

**Sermon**  
**Rev. Melanie Oommen**  
**Luke 2:41-52**  
**December 27, 2009**

Five-month-old Andrew Roadman dazzled us all with his performance on Christmas Eve with his fine portrayal of the baby Jesus. Yanking on Mary's hair, squirmy, making a whole range of wonderful baby noises, I watched with tears in my eyes as young Mary and Joseph gracefully struggled to sooth him, just as any new parents would. But I doubt they would have had such an audience! The moment was intriguing, joyful, and poignantly reminded us of what we are talking about when we live into a story about God becoming incarnate - God taking the form of a little baby. There is richness in the infant qualities of God incarnate: God as vulnerable, infinite possibility, unpredictable, new, evoking in us wonder and new resolve, hope. God coming to us in tenderness, needing protection, depending on us to nurture such light. In the glow of candlelight on Christmas Eve, we linger and praise this surprise of a God, grateful to cradle such knowledge, grateful to imagine the baby Jesus embodiment of some dimension of God's infinite array of qualities.

Andrew's stunning performance led to much speculation and lively conversation in my own family on what sort of baby Jesus might have been, and then the conversation turned to other questions: why weren't there more stories in the gospels about his childhood, my children wanted to know? He's a baby, then he's a grown up. Something surely must have happened in between! There is a brief story in Luke's gospel of Jesus' circumcision on the eighth day of his life. And then declaratory words of wise, faithful prophets Simeon and Anna of the impact this child will have on the world. But still he is a baby. So now we are picturing Andrew Roadman receiving such profound news, and then just this line in Luke 2:40: "the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom and the favor of God was upon him." No Jesus the toddler or Jesus the 5 year old, no Jesus on the first day of school or Jesus riding a two-wheeler. There is baby Jesus, a long silence, and then today's reading: Jesus at 12, scaring his parents.

Have you ever stood away from someone you know well, a spouse maybe, or a child, or dear friend, watching in one sweet moment when they don't know you are watching, not adjusting their behavior or words to match your impression of them, and you are surprised by what you hear, see? This person you know so well is different. Of course this is another dimension of who they already are, but why hadn't you seen it?

In all their fear, despite their anxiety, I wonder if this is how it felt to Mary and Joseph in this snapshot of Jesus' adolescence. Weary Mary and Joseph, sick with worry, search and search for their dear son, where in the world could he be? And then they turn a corner and they see their child, the one whose diapers they have changed and who they have stayed awake with when he has ill. The one who runs through the house - does he even know how to WALK, they have sighed more times than they can count. And they turn a corner and there he is. But what child is THIS? Sitting with the religious leaders in the temple, not just listening to the wise, but being questioned by the wise. The wise shaking their heads with amazement for what they hear from this boy turning man. Who is this child, the elders of the temple wonder? And when his parents turn the corner and see their boy here, like this, they wonder too. Who is this child?

We talk a lot during this season about what we learn about the nature and presence of God through the infant, but what do we learn of God's nature through the adolescent Jesus? How would you describe this Jesus? And what does he reflect to us of God incarnate? He took us to the manger - now he takes us to the temple. What is being birthed here, now? What does this 12-year-old Jesus reveal to us of the Divine? A dimension of God we forget, perhaps. A God of finding voice, engaging the world, immune to the limitations and prescriptions of social convention. A God who takes us directly to the place of meaning-making. A God who does not follow that predictable path, but backtracks, circles, finds the switchbacks and shortcuts. A God of surprise, who challenges, terrifies, compels, propels, questions, speaks truth to power, who makes us uncomfortable, who makes us mad for pointing out what we would rather not pay attention to. The spark, the one who unsettles, wakes us up, and keeps us awake. A God who stays up past midnight. A God who we think we have all figured

out, and then we turn that corner and are awakened by a whole new reality . . . Unafraid to challenge social conventions. Fresh wisdom. Surprising. Goes directly to the center of meaning-making. Questioning, subverting assumed sources of truth. Terrifying. Delightful. The spark, the one who unsettles. God came into the world, born in all innocence and humility, and then one day stayed out past curfew . . . and we knew now, that the world would never be the same. . .

Where have you experienced such qualities of God in your life? My mind goes to the story of a man who I became acquainted with this summer, or at least I can say I got to know his story and his legacy because now he has been dead for some 17 years.

