



Weaving God's Promises

LESSON 33

GOING TO CHURCH

WONDERING AND LEARNING

We talk about “going to church.” But in a more important way, we—all of us—are the Church. The church is more than a building, and it is more than the destination where we end up on Sunday mornings.

So when we “go to church,” where are we going? What are we going to? And what makes the church so special? In fact, what makes the church a church?

KEY CONCEPTS

- What is a church?
- The importance of community
- Characteristics of the Episcopal Church

WHERE YOU'LL FIND TODAY'S STORY

In the Bible

We recommend the *New Revised Standard Version Bible*.

The story:

Luke 2:41-51 (the boy Jesus in the temple)

Other passages:

Philippians 4:4-7 (“Rejoice in the Lord...”)

In the *Book of Common Prayer*

Catechism, pp. 854-855: The Church

Prayer #7, p. 816: For the Church



GROWING IN FAITH

In some ways, the church is much like God's universe. The more we know and understand it, the richer and more wondrous it becomes.

Children are hungry for an understanding of how the world is put together. They want to make sense of the world. Perhaps that is why they like puzzles pieced together, Legos made into grand structures, blocks stacked into buildings.

Just as importantly, adolescents are looking for ways to make church relevant to their own lives. They

are beginning to think on their own, form their own sets of beliefs, and find a place for themselves in the church community.

In some ways, a youth—or an adult—will eventually intuit the workings of the church. After some time in church, we will understand at some level how its worship flows, why we do certain things, what the important elements of church worship and church life are. But the more that we clearly understand, the more we can enter into church life with joy and encounter God with a joyful heart. That's how we, along with Paul, can say, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say rejoice."

We were made in the image of God, created as God's beloved beings. We are made to be in loving relationship with God. The church helps make that happen by being a gathered community for this purpose.

Jesus, the Son of God, proclaimed the reign of God to us, and we recognize Jesus as our Savior and our Redeemer. The church helps us to be agents of transformation, to promote the reign of God in this world as Jesus calls us to do.

So in church, we learn to love God and to love our neighbors, which Jesus called the two greatest commandments.

Why do we come to church?

We come to church to worship God. In large part, we think of worship in terms of the word of God and the Eucharist. But our worship of the Lord includes not only the words but also the whole experience of the liturgy: the ritual and music, the gathered community of the faithful, and the giving of ourselves in love and praise to God. Worship is not limited to the words that we hear; it encompasses the whole experience of being with God.

Worship is an experience of being with God in an environment that engages all our senses: we see the stained glass, we hear the music and the word, we sing and say our responses to God, we feel the passed offering plate, we taste the bread and wine of Holy Communion.

And worship is the experience of being the people of God gathered together for an hour to focus on God and God alone. This is the time that we are allowed to spend not thinking about how our friends treated us, meals or homework, but on renewing our relationship with God, talking to God, listening to God, getting to know God better.

What do children learn about being in church?

We may not see the "results" of regular worship attendance for young children right away...or ever. The children may never articulate their experience and may never even think consciously about it. But the assumptions and the foundations of their faith being formed at this time will be ingrained into their hearts and minds and will stay with them throughout their lives.

As young people and adults, they will always remember being welcomed at the table of the Lord. They will always remember that as children, they were accepted and loved in church by the adults.

And they will see the church as a place where they can take their own children, because their own

children will be welcomed and accepted, just as they were.



THE EPISCOPAL THREAD

The Episcopal Church has a unique heritage, so as Episcopalians our beliefs about church and our experiences in the church may be different from those of other denominations, even though we all share faith in Jesus Christ.

Here are some distinctive characteristics of the Episcopal Church:

- ***We are a liturgical church.*** This means that our faith is centered on the worship of God in the church. In our worship, we create an atmosphere that enriches our experience of God.
- ***We are a sacramental church.*** We believe that sacraments are signs that communicate God's presence to us, and we order our common worship around the various sacraments, especially the two main sacraments that Jesus himself commanded of us: Baptism and Holy Communion (Eucharist).
- ***We are heirs to the tradition of the whole, universal Church, but we are also a member of the specific part of the Church called the Anglican Communion, whose heritage is the Church of England.*** A common feature of all churches in the Anglican Communion is the use of a *Book of Common Prayer*. And all churches in the Anglican Communion have a connection with the Archbishop of Canterbury.
- ***We talk about a three-legged stool upon which we base our faith: scripture, tradition and reason.*** This leads us to believe in balance and moderation in our beliefs and our practices.
- ***We believe that God's creation is good, and so we honor created life.*** Jesus, after all, was born of a woman and became one of us.
- ***We believe in the ministry of all the baptized.*** All persons have a place in the ministries of the church. But we are also hierarchical, though not centralized, and we have specific orders of ministry including laity, bishops, priests and deacons.



WEAVING GOD'S BELOVED COMMUNITY

There are many good and moral faith traditions in this world, and we can respect and honor all that reflect good and moral values. At the same time, we subscribe to and honor our own, and in our own faith tradition, we ascribe to the Good News of God in Jesus Christ. And we are part of an institution called "church" that lifts up the Good News.

In God's Beloved Community, we are not called to believe we are superior to other ethical traditions. Instead, we are called to recognize and encourage the principles and values that other traditions share with us, including the values of compassion and moral living. At the same time, we are also called to embody our own tradition of faithfulness to a spiritual and ethical foundation flowing from the life and ministry of Jesus Christ.

- **What are some of your favorite traditions within the Episcopal Church?**
- **How can you show respect for someone else's traditions that might now look the same as yours?**



Weaving God's Promises

LUKE 2:41-51

Why do we come to church? We come so we can learn about God, and about Jesus, and about God's Holy Spirit who is with us all the time.

