

“A New Song: The Teaching Begins”

30 December 2018: First Sunday after Christmas Day

Salado UMC—Salado, Texas 76571

Preaching Text: Luke 2:41-52

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“Education is the best provision for old age”—(Aristotle).

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**Opening Prayer: O Almighty God, by the birth of your holy child Jesus
you gave us a great light to dawn on our darkness.**

Grant that in his light we may see light.

**Bestow upon us that most excellent Christmas gift of love to all people,
so that the likeness of your Son may be formed in us,
and that we may have the ever brightening hope of everlasting life;
through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen (THE BOOK OF WORSHIP 1965, ALT.).**

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This Lucan story about vocational identity calls us to name and participate in life’s rare moments when children, youth, or young adults begin to clarify a sense of family, call, and mission. To sing a new song—that is to participate in what Isaiah speaks of when prophesies that God said “I am about to do a new thing” (43:19) means God teaches us a new song. A new song stands as a metaphor for bringing a new attitude to life—beginning afresh—with a song in our heart, perhaps. Perhaps for 2019?

Perhaps we have many questions about this Lucan text—Jesus in the temple. How do adults respond when children declare a sense of vocation/call in ways that fracture our adult sense of control? Does youthful declaration confuse our hopes for them? How do congregations nurture and nourish a vital sense of Christian identity in the lives of its younger members? What vivid understandings might emerge if we set verses 48 and 49 of our passage up against Luke 8:20-21? [“Who are my mother and brother and sister?"]. Hear our Gospel lesson for the First Sunday after Christmas Day:

[41] Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. [42] And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. [43] When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. [44] Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day’s journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. [45] When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him.

[46] After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. [47] And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. [48] When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, “Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.” [49] He said to them, “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” [50] But they did not understand what he said to them. [51] Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart.

[52] And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor (Luke 2:41-52).

This is the only Bible passage that tells of Jesus’ boyhood. At the “festival of the Passover,” Jews celebrated both Israel’s deliverance from Israel and the festival of unleavened bread, a symbol of “a new

year.” Ritual law required Jews to make three pilgrimages to Jerusalem each year: Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles.¹ The question as to whether ritual law included the participation of women and children divided the Rabbis and their opinions. The Rabbis customarily excused those who lived far from Jerusalem from Pentecost and Tabernacles feasts.

According to Luke, Jesus is now “twelve years old.” Soon, he will formally become an adult (now celebrated by Jews at the bar mitzvah). After the eight days of the festival, the “group” (v. 44, probably Mary’s and Joseph’s whole village) journey back to Nazareth. Somehow Joseph thinks Jesus was with Mary and the women, while Mary assumes that Jesus travels with the men. When large groups traveled together, the entourage might stretch out for perhaps even miles, depending on the group’s size. Somehow, possibly camping and sharing a meal, Joseph and Mary discover that neither has Jesus. He has disappeared. Frantic with worry they begin their search. First, they seek out “Uncle Zechariah” and then “Aunt Elizabeth.” But Jesus is not with relatives.

After three days, Joseph and Mary find Jesus in the Temple’s outer court “among the teachers,” experts in Jewish law. Respectful of torah, Jesus listens and asks questions. Jesus also answers their questions. Verse 49 records a turning point in Luke’s Gospel—Jesus’ first words. Luke designates Jesus’ father as “the Father.” Until this point in Luke’s narrative, Jesus calls Joseph his father. Note the term “must.” It suggests that the relationship between Jesus and his heavenly Father requires obedience. It is a necessity!

Do parents ever completely understand their children? Luke tells us that Mary and Joseph simply cannot comprehend that Jesus’ relationship with God, even at his early age, takes precedence over his relationship with them. Yet, returning to Nazareth, Jesus daily obeys his parents.

Despite not understanding, Luke writes that Mary “treasured” what Jesus said. Jesus continues to grow in understanding. This growth prepares Jesus for the mission that comprises Luke’s Gospel. Jesus eventually lives out the song that Mary sung before his birth. Representing God, Jesus carries out the prophecy of “filling the hungry with good things” and “sending the rich away empty” (paraphrase of Luke 1:53). Today we can boil down this story to three important features/facets.

1) An obediently faithful and worship observant family nurtured Jesus. In Genesis, when God completes creation, then God rests. God’s interest for rest begins with God. Thus, faithful Jews rested and remembered and worshipped on Sabbath. We paraphrase an ancient belief: “If Sabbath rest is good enough for God, then it should be good enough for us.” Sabbath keeping achieves two vital outcomes for God’s people. First, God tells God’s people that “Six days shall work be done, but on the seventh day you shall have a holy Sabbath of solemn rest to the Lord.” Sabbath is a day to rest and a day to worship. Note the Hebrew seriousness about Sabbath by hearing the rest of the verse: “Whoever does any work on it shall be put to death” (Exodus 35:2). He who rests has time for worship—for worship offers perspective on Yahweh’s gift of life.

¹ Verse 41: “Passover:” The regulations for Passover are in Exodus 23:17; 34:23; Leviticus 23:4-14. The ritual law saw leaven (yeast) associated with fermentation and thus corruption (1 Corinthians 5:8). The Festival of Unleavened Bread, seven days in length, originally followed the one-day Passover celebration. The ritual law prohibited leavened bread during this festival to mark the beginning of the grain harvest. In their haste to leave Egypt, the Israelites could not wait for the dough to rise (Exodus 12:14-20; 34:39). By Jesus’ time, the law had combined the two festivals (See also Luke 22:1).

A second outcome concerning the Sabbath is that it is a day of remembrance—a day to ponder what God has done for us—God’s people. Deuteronomy 5:15 reads, “Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore, the Lord your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.” Thus, sabbath is a day of rest and worship and remembrance. When God completes creation, then God rests. God also invites us to rest so that we remember and worship.

2) When Jesus was twelve years old, he began to understand his own uniqueness. Of course, we understand Jesus as Messiah, Son of God (John 1:49; Heb. 4:14), Source of Eternal Salvation for all who obey him (Hebrews 5:9), true Bread (John 6:32), true Light (John 1:9), true Vine (John 15:1), Truth (John 1:14; 14:6), the Way (John 14:6), and the Word of God (Rev. 19:13). We could mention many others too! But from Jesus’ actions we might conclude that he self-understood himself best as “a friend”—as we even sing: “What a friend we have in Jesus.”

A friend is someone who wants the best for us and from us. A friend is a person who is willing to invest his or her life in ours. A friend is willing to let us make our own decisions, even when we make mistakes in our decision-making, causing us to bring pain to ourselves or others. And yet a true friend will be there for us despite whatever mistakes or bad decisions we make. Honest friends will tell us where and when we are wrong, and will be there to pick up the pieces after we have made a bad decision. True friends are those who stick with us in good time and in bad times. When we think about disciples like Peter, then how could have Jesus ever demonstrated the fundamental idea of friendship any more than he did?

3) Jesus’ move toward God signaled a tension within his own family. All families have squabbles. When Jesus and his family had issues, like the one of his parents searching for him for three days, for example, it served a larger purpose. Do not think these problems terminated at the Jerusalem temple when Jesus was twelve. Remember this nugget from Mark’s Gospel right after Jesus had selected the twelve:

Then he went home; and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, “He has gone out of his mind” (Mark 3:19-21).

Jesus, as all of us do, has some issues with his family—it comes with belonging to a family. There is a Spanish story of a ruptured relationship between father and son. The son ran away, and the father set off to find him. He searched for days, then weeks, and finally months—all to no purpose. Finally, in a last frantic effort to find him, the father put an advertisement in a Madrid newspaper. It read: Dear Paco, meet me in front of this newspaper office at 2:00 on Saturday. All is forgiven. I love you. /s/ Your Father. On Saturday, 800 boys and men named Paco showed up, looking for forgiveness and love from their fathers (*Bits & Pieces*, October 15, 1992, p. 13).

Of course, the cosmic rupture Jesus mends is between us and our earthly relatives and friends—and our heavenly parent. Jesus is Rabbi and teacher. The new song, Isaiah’s prophecy of God’s “doing a new thing,” forms the content of the music—music that Jesus teaches us with his words, but he also does more than teach—Jesus takes our final exam for us on the cross. These are the three things that

Jesus teaches us as we move from his infant/baby stage toward a more mature understanding of who Jesus is for us. Remember he is only twelve years old.

- 1) An obediently faithful and worship observant family nurtured Jesus.**
- 2) As a twelve-year-old, Jesus grasps his special relationship with God his father.**
- 3) It is hard to be Messiah and conform to family life.**

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O God, Searcher of all our hearts,
you have formed us as a people and claimed us for your own.
As we come to acknowledge your sovereignty and grace,
and to enter anew into covenant with you,
reveal any reluctance or falsehood within us.
Let your Spirit impress your truth on our inmost being,
and receive us in mercy, for the sake of our Mediator, Jesus Christ,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

(DAVID TRIPP, ENGLAND, 20TH CENT.)