On July 18, my family and I stepped off a tiny ferry, after a four-hour train ride, a longer ferry ride, a bus across the isle of Mull, and now onto the Isle of Iona – a place of pilgrimage, story, legend, and new light. We would spend a week on Iona, as spiritual pilgrims had since the 6<sup>th</sup> century, when St. Columba first landed on this starkly beautiful, harsh landscape. To seek solace, inspiration, and God’s leading . . . and here we heard the story and experienced ourselves the legacy of George MacLeod, the founder of the Iona Community, the ancient made new in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The Iona Community has a long history, beginning with Columba who left Ireland for Scotland in 563 and was content to come ashore at Iona where “Ireland could not be seen.” Columba established the first community on the island, and its Celtic spirituality was only invigorated over the next two centuries. These early Celtic monks were eventually dispersed, due primarily to a Viking raid which killed many and left buildings in shambles. These early Celts moved inland, and it wasn’t until 1156 that Benedictine monks were sent by Reginald, Lord of the Isles, to establish a Benedictine community on the “Columban foundation.” The Benedictine monks made substantial repairs and constructed additional buildings in order to erect a full functioning Abbey. This community, however, was short lived as well. At the Reformation the Iona Monks were dispersed. The Abbey eventually was turned over to the official Church of Scotland, which only made occasional use of it and it fell into disrepair. It became a place to visit, drawing both “the famous and the curious” even though it was basically a place of desolation. In 1828, however, it became an official parish of the Church of Scotland. It received a resident pastor, holding services again, and soon attracting tourists and pilgrims. In 1899, both the Duke and the Church of Scotland decided that the Abbey should be restored and that all branches of the Christian Church should be able to worship there. What was needed was a complete rebuilding. However, no one stepped forward, with money or passion, to carry the task.

But an idea was sparked that would one day impassion the Iona Community. The spark to light that fire would be George Macleod, who would become founder and longtime leader of the Iona Community. He brought men, and they were only men in the early days, from Glasgow for a new experiment in Christian Community. Macleod was an energetic and enthusiastic young Church of Scotland minister appalled by the poverty and oppression of the community he served in the poorest parts of Glasgow during the Great Depression, and the Church’s lack of response. Macleod’s new experiment proposed two things. First, that unemployed craftsman would be invited to restore the ancient Abbey buildings. And second, that future ministers in the Church of Scotland could come and be prepared, working side by side with craftsmen while living in community.

Born just before the start of the 20th century into a famous ecclesiastical dynasty and great privilege, George MacLeod became disturbed by his increasing awareness of “two nations,” the rich and the poor, while working as a young minister in Edinburgh during the 1920s. Disillusioned by post-WWI rhetoric about a “land fit for heroes,” he shocked his many admirers by taking a post as a minister in Govan, a poor and depressed area of Glasgow.

In 1938, feeling that a radical move was necessary to meet the needs of the times, MacLeod embarked on the imaginative venture of rebuilding part of the ancient abbey on the isle of Iona. He utilized the skills of

unemployed craftsmen, and persuaded trainee ministers to work as laborers. Out of this was born the often controversial Iona Community, which over the years has trained clergy for work in deprived areas, produced innovative worship for the world church, pleaded for disarmament, inveighed against world hunger, and advocated joint ecumenical action on social issues, and always provided an extraordinary ministry of hospitality to pilgrims traveling to Iona.

George MacLeod was fed up with a church that was irrelevant in a world so desperate for justice, hope, compassion, and love. He lived in a world of desperate people leading desperate lives, and experienced the church not as a place of liberation or salvation, but as an institution intent on sustaining its traditions and privilege. He didn't abandon the church, not by any means, but dreamed bigger, questioned, challenged, and joined voice and labor with others to create a community alive with transformation. George MacLeod was unsettling, restless, controversial, outspoken and passionate about a God who would not let things be. In the midst of his ministry he was quoted and misquoted, accused and celebrated, excluded from places of ministry, and welcomed into the Iona Community a most diverse and lively band of Christians passionate about the subversive teachings of Jesus, about a God Spirit that takes less the form of infancy and more the form of teen.

George MacLeod said, "I simply argue that the cross be raised again at the centre of the marketplace as well as on the steeple of the church. I am recovering the claim that Jesus was not crucified in a cathedral between two candles, but on a cross between two thieves, on the town garbage heap, at a crossroad so cosmopolitan they had to write his title in Hebrew, Latin and Greek. It was the kind of place where cynics talked smut, thieves cursed, and soldiers gambled. That's where he died. And that's where Christians ought to be and what Christians ought to be about."

He saw so clearly how separated – in the wrong sense – has become the church, and how incomprehensible to most people was the ecclesiastical language and fastidious Otherness. One of MacLeod's favorite quotations is from Dostoevsky: "Love in practice is a harsh and terrible thing compared with love in dreams." MacLeod said, "Our present tragedy, with 'one world dying and the other powerless to be born,' is that the church is too ethereal in its instructions, and the world is too material in its constructions. Jesus Christ, the God-Man, is the mystery that can alone explain . . . our world."

Members of the Iona Community meditate much on the meaning of the Incarnation, which they feel obligates all Christians to minister to bodies as well as to souls. This obligation carries through to the body politic. "It is wrong," says George MacLeod, "to pray only for 'Margaret suffering from tuberculosis,' if you know too well the noisome tenement in and by which the suffering began. If we work with Margaret in prayer, we must work with Margaret's father in the housing issues at the next election."

As from the early vision of labor and worship, my family and I spent a week of shared labor and twice daily worship in the midst of pasture and craggy rocks, on a remote island in the northern seas. And yet, the world in all its beauty and brokenness felt very present, very close. Many were willing to travel this surprising path worn deep by years of pilgrimage. It was as if, as if the moment that Jesus' parents, frightened and exasperated, confronted Jesus in the temple and he turned to them and said, "Why are you searching for me? Why do you look so surprised? Didn't you know that I would be right here? What did you expect?"