and harmony in God's creation is doomed. As I mentioned in last week's sermon, he said that the kingdom of heaven is all around you. It is in your midst. Many of the ideas the world worships are false. The world says, "Blessed are those who have power." Jesus said, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are the pure in heart; blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness; blessed are the poor in spirit; blessed are those who mourn; blessed are the peacemakers; blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake."

He also said, "Do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?" These are good words to remember at this time of year. "Seek first the kingdom of God and God's righteousness. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and love your neighbor as yourself."

There was a man who had a well-to-do aunt who was quite fond of him when he was a baby and a little boy. Since she lived a long distance from him, she had seen him only twice in the past 15 years. But she continued to send him a birthday card and present each year, although the gifts continued to be suitable for a child of six to ten years old. She could never quite accept the fact that the child had become a mature adult.

Each year, this young man would pass the gift to some needy youngster who would enjoy it. This case is not difficult to understand. In growing up, this young man had acquired some values that were quite different from those of his aunt. He had become part of a group ministry that lived and worked in the slums of a large city, and he carried on his ministry there.

In doing so, he and others came to challenge some of the power holders and slum lords. His aunt could never understand what happened to that sweet little boy she loved so much. Why did he have to grow up and change? He seemed so different as a very young child.

As you recall the baby in the manger each year during this holy season, you also need to remember that this baby became an adult, and the power holders of his time rightly saw him as a threat to their way of doing things, and so they killed him.

In a book by Harry Emerson Fosdick called Dear Mr. Brown, Fosdick describes a father's frustrating attempt to explain the nature of God to his young daughter who was confused by the stories of war and destruction in parts of the Old Testament such as the story of God telling Joshua The father also read to her some of the words of the later prophets, "What does God require of you but to do justice and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."

Then he read to her from the New Testament, "Beloved let us love one another, for love is of God and those who love are born of God and know God," and many other passages like this one. One day the little girl said to him, "Daddy, it seems to me that God grew better as God grew older." That's one way of describing it. Another way is to say that God grows better as you come into a more mature knowledge of God.

The season of Advent and Christmas is a beautiful time and it's quite appropriate to remember and celebrate the fact that God entered the world in a new way in the person of Jesus and he entered the world in the same way as all of us enter this world.

Then your faith needs to grow and expand in the same way that Jesus became an adult and is always more than our expectations and ideas. This Jesus cannot be kept in a manger or in any kind of box or in a creed or doctrine.

Lest you misunderstand, it's fitting to worship the baby in the manger for God is there too in all innocence and vulnerability and God is also in Jesus as an adult. Both the manger and the cross are revealing symbols of powerlessness. Someone once said, "We want God to be strong so that we can be weak. But God wants to be weak so that we can be strong."

This Christmas as always you can meet Jesus in many ways. You can find him in little babies wherever they are -- in warm homes with loving parents and in homeless infants, children and adults. You can meet him in your friends and family members as you gather together to express your love for each other and you can find him in the jails and prisons in lives of thousands of forgotten people. You can find him in the hospitals and you can discover him as you reach out to others. Remember it was Jesus who said, "As you did it to one of the least of these my sisters and brothers, you did it unto me." Amen.