

This will be the third week we have looked at the life of young Jesus: the baby in a manger, the Jewish child brought to the Temple and consecrated to God, and here, the adolescent boy- at the edge of young adulthood, with his voice changing and the teenage hormones beginning to develop and run through his body- again in the Temple, discussing with the wise teachers of Israel- as though on equal terms- discussing, what, the scripture doesn't say; but a safe guess would be that the topics were God and faith, the Torah, and the religious life.

Three weeks, and already we are at the end of the series. This is all we get, regardless how we wish to fill up the vacant spaces in his young, or even his grown-up, life. This is all the gospels will tell us: baby, pre-teen, and next, the thirty- year-old Jesus at his baptism. I don't know why these 12 years are skipped, or the eighteen years after this moment. But for the gospel writers, this is all we need. In these few verses of chapter 2 in Luke, we should be able to see what he was, and understand how he grew up- look at verse 41, *every year* Joseph and Mary pack up and take the family to Jerusalem for the great festival: they are very religious. And do you remember verse 40 from last week's sermon text, that Jesus the boy grew bigger and smarter, and closer to God? Now, he is 12, and verse 52

has it that he kept growing, wiser and stronger and closer to God, and that he built up relationships with others. We see him as a youth, from a backwater neighborhood, and thus probably poor with limited education. A hard scrabble existence, and yet he has thrived. Thrived, the author insists upon that point: stronger, wiser, and filled with God's grace. Look at him in the Temple, "they were all amazed at his understanding." Even Mom and Dad were astonished: that he was in this place, and that he was so precocious.

How many times have we heard stories of the young and very talented only to see them fall away? The boy who just tears up little league or youth soccer, because he matured faster; the little girl who can sing four octaves or who wins the baby beauty pageants; but then the other children grow up at last and catch or surpass them, and these *wunderkind* are left only with trophies and memories, but nothing to build a life on. Where does Jesus fit in this scenario? 12 years old, and the crowd around him in the Temple that day had never seen anything like it.

We know that early success does not always lead to later success; we know that a life cannot rest on premature accomplishment. But here is the thing about young Jesus. This story shows us a boy wiser than his years, smart enough to look beyond this present moment, "I must be about the things of my Father," he says; a

boy unspoiled by his intelligence, a self-assured, respectful child, and not stubborn or churlish, so that he went back home obedient to his parents.

My mind keeps returning to this one word, in verse 46, where he is asking the teachers *questions*. Our inclination, I think, is to concentrate on the answers. It seems to me that the nature of quick learners, the precocious ones, is to learn or even to memorize the answers, but those that develop slowly are perhaps more likely to learn deeper. But Jesus is not only quick on the uptake, he is also profound, thinks deeply, and asks big questions that challenge even the wise. It would be easy for him to repeat the answers, that just requires listening and knowing what the teacher wants to hear. But this is a young one who understands the possibilities and the problems of a particular answer, and so asks questions: he will not be satisfied with a simplistic answer. And so, neither should we. Our questions will demonstrate an open and searching mind, while knowing every answer is merely the attribute of a smart aleck. A mind that asks deep questions proves its quality, but as well, the qualities of heart and character are shown by the hard questions we are willing to face. Questioning is one hallmark of genuine spirituality.

The same thing must be happening with his mother: “Mary kept these things in her heart”; verse 51 is a reiteration of verse 19, where she pondered all that the shepherds told when they had come to see the baby. She is asking questions, too. And in that, she is an example for us. And even though we can read what comes next, when he has become a man and is called by God, named God’s Beloved Son, we cannot know all the answers about him. Even with the benefit of hindsight, there are still so many questions. No matter how hard we try, how smart we think we are, or how wise we really are, still so many questions. Maybe here is one helpful answer, or the starting point for an answer.

If the story had ended with him in the Temple at 12, we couldn’t know how he turned out- we wouldn’t have read of his teachings and come to know the depth of his insight and commitment. But we should not read back our knowledge of the man into the story of the boy. That is a too easy answer. And so, we must not read too much into that statement about being in his Father’s house. We shouldn’t take that to mean he understood he was the Savior, but just that he knew he was God’s child. At 12, he wasn’t elevating himself above others, wasn’t proclaiming himself Messiah, he was simply affirming his place among the community of God’s people. It is, in fact, how we should try to see ourselves. And the starting point for

this insight may come to us by taking in the “big picture” of Luke’s gospel. Look how the drama begins: there is a priest named Zechariah in the Temple, and an angel appears and announces God’s word of hope to him. Look what Mary and Joseph do so soon after their son’s birth, they bring him to the Temple and offer sacrifices; look how the story of 12 year old Jesus begins, he goes with his parents to Jerusalem, to celebrate what God has done; and then he stays behind- in the Temple. And then, let’s look ahead to the very last words, where we are told the disciples of Jesus “were continually in the Temple, praising and blessing God.” Here is where we start to find the answer, at worship, together, obeying God and giving thanks.

But let’s never think it’s just that easy. There will always be questions, and humble worship is just the beginning. But it is where we can come to know who our Father truly is. It is not a place, of course, but a mind that opens up to God.

Verse 52 informs us that Jesus was living a well-rounded life: growing smarter and stronger, increasing in favor with God and with the people around him. This favor, isn’t it simply growing into an understanding of his place in the world- as God’s child, and as a neighbor and a friend? This word is for us, too, even if we will

never grow up to be the Messiah or Savior. “Favor with God and with others,” has to do with the highest human traits, graciousness and compassion and humility. But it is also about the truth of things- and God’s grace inside the truth of things- and finding the truth about the world and about ourselves. And truth demands much, sometimes that we speak and act- when the world is wrong, when there is injustice, where there is oppression and lying, and greed and wickedness. *That’s what growing up is for*, to continue the search for this truth when we have become older and wiser, to be able to help and to stand with those who are hurt and broken, and so that we may have the courage to stand against power when it is corrupt. Even now may be that time for us, to prove we are strong and brave enough to be God’s men and women- and not children- for the sake of peace, to develop relationships that show God’s love and mercy for the hungry and for the lonely. And so, let us live that they may see in us, and come to know for themselves, God’s favor.