

## The Second Sunday after Christmas • January 2, 2011

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

Rev. Braun Campbell

Luke 2:40-52

"Questions and Answers"

I have here a copy of Luther's Small Catechism. If you come from a Lutheran background, you're probably somewhat familiar with it, though you might not have really read through one since your Confirmation instruction. Here at St. John's, we use the Small Catechism as the framework for our Confirmation program, but we also incorporate it into *Discipleship 101*, our course for prospective members and others who'd like to learn more about what we believe and how we live out our faith as a congregation. In a D101 class last year, someone asked why we use the Small Catechism as our primary resource for the course, why we don't just use the Bible. It's a good question. The answer is that we hold that the Bible, God's holy word, is indeed the sole source and norm – the only foundation – for what we believe and teach. The Small Catechism is a tool for learning what the Scriptures teach; that's why it was written in the first place. In it, we find a number of different sections (or "parts") that explore some of the basic teachings of the Christian faith. In particular, these basic teachings are conveyed through questions and answers: the practice of "catechesis," spoken instruction through questions and answers, is where the Small Catechism gets its name.

Today, as we enter the new year, we hear of an episode in the life of the holy family that revolves around questions asked and answered. What's more, **like the Small Catechism, this sole account of Jesus' boyhood points us to his reason for being and helps us to know our God.** For present-day hearers of this part of Luke's Gospel, an understandable first question might be, "Where was Jesus when Mary and Joseph were heading out of town to return to Nazareth?" It's not that Mary and Joseph were bad parents who didn't think to include Jesus in the travel plans. What we have here is something like the biblical equivalent of the movie "Home Alone." In the culture back then, families didn't just load up the minivan and go to visit grandma. They would travel with other friends and neighbors in groups, something that would help to provide a bit more protection against bandits and help with support in case someone fell ill. Additionally, the women and children would get underway first, then the men – who tended to travel faster – would catch up with them a bit into their journey. So when Mary and Joseph left Jerusalem, it's a strong possibility that each thought that Jesus was with the other or with friends from the other group. Since Jesus was 12 years old, he could have gone either with the women and children or with the men. As it would turn out, though, Jesus wasn't with either group, and it wasn't until they got a day away that his parents noticed that he was missing. Where'd he go?

You can probably imagine the alarm that Mary and Joseph were feeling as they searched everywhere among their friends and family, especially if you're a parent. Unsuccessful, they turn back to Jerusalem to see if they can find their lost son there. Returning to the great city, they search. And they find him. Jesus is in the temple. But what is he doing there? We see, along with Mary and Joseph, that Jesus is sitting in the midst of the official teachers of the people, with questions and answers in the air. These teachers, who had spent great amount of time in catechesis, learning the Scriptures and studying in their faith, had been engaged in conversation by a twelve-year-old boy who astonished them with his understanding and answers to their questions. I don't think they'd ever seen anything like him before: a boy of Jesus' age would only just have come to the point where he'd be recognized as capable of maturity in religious matters. And there he is, listening to the teachers – and teaching them, too. Finding him there in the temple, seeing him with the teachers, Mary and Joseph are even more astonished than the teachers had been. Her question to Jesus probably reflects both her relief and her anxiety in equal parts: "Why did you do this? We've been

in great distress, seeking you.” Why did Jesus go to the temple and not back to Nazareth with his family?

Jesus’ response to his mother comes in the form of another question, the first of Jesus’ words that are recorded in Luke’s Gospel. “Why is it that you were seeking me? Didn’t you know that it is necessary for me to be in my Father’s house?” In these words, Jesus points both his parents and us to the reason for Christmas, the reason that he came into the world. Mary and Joseph, like the rest of the world, didn’t understand that **Jesus would be the one who would reconnect humanity with God**. Through Jesus, we human beings can come to know God as our Father. That was his mission in Jerusalem when his parents found him in the temple; he would be on that same mission twenty years later when he brought it to completion on the cross outside the city walls. Even here in the temple, Jesus knows who he is: God’s Son, our Savior.

That’s the **ultimate answer to Mary’s question**. That’s the reason that Jesus was in the temple, the reason that he had been born in the first place. We remember New Year’s Day as the day of the circumcision and name of Jesus, eight days after his birth. His name, given through the angel Gabriel and confirmed when he was first presented at the temple, means “the Lord saves.” Jesus’ return to the temple in today’s Gospel points to that purpose again: the Son of God has come into the world as a human being **to engage us, to find the lost**. We were lost; but unlike Jesus, we were lost because we were *not* in our Father’s house. In the Small Catechism, Luther framed the first three chief parts of our Christian faith with the Ten Commandments, the (Apostles’) Creed, and the Lord’s Prayer. The center of that framework is the Second Article of the Creed, the one that focuses on Jesus. If you take a look at Luther’s explanation of Second Article in the Small Catechism (something that you can do in the back section of our pew Bibles at St. John’s), you can learn why Jesus did all that he did: “*that I may be his own.*”

In this new year, God has come to engage you, that you might grow in your knowledge of Him as your loving Father, Who has come to make you His own. The Small Catechism can be a great tool for doing just that. If it’s been a few years since you’ve gone through Confirmation instruction, you might find that you’ll have a new appreciation for the questions and answers in this little book. As you go from page to page in the Small Catechism, the scope of God’s work begins to unfold: the chief actions that he undertakes to care for us and restore us, to bring us into His house. The Small Catechism was never intended to be a textbook; rather, it’s a devotional guide that you can use alongside the Scriptures to as you grow in knowledge of our God and how He has come to be with you. The dawning of a new year can be a great time to pick up healthy disciplines, and engaging the questions and answers in the Small Catechism is definitely a healthy discipline. If you’d like to do that in a group setting, our next round of *Discipleship 101* begins next Sunday – consider yourself invited! God wants you to know Him even better.

Joseph and Mary went looking for the boy Jesus and found him in his Father’s house. Where will we find him today? He is with us here, now, and with us as we go out into the year ahead. We’d been lost, and he found us, that we may be his own. This is most certainly true.

Amen.