

“Middle School Jesus”

Luke 2:41-52

Rev. Jeff Allen

January 3, 2010

Kids grow up so fast. I’ve heard this saying all my life, and now that I’m a father, I can verify how true it is. It doesn’t seem possible that my kids are saying some of the things they’re saying at just two and a half years old. It seems like only yesterday that we were bringing them home from the hospital. Life just seems to speed on by, and we’re often left wondering where the time went.

One writer put it this way: “It seems like one minute you are trying to encourage your child to go faster on his bicycle, to get up enough speed to stay balanced, and the next you are pleading with the same boy now at the wheel of a car, pleading with him to slow down. One minute you’re urging a shy daughter to say hello to strangers, and the very next, you’re trying to discourage her from responding to strangers on the Internet.”¹

Yes, our lives and the lives of our children can seem to fly by, but that’s nothing compared to the story of Jesus’ life that we find in the Bible. In the gospels, Jesus grows up almost immediately. The span of his childhood and young adulthood can be found between the period of one sentence and the beginning capital letter of the next sentence. Only Matthew and Luke even speak about Jesus as a child. Matthew goes straight from Jesus’ birth to his baptism by John as an adult. Thirty years in the blink of an eye. Luke isn’t quite as bad. He at least gives us a bit more information about Jesus before he becomes an adult.

Chapter two of Luke’s Gospel starts with the story Jesus’ birth, the shepherds that visited him in the stable in Bethlehem, and his visit by Simeon and Anna when he presented to the Lord in the temple in Jerusalem. Then Jesus’ family goes home to Nazareth in Galilee, and all that we know of Jesus’ childhood according to Luke is that “the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him.”² That’s all we know, until the scene Luke describes in today’s Gospel text.

Mary and Joseph went to Jerusalem every year for the Feast of the Passover. When Jesus was twelve years old, he went with them, according to the custom. When it came time to leave and head back to Nazareth, Jesus stayed behind without his parent’s knowledge. After a day’s journey, Mary and Joseph looked for Jesus among the caravan of all their family and friends. They finally realized that Jesus wasn’t with them, so they went back to Jerusalem and searched for three days.

Let’s pause the story here. What do you think it would have been like to be Mary or Joseph. You’re among friends and family, it’s a safe group, so you let your guard down a little and let your kids run around. Eventually you discover that one of your kids is missing. What do you do? How do you feel?

¹ Sid Burgess, “Growing up Fast” www.esermons.com

² Luke 2:40, NIV

A month or two ago, something similar happened to me here at church. We were in the main lobby after the second service, chatting with folks and eating some cookies. All of a sudden, I realized one of my sons was out of sight. I asked Sandi if she knew where he was and she said she thought he was with me. I wasn't too concerned initially, since we were here at church. So I looked down the hallway and didn't find him. I went out to the parking lot and didn't see him there. My steps were getting a little faster by now as my anxiety about the situation increased. I went to the nursery to see if he had gone back there. At one point, I saw Cathy Davis and asked her if she had seen him. She must have noticed the concern in my face, because she started looking too. Eventually I found him sitting in my chair in my office playing with my computer keyboard. What a sense of relief! This was about a five-minute episode in my life. I can't imagine what it must have been like for Mary and Joseph as they were looking for their child in a big city for three whole days.

Well Mary and Joseph finally found Jesus in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening and asking them questions. Why did it take three days to find him? One preacher said "One might imagine that it took three days because the last place one would seek a twelve-year-old boy in the fascinating scenes and markets of Jerusalem would be the Temple!"³ If your twelve year-old boy were by himself in a big city, would you think to look in church?

Anyway, they found him. Now what would you have said if you were Mary or Joseph once you found Jesus? I'm not sure my response would have been appropriate material for the Bible. According to Luke, Mary and Joseph were astonished, and that Mary simply said "Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you!"⁴ Nothing more is recorded by Luke.

If you think Mary and Joseph probably had something more to say, you're in good company. Bishop Peter Storey of the South African Methodist Church said that "This has to be the censored version! ... What 12-year-old from a loving home would calmly detach from his parents, enter the portals of probably the most daunting building in the city, and be found three days later in solemn debate with theologians of note? And then, what Jewish momma, finding her missing child after three days, would simply be 'astonished'? Can you imagine her saying in polite Aramaic, 'Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been looking for you anxiously.' Give me a break!"⁵ Like Bishop Storey, I imagine Mary and