

**“He’s a Tweener”**

**Luke 2:41-52**

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Merry Christmas! Do you realize that today is Christmas 1? That’s right, according to the Lectionary, and I have come to enjoy learning about the lectionary and the church year, this is Christmas 1. It makes sense. Today is the first Sunday AFTER Christmas Day. Before that we are in Advent, anticipating the coming of Christ. This is the first Sunday after his birth, thus Christmas 1.

Of course, it is NOT fair! Think about it. I mean, we have five Sundays of Lent in the Spring and four Sundays of Advent, but only 1 day of Christmas to celebrate. How does THAT work??!! Probably the same group that didn’t think we should be able to dance at church!

But how fitting is this? It is Christmas, a time when we traditionally focus on our children and make sure to the best of our ability that they have every little thing their hearts could possibly desire! And our emphasis today is on the passage from Luke dealing with the boy Jesus in the temple. Now isn’t that amazing!?! Seriously, someone must have put a lot of thought into the timing of this, you think?

Okay, in order to move on why don’t we do a quick recap of where we have been in order to get to where we are today. There are nine infancy stories about Jesus and Luke is the ONLY Gospel to record these stories. Why is that?

I don’t really know, but the author of the Gospel of Luke is Luke who most people think is Luke, the physician, who was the traveling companion of the Apostle Paul on his missionary journeys. He wrote two books; Luke and Acts. Luke said in his introduction that he had been following the life of Christ closely for some time that there were many other gospels in existence, but he wanted to write a more orderly account of the life of Christ for the most excellent Theophilus. ... Now there are many people who feel that Theophilus was a Roman official of upstanding position, a Gentile, a non-Jew, and that Luke feels he needs to explain the Jewish religion that he wouldn’t have had to explain if Theophilus had been a Jew.

So let’s look at what Luke tells us about Jesus in these infancy stories. The first story is about old Zechariah and Elizabeth and she gets pregnant while old and barren. The second story is Mary becoming pregnant by the Holy Spirit and declaring that this child will be the Son of God. The third story is that Mary visits her old Auntie Liz who is now pregnant and her baby kicks the belly when Mary enters.

Old Zechariah comes out of the temple, his baby has been born, old Zechariah can’t talk and suddenly he talks and announces the baby’s name.

The angel choir is singing above the shepherds and announce, “For to you is born this day in the City of David, a Savior who is Christ the Lord.” This is the first time Jesus is called, Lord.

The shepherds go into the cave and discover it is exactly as the angel told them.

At eight days, Jesus is brought to the temple to be circumcised as was custom, and Old Man Simeon was there, picked up Jesus and declared that he could die now in peace because he had seen the Messiah.

The next story is a story of an eighty four year old widow, who had been in the temple for ages, and she too recognized the baby Jesus as the Messiah.

Those are eight great stories, but they are God stories. We know Jesus is God, but what about the human part? How can a God know how I feel unless he has been in my shoes? Jesus is fully human and fully God. IF you were going to convince someone that Jesus was fully human, what would you be able to tell them?

That is why we have the ninth story in Luke. It is a great story. It is a boyhood story. Jesus is no longer an infant, no longer a child as he was in the previous story when he was deliberately called a child. In this story, Jesus has become a boy. And not just a boy, but a 12 year old boy which in our society we call an adolescent! Last semester in my Wednesday night seminar (is there anyone here from that class?) we learned something very significant. Girls begin adolescents now at age 10 and boys 11. That is shocking!

But in our story Jesus is 12. Twelve is an in-between time, not yet fully grown but no longer a little kid. In some countries twelve year olds are working full-time, picking through garbage dumps searching for copper wire or computer parts to sell, or pounding rocks into small pieces to make gravel, earning pennies a day for their families. In some parts of Africa, a girl who's twelve now heads her household caring for younger siblings after their parents have died. In far too many countries, a boy who's twelve is carrying a rifle as part of a rebel army he probably didn't choose to join.

When I think of a twelve year old I think of a 6<sup>th</sup> grader. I used to have a name for them. I called them tweeners because they were between children and teenagers. I have had lots of experience with this age group, and so for me, when I read this story, I can totally see Jesus as a boy, and I understand his actions much better.

In his own society Jesus was also at a "tween" age, half adult/half child. In his society a twelve year old male was technically a man. He became a son of the law, which means he was obligated to follow the laws. The law said that every adult male Jew who lived within fifteen miles of Jerusalem must attend the Passover, but it was the aim of every Jew in all of the world at least once in a lifetime to attend that feast.

Can you imagine how fascinating this must have been for Jesus? Here he is, a twelve year old on his way to his first Passover. Can you imagine the awe he felt as he saw the holy city? Or the feelings he must have experienced as he saw the Temple?

I still vividly recall my first time away from home for an extended time. Unlike our students here at Smoke Rise who go to camps and retreats, I was always with my parents unless my brother and I stayed with my grandparents for a weekend. But one summer while we were visiting relatives I was asked if I would want to stay a week with my uncle and work on his farm. I was SO EXCITED! I would work in the garden each day, help with the animals, and get to fish every evening in the pond.

I wonder how excited Jesus must have been to be experiencing this for the first time, but we get none of the answers to those questions. Instead, we see from our story that when the feast was over his family was on the way back to their home. Somehow Jesus did not leave with the group. Did he not know the time they were leaving? Did he

not get the message about where they were meeting to take off toward home? How could he not be with his family as they left Jerusalem?

