

January 3, 2010

The Boy Jesus

LUKE 2:41-52

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Our text from Luke today is the only story we have in the Bible about Jesus as a boy. This is the one picture that we have of Jesus between the stories surrounding His birth at Christmas and His baptism when He is about thirty years old, which we will celebrate next week. So here Jesus is twelve years old, and his family and the people in the close-knit community in Nazareth travel about 65 miles down to Jerusalem for the great annual festival of Passover.

Now the picture painted of Mary and Joseph throughout Luke's Gospel shows that they are very good parents. There are a faithful family; they presented Jesus in the Temple when He was a baby; they go to Jerusalem every year for Passover; they honor God; they have been teaching their children the faith.

The year when Jesus was twelve was no exception. Like every other year, they go to the Temple in Jerusalem to hear once again the great story of the faith, which is very similar to what we just did at Christmas. At Passover, they remembered how they were enslaved in Egypt by Pharaoh, and how God raised up Moses to deliver them. They remembered how there were ten plagues sent upon the Egyptians, the last of which was the death of the firstborn, and if you can recall the story, the Passover got its name because God passed over all the Jewish Houses that had blood painted on the doorpost so that no Jewish firstborn son suffered death. They remembered once again how they made bread without yeast since they were in a hurry to leave Egypt in order to come into the Promised Land, which is right where they are in today's reading as they celebrate the Passover.

So after this great and holy week of celebration, Mary and Joseph packed up and headed home. Again, it reminds us of our celebrations over this holiday season as so many of us have returned home. But something happened during their festival that probably did not happen in your family. At the end of the festival, Mary and Joseph *forgot* Jesus. They actually left Jerusalem without Him. It was an entire day before they realized He was not with them. Did you catch that? The text tells us that "thinking he was in their company, they traveled on for a day."

So after a long day of travelling north towards home in Galilee, Mary and Joseph had to turn around and travel south back to Jerusalem to get Jesus. That's two wasted days. (Now I am guessing at this point that they were not happy with their almost-teenage son.) Then, they spent three days searching, until they found Jesus learning and asking questions in the Temple courts.

Mary and Joseph thought Jesus was right by their side, going right on their way, and didn't think twice about Him *until* they recognized His absence. That scene is quite a bit different from the warm and cozy scene of Jesus lying in a manger with shepherds and Magi all around him at Christmas.

It is striking how much we are like Mary and Joseph. We would never return from a trip and leave our child alone in a big city, but how often do we go about our lives and run off doing our own thing, and never stop and think about Jesus? Like Mary and Joseph, we can travel quite a ways until we finally realize that we have gotten away from Jesus.

The ironic thing is so many other people seem to know where He is. Many people in Jerusalem know; He is in a public place. Jesus is now old enough where He is questioning some rabbis in the Temple courts, and He is amazing everyone. His understanding is stunning. Those

who heard Him are taking great delight. “Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding” the story tells us.

And upon arriving at this scene at the Temple, with Jesus sitting among the teachers, and everyone is hanging on His every word so closely – isn’t it interesting that everyone in the whole place is *listening* to Jesus, except for his parents! Instead of doing the natural act of listening like everyone else, they simply *look* at him. They don’t listen, they look. “When his parents *saw* him they were astonished” and then His mother gets after him and says, “Why have *you* treated *us* like this?”

Moving quickly ahead in life focusing on our own plans, doing whatever we want, always goes hand-in-hand with not listening to Jesus. And when we realize our mistake, we are much quicker to blame God instead of looking at ourselves because blaming God is simply the easier thing to do when something has gone wrong because self-reflection is hard. It means we acknowledge our brokenness and then allow God to change us.

Now don’t get me wrong, sometimes when life is really hard, we do look for God’s help, as we should. We do say, “Lord, where are you?” We do this especially when we are sick, when we learn we have cancer, when we have relationship problems, when we are anxious about our circumstances. During hard times when we just don’t understand suffering, we are just like Mary and want to say to Jesus, “Why have you treated us like this?”

But what about the regular times of life, when there is no emergency? There is no true crisis in today’s story. No one is about to die. Everyone is healthy. Like us, they just celebrated a great festival for God. Today’s story is as much as an inconvenience in a few extra days of hassle and travel for Mary and Joseph than anything else. A parent leaves her child behind, and then blames the child? Doesn’t that seem backwards? Instead of blaming Jesus, saying “why have *you* treated *us* like this?” Shouldn’t Mary have wondered instead, “Why did *I* do this to *you*?”

