

“The Boy Jesus”

Valley Presbyterian Church – January 3, 2021

2nd Sunday after Christmas / Epiphany Sunday

Psalm 147:1-11

Rev. John Wahl

Luke 2:41-52

Luke’s story of Jesus in the temple at the age of 12 is the only incident in the gospels about the life of Jesus between infancy and the beginning of his ministry. Mary and Joseph, as faithful Jewish parents, make sure to fulfill their religious duties toward their son, Jesus; and Luke – the gentile author of this gospel, writing it for other non-Jews – makes certain that we know Jesus was raised within that tradition.

In last week’s reading, we heard about Mary and Joseph taking Jesus to the temple when he was eight days old to name and circumcise him. They offered the appropriate sacrifice and received blessings from Simeon and Anna. Now, they are making their annual pilgrimage for the Passover festival; what would have been about a ninety-mile journey on foot from their home in Galilee.

Jerusalem would have been packed with Jewish worshippers from all over the known world to celebrate the Passover. They would travel in groups to avoid the dangers of the road and help watch one another’s children. Mary and Joseph might have stayed with relatives or friends in Jerusalem during the festival. At the end of the celebration, they headed home. They went a day’s journey without checking on their son; assuming he was in the group of travelers. Were Mary and Joseph irresponsible parents? Was there a reason that they failed to make sure Jesus was doing okay? We’ll never know, of course, but Luke’s main focus is not on Mary and Joseph; but on the boy Jesus: where he was and what he was doing.¹

Jesus is finally found after three days – surely a symbolic number – which we can assume means one day travel out, one day back, and then located the next. Mary and Joseph find him in the temple, sitting among the teachers of the faith: listening to them, conversing with them, both asking and answering questions. As

¹ Niveen Sarras from *WorkingPreacher.com*

a first hint of his precocious depth of understanding, Luke shares that all who heard him speak were amazed with his knowledge.

Mary, astonished if not also angry with Jesus, says to him, “child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.” In response, Jesus seems surprised: he assumed that they knew where to find him. He was, of course, meant to be in his Father’s house. With these first words that Jesus speaks in the gospel, Jesus claims his role in fulfilling God’s plan of salvation. It would start within the tradition of his birth; as someone who learns from the teachers before become one himself, increasing – as we are told in the final verse of today’s reading – “in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.”

Of course, three is not the only significant number in today’s story. It is also notable that Luke tells us Jesus is twelve years old when this takes place. At this age, Jesus is still considered a child; the expectation in Judaism was a transition to take on adult responsibilities when he turned thirteen. For Luke, the number twelve is also important as a continuation of God’s revelation: linking the twelve tribes of Israel to the twelve apostles.²

Our modern word for this particular age – *tween* – also points to its transitional nature. It is about this time when children begin to undergo changes: physically and socially; in the way they think and the way they act. This is the time when we see children differentiate from their families; beginning to claim their autonomy, at least in small stretches. It’s a little like learning how to swim; venturing away from the side of the pool briefly to test the waters before coming back and grabbing on for security.

So, when Jesus stays behind at the temple, it shows he had enough self-confidence to be on his own, at least for a while; to begin transitioning from the household of his parents to the *house* – or, as it could also be translated – the *interests* and *affairs* of his heavenly Father. His amazing level of understanding, like his amazing birth narrative, sets him apart as not just an ordinary child, but one who is destined for more. Though not ready to set out on his own – for we are told that he obediently returned with Mary and Joseph to live with them in Nazareth – we are given, in this story, a preview of what is to come.

² Kyle Schiefelbein-Guerrero from *WorkingPreacher.com*

What is foreshadowed here in the temple is Jesus' deep and complex relationship with his faith tradition and its leaders. Jesus is welcomed by the teachers; they allow him to sit for three days at their feet to openly discuss the scriptures. They are not dismissive of Jesus, nor do they seem to be threatened by his understanding. Instead, Jesus is provided with the space necessary to explore his role and take his first steps of autonomy; free to be at home in his Father's house just as he was with his parents in Nazareth.

Later on, Jesus will have a much different relationship with the religious teachers and leaders. During his ministry, Jesus will criticize them for failing to act in accordance with the teachings of the scriptures. He will deride them as snakes and hypocrites; but can only do so after having studied and learned as a religious insider. Because his parents dutifully practiced their faith and the teachers welcomed and encouraged him to develop his heart and mind, Jesus could perceive what about his faith tradition needed to change.

Maybe there is something here for us to learn about welcoming and learning alongside young people in our faith communities. The temple teachers display interest and great patience with Jesus; they take this twelve year-old seriously as a conversation partner; neither patronizing Jesus nor expecting him to be a fully-formed adult. They help Jesus imagine how, one day, he can be a member of the community: someone whose development and opinions are encouraged.³

These are the very reasons that we invest so extensively in our children: within our religious communities and, likewise, through the faith formation that takes place at home. Sadly, we had to cancel our planned youth group trip last summer; and are unsure about what we will be able to do this coming one. Every other year, though, we offer at least one opportunity for young people to travel away from home and explore their faith: to practice differentiation from families and engage in new experiences and conversations.

This is, of course, not the only way that young people – children, tweens, and teens – grow in their faith. It is also important for them to have positive models for worship and service; to explore their God-given gifts and discover their own language and imagination for the divine. The rituals of our faith tradition offer young people a pattern for what their lives as adults might look like; and yet, as we well know, this age of differentiation and autonomy overlaps the time when

³ Amy Robertson and Robert Williamson, *Bibleworm Podcast*

many people choose to leave religion behind. Even more important, then, does our task become: to help create safe space for questions to be heard.

And so, I encourage you: if you have the opportunity to teach and nurture young people – as their relative, neighbor, or friend – know that they are testing out their new-found autonomy; understand that they are going through a myriad of changes and looking to find their voice and place in the world. Therefore, invite them to sit with you for a while; welcome them as conversation partners; provide a safe place for their questions. While these pre-teens, tweens, and teens may be striving to become adults, they remain – like the twelve year-old Jesus – kids.

For, apart from his parents, likely for the first time, amazing the people around him with his understanding; Jesus was still just a boy. As hard as it can be for us to recognize his dual nature – that he was at the same time fully human and divine – nobody is fully developed at that age; there remains a lot of living and learning to do. And so, above all, I implore you to be patient – with them and with yourselves. We are constantly learning; our relationship with God, and within our faith community, is always changing.

Thus, I'll close with what we are told Mary – the mother of Jesus – observed and understood about parenting this fully human and divine child. Luke tells us that – after they returned home from Jerusalem and Jesus lived obediently with his parents – Mary “treasured all these things in her heart.” It does not say that she understood it all, or that she felt in control; only that she thought about and appreciated it; the earthly and the heavenly; the child-like and the seemingly all grown up. May God provide us with the same. Amen.