Again, try to see it through the eyes of an adolescent. How many students really care much about times? Aren't parents continually reminding their students of when they are to leave, when to arrive, when to do homework, when to . . . ? And even when you remind them, do they always remember?

I saw so many of our former students at the Christmas Eve service and one of the students reminded me of the time factor. On a trip to White Water one year we took 55 students. We got there when it opened because two of our students had to be back earlier than normal for tennis and we wanted to have as much of a day as possible. Everyone was told to be back on the bus at 3:45. One student heard 4:45.

This is an interesting insight into the culture in which Jesus grew up. It was entirely possible that Jesus would get lost among the crowds at the temple or overlooked among the pilgrims on the way home. It was even probable that a twelve-year-old would not be panicked about being left behind as this was a culture oriented towards care of strangers and one in which children were given great responsibilities at an early age. The more interesting part is that Jesus didn't set out after his parents.

He certainly wouldn't be missed initially. Jesus was at a "tween" age, and could walk with the women (in the front of the group) or with the men who came later. It was the custom for women to leave earlier than the men. They tended to walk more slowly and they had the children to watch. It would take them longer. The men would leave later, move more quickly, and catch up with the group in the evening. It wasn't that Mary and Joseph were careless parents unconcerned with Jesus. In fact, this tells us more about the culture in which they lived. One in which children were not preyed upon and parents were more secure in the adults of their community.

But they did miss him. Can you see how that would work? Joseph thought Jesus was with Mary and Mary thought he was with Joseph. When he didn't show, they looked among their family and friends. Only then did they realize he was not on the trip. Now, it is one thing if he has not been seen all day but is with someone in the caravan, but not to be found anywhere would probably cause most parents to panic. I wonder how frightened Mary and Joseph were.

We don't really get a glimpse of their feelings from the passage. It just tells us that they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. It says they found him after three days. He was in the Temple sitting among the rabbis listening to them and asking them questions. My early understanding of this was of a young boy wowing a group of teachers, but that is not the case. Listening and asking questions is the typical way students learned from teachers. Jesus was listening to the discussions and eagerly searching for knowledge as any avid student might do.

And then comes the most revealing aspect of this passage. It is revealing about parents, and it is revealing about students. Now I know what the scripture says, so I am not trying to make it say something not written, but seriously, can't you imagine how it might have played out? What would you have said?

Mom: "Where have you been? Do you know how worried we were? Are you okay? If you ever do anything like this again . . ."

Son: "What are you worried about? I know where I am! Why are you following me around? You're embarrassing me! Sound familiar?"

As parents we can get comfortable with the ways of our children. We get used to a routine and the way things are supposed to be. Our children continue to grow and we still see them as before. One day they are into puberty and they are no longer the same. How do we respond when our student begins to assert himself?

I will say I like Mary's approach of asking, "Why have you treated us this way? It is good for students to have a chance to understand how life is about more than just them and what they want. But I also like how Jesus gently but definitely takes the name "father" from Joseph and gives it to God.

Now you will want to write this down. I am pretty sure I have never said this, although I have heard it said. I cannot believe I am about to say it, but in verse 49 I believe I like the King James version best because it says, "Did you not know I needed to be about my Father's business?" I think that is a question for all of us.

Despite my newfound interest in the Lectionary and how it helps me look at the entire Bible, I still find myself looking at the year. For example, I see that this is our last Sunday before the New Year. Why is that significant? Because for over half my life I have tried to challenge students and adults to see the new year as a chance to put off the old and put on the new. I have tried to encourage them to set spiritual goals in order to grow in wisdom and stature with God and man. I ask them what would God have them do in the coming year?

However, spiritual growth involves more than simply figuring out who we are or what we must do. There is the question of maturity, and the challenge for us in a new year may be to resolve to deepen our maturity in faith. For example, would anyone find us in church, discussing the things that really matter? Do we simply read the Bible the same way we might have read it as children, or are we continuing to grow into an adult, informed, inquisitive and open approach to Scripture, using the tools scholars have given us and seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit? Are we open to where that might lead us? Would it mean that we need to grow beyond our spiritual adolescents? Would it mean we need to worry less about being comfortable and find ways to live our faith?

I believe we have in this story the day Jesus discovered who he was. What is significant is that the discovery did not make him defiant or proud. It did not make him look down on his humble parents. The scripture says he went home and was obedient to them.

Today is your chance to be obedient. Perhaps you are a "tweener" caught between who you know God wants you to be and who you are. A new year is only a few days away. What will be different in the coming year for you? When family and home draw you into places too safe for growth and too comfortable for giving, will you be able to hear God calling you out, out to the unfamiliar and the risky and the different, out to the places of growth, generosity, and new life? Will there be growth in your relationship with God? Your family?

We have come through a season that is at once family-centered and yet often full of family tensions, from money problems to old hurts brought to new life, from pressures and misunderstandings to unfulfilled expectations and disillusionment. The people who love one another most disappoint and hurt one another most deeply. The lovely image of shepherds and stars and angels singing in the night gives way a couple of days later to anxious parents perplexed at their adolescent son's preoccupation with things above their understanding. Will life ever be the same for any of them, or for us?