When life is going about like usual, do we go about so much of our lives without thinking about God? Do we go from a time of holy holidays, like Passover or Christmas, and act as if we have not been changed? Aren’t we sometimes like Mary? How often do we realize that we have run right ahead with our plans and our lives and gone without Jesus next to us and say, “Lord, how could I have done this to you?” Reversing those pronouns of Mary’s question makes us focus outward beyond ourselves. It helps us listen to God. And listening leads to growth.

Perhaps one of the reasons that we like Christmas so much is because Jesus is a baby. Babies cannot tell us what to do. They are simply present with us. And if it is someone else’s baby, there really is not much required of us. We simply get to smile and enjoy.

Imagining Jesus as a happy baby is one of our favorite places for Jesus. As a baby, it is easier to imagine Him next to us, but not challenging us. Where we feel like we are in control. As if we get to have Jesus in our lives, but on our own terms. We know that He is with us, but He is – not demanding anything or challenging us – so that we think we can turn to Him whenever is convenient for us and be confident that He is right there. Sometimes we want the safety of Jesus, without the challenge that He brings. Maybe you’ve heard that saying, “we want Christ without the Cross.”

Sometimes we are just like Joseph and Mary, and instead of listening to the amazing things that Jesus would say to us, we quickly take the circumstances of life and make them about us. Sometimes we simply want to receive new life from God so that we know we are going to heaven when we die, and just leave it right there. We live as if we could contain Jesus in our lives. Sometimes we want Jesus nearby, ready to be at our disposal when we need Him. And

along they way, we make our own plans and go without consulting Him, simply expecting Him to always be there. How often do we forget about Jesus when things seem to be going fine, and it is not until something startles us that, like Mary and Joseph, we then turn to Him panicked when we are anxious, wondering where He is?

But when we do seek Jesus, we find Him, and finding Jesus in our lives, always involves a surprise. The rabbis were surprised at the boy's understanding. Mary and Joseph were astonished when they saw Him at the Temple. It doesn't matter what age we are; it doesn't matter if we are young or old: wherever we are in life, we are called to grow in Christ. We are called to look at ourselves, and see where God is healing our broken parts. It's a continuing process. It never ends.

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Despite their initial response, maybe bringing them back to Jerusalem at Passover to find Jesus really did help them to listen to God. For one day, Mary would come back to Jerusalem at Passover, looking for Jesus. She would hear again about the Passover, and how death passed-over the doors of the Jewish homes. She would begin to understand that death and sin still passes-over us because it landed on Jesus. Because on that later Passover, death landed on a Jewish firstborn son as Jesus was lead to a Cross.

At Christmas, Jesus was born. A baby in a manger. But Jesus is growing up. He did not stay a child forever; "He grew in stature and in favor with God and men." Even though Jesus has not officially begun His public ministry, He is already doing the work of our Heavenly Father. Luke is setting the stage for the next time when we see Jesus, when He will be a man.

Like Jesus, we learn and listen "in our Father's House" so that we would grow and be prepared for God's mission. And as we do, what wonderful things He has in store. He has so many good things to teach us and tell us. When we do more than just see Him in a manger, but when we begin to listen to Him and marvel like the rabbis of old did, then we too will grow. We can see that call already: don't just See Him, but Listen – and be amazed!

The things Jesus has to teach us are so wonderful and beautiful that they change us. And we grow. It is all so exciting that not only can we *not* contain Jesus as a silent infant, but we would not want to, even if we could! Some things are too good to be contained!

Today is the first Sunday of the New Year. This is the perfect time to take stock of our relationship with God. How did you grow with Jesus this past year? Do you hunger to grow this New Year? This is especially timely even as next week we ordain and install new church officers, who will be seeking God's guidance at our upcoming annual retreat.

At Christmas, the baby Jesus was born. As a boy, he is growing. If we want to follow Jesus, if we want to be His disciples, we cannot simply *be* with Him – because we are called to *grow* in Him. We can't take Jesus on our own terms. Jesus is preparing for his Father's Work, as we will see next week at the Temptation. He is preparing by listening and learning. He calls us to do the same. Amen.

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