Jesus was a Jew, and Jews did not have church. But they had a big temple, and then they had synagogues. The synagogue was like the neighborhood church. It was where people went to worship God, and where they went to learn about God.

Jesus' mother and father, Mary and Joseph, would take Jesus to the temple and to the synagogue. When Jesus was a newborn, they took him to the temple to be presented to God, as was the custom. And as he grew older, he went to the synagogue to learn about God from teachers and from the stories from the part of the Bible that we call the Old Testament.

Here is a story of what happened to Jesus one day when he went to visit the synagogue. Only his mother and his father didn't know he was there...

Mary, Joseph, and Jesus go on a journey

Every year, Mary, Joseph and their son Jesus would go to the big city of Jerusalem. In Jerusalem, everybody comes to celebrate the festival of the Passover. It is an exciting time for all Jews and an important time. So everybody goes to Jerusalem in the spring for the Passover celebration.

It's a travel time for this family. They live in Nazareth, so it is around 68 miles from Nazareth to Jerusalem. That's a long way! There are no cars or trains, and the family probably doesn't own horses or donkeys to ride on. If they walk, it takes around four or five days to get to Jerusalem—or longer, if you have to rest sometimes.

The family joins their friends and neighbors to travel to and from Jerusalem. When they get there, they are surrounded by thousands of people, all happily celebrating the holiday.

When the festival is over, it's time to go back to Nazareth. Time to get back to our daily chores.

Jesus is missing!

Jesus is 12 years old. He has grown a lot since he was a baby in Bethlehem. But he is still a boy, not a grownup. This year, like the other years, he goes with his mother and father to Jerusalem for the Passover feast.

Lots of people get on the road from Jerusalem to go north, where Nazareth and a lot of other towns and villages are. Sixty-eight miles to get back to Nazareth! The caravan of people travels in big and little groups. Sometimes the big families travel together. Sometimes they get together with neighbors from their hometown. Together they share food, water or stories about what they did in Jerusalem. Sometimes strangers meet other strangers on the road, and they become friends.

Mary and Joseph are walking too, with a big group walking with them. After a day, they look around. Something is missing. *Someone* is missing! *Where's Jesus?*

Mary goes off to find some of her relatives and friends. "Is Jesus with you?" "No, we haven't seen him."

Joseph goes off to find some of his relatives and friends. "Have you seen Jesus? Is he with you?"

"No, he's not here. We thought he was with *you*."

Mary and Joseph search all over for their son. "Jesus! Where are you!" they shout. They ask friends, neighbors, strangers. No one has seen Jesus.

Mary and Joseph become frightened. With all these thousands of people, this huge crowd, and all the people in Jerusalem, how will we ever find him? What's happened to him? What if something bad happened? What if...?

When they see that Jesus is not with all of them on their way back to Nazareth, they turn around and start going back to Jerusalem. Everybody else is going north, and they have to wiggle their way through the crowd to head the other way. It took them a day to get this far on the road. Now takes them less than a day to get back to Jerusalem. They are parents in a hurry.

When they get to Jerusalem, the city is emptying out fast. Everybody who doesn't live in the city is going back to wherever they live. It's not as crowded. They can look for Jesus. Still, Jerusalem is a big city. Where can he be?

Mary and Joseph go back to the place where they stayed, the hotel. They go back to the restaurants where they ate, to the place where they celebrated the Passover Feast. They go to every place that they visited just for fun, or to see friends, or to buy food or souvenirs. For three days, they look for Jesus.

No, he is not here. No, we haven't seen your boy. No, he's not with us. The parents are frantic, scared, worried.

Finally, they go to the temple.

There are teachers in the temple, talking about God. Mary and Joseph look at the group of teachers.

There Jesus is. He's in the temple, learning about God.

Mary and Joseph find Jesus in the temple

There's Jesus. He is sitting with the teachers. Jesus is listening to them, and every once in a while, he asks them a question. A 12-year-old boy, talking with the great Jewish teachers! Mary and Joseph are amazed. This is their son, Jesus, talking with the teachers in the temple! But they are also relieved, for they were very scared.

They both run up to Jesus. The teachers stop talking as Jesus stands up and smiles at his family. Mary and Joseph wrap him in a big hug as the teachers look on in wonder.

Mary says, “Jesus, my child! Your father and I have been looking all over for you! We were so worried about you! Why did you do this to us, leaving us like this without telling us?”

Jesus looks at his mother in surprise. He says to her, “But why were you looking for me? Didn’t you know where I would be? Didn’t you know that I need to be right here, in my Father’s house?”

Mary and Joseph look at each other. They don’t understand. *This* is his father’s house? But *Joseph* is his father? But they say nothing. They just take Jesus’ hand and go with him out of the temple.

Jesus and his parents then take the trip back to Nazareth. Mary and Joseph watch Jesus very carefully this time. They never let him out of their sight. But Jesus stays with them and does not wander off again.

And in those five days of travel back home, Mary starts thinking. What just happened? Who is Jesus’ Father? Is it God? Is it the Holy Spirit that the angel promised would bring this child into the world?

There are some special things to remember, Mary thinks. The angel Gabriel, the time we presented Jesus at the temple and he was blessed, this time when he calls the temple his real home. I must remember these things.

Jesus in the temple, we in the church

Jesus is in the temple learning about God. He loves to listen to the teachers talk about God, and when he doesn’t understand, he asks them questions. He loved so much to learn about God in the temple that this time, he even forgets that he needs to go home with his parents.

We are in church learning about God. We too can hear stories about God. And when we don’t understand, we can ask questions, just like Jesus did. But let’s not forget to go home with our parents!