

School Days

Luke 2:41-52

Wilton Presbyterian Church

January 6, 2019

This morning the scripture lesson jumps from the birth of Jesus, his Bris and circumcision at the temple and on through his childhood to early adolescence—12 years old. All of his young years are what have been called “the hidden years.” Perhaps Mary and Joseph, as well as the Gospel writers were protecting him, much like the parents of famous young children, wanting him to have as “normal a childhood” as possible without many onlookers, the ancient version of the media. Nevertheless, all we are left with are the words in verse 40 right before our text this morning, “and the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him,” –that and a lot of imagination.

So, what did Jesus like to play when he was young? Did he play at all? Did he have many friends? Was he like any other child of his day? Did he treat his parents with respect? Did he get into trouble? If he was like us in every way...then...

The first glimpse we get of the young Jesus is at age 12, and an incident where he showed signs of being a bit rebellious, or minimally having a mind of his own. At Passover, the scriptures say, everybody went to Jerusalem. So Jesus and his parents made the trek again from Nazareth, where they lived. After the festival, however, the large group with whom they had travelled, which included Mary and Joseph, started the journey back home. The problem was, no one noticed that Jesus wasn't with them. His parents assumed that he was with others in the group. Meanwhile Jesus was hanging out at the temple, oblivious to it all.

You can almost hear the panic...

Now the temple was where all of the erudite scholars stayed. They spent their time pontificating on the Torah and other teachings. It could have been a very intimidating place, especially for a young guy. Yet Jesus sat among them, listening and asking questions. The scriptures say, “And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers.” (v. 47)

Was he a savant?

Knowing Luke, and the way he wrote, even in the way he introduced Jesus to us, I tend to think that this story is written to remind us that Jesus knew what it was like to be in school and to be small and vulnerable. Having God's favor and wisdom in him certainly gave him the ability to reason at an early age with the best of them. And the scriptures say “they were amazed.” But just imagine...it must have pricked their pride a bit to have this young one among them, bat mitzvah age, with such understanding. Maybe some of them tried to show him up. After all, how could he have known so much when they had spent their entire lives studying the scriptures?

Specially gifted children often times have difficulty fitting in not only with their peers, but also with the adults in the world. I remember hearing a mother talk of her experience with her son who had an extremely high IQ for his age. At age 8, he reasoned like a 17 year old. One day the mother was sitting next to a teacher in a meeting at school. The teacher, not knowing who she was said, “Can you believe this boy? No one wants him in their class.” Needless to say, the mother was devastated. Fortunately, the student was placed in a different classroom which suited his needs better.

On behalf of teachers, and parents it can be extremely challenging to keep all students challenged when there is such a disparity in talent. I wonder if Mary and Joseph ever felt this way? Who would Jesus' teachers have been? At a young age, he was reasoning with the scholars of his day, perhaps threatening their intellectual abilities with his fresh insight. They probably didn't know what to do with him. What must his peers have thought of him? Did they want to spend time with him, or was he so beyond them, that they shunned him?

And what about Mary and Joseph's reaction when they went back and found Jesus sitting at the synagogue. He had been missing for 3 days! Had they issued an amber alert? I would imagine it must have been a tense situation. All they wanted to do was to get their son and head home, and the scholars barraged them with questions about his background. Do you think Jesus got punished when they got home?

And what about Jesus. Did he know he had impressed all of the scholars? Did he know he was intellectually "well beyond his years?" Did his intellect match his emotional development? Remember when YOU were 12? Everything is a bit awkward when you're trying to make sense of your place in the world—when you're managing the tender journey from child into adult. Oh, and then there are the hormones...

Once again, we see that Jesus knew human experience. He knew what it was like to be in school, to be a bit out of place, and to perhaps be open to marvel and ridicule. Who knows, maybe he was even bullied.

I heard that Duke University Chapel has a mural carved in lime wood over the altar depicting this scene—young Jesus sitting with the scholars at the Temple. Why? Why would this scene have been chosen out of all of the possibilities in the life of Jesus as the centerpiece of their worship?

Perhaps it's a depiction showing an image of Jesus belonging among the most scholarly as well as sinners and saints. He was himself in all situations—he showed us time and time again that he carried within himself a sense of belonging—not because others included him, but because he had an inner sense that he was at home wherever he was. True belonging never asks us to change who we are, it demands we BE who we are. If we fit in because of how we change ourselves, that's not belonging. Because you've betrayed yourself for other people and that's not sustainable. Researcher Brene Brown, who writes and speaks on shame and identity says, "I belong everywhere I go no matter where it is or who I'm with as long as I never betray myself. The minute I become who you want me to be in order to fit in and make sure people like me is the moment I no longer belong anywhere." Poet Maya Angelou says it a little differently, "We're never free until we belong everywhere, which is nowhere which is no place at all." The cost is high but the reward is great.

From the sounds of it, it sounds like Jesus embodied these ideas. He was unapologetically himself, and thus belonged EVERYWHERE, BECAUSE he knew who he was, and whose he was, even in the face of real world challenges. He knew his purpose.

Once again, I am comforted in knowing that I serve a God who knows the intricacies of what it means to be human. Not only that, but in this season in which we celebrate the incarnation...God made flesh, we understand a bit more how God knows that we need people in our lives who can be God's loving presence in our midst—family, teachers, therapists, mentors, sponsors, spiritual guides, coaches, and friends. But also, we see that we are called to claim our identity as God's children, and in so doing, we can offer welcome, comfort and a sense of belonging to others.

Thank God for the presence of those in our lives who know how to skillfully guide us and our young people through the periods of their lives as they find out who they are, and what they are to do in this world. Jesus must have had some wise people in his life...Mary and Joseph for starters, but teachers and mentors as well, after all, he grew up to be what many call, "The greatest teacher who ever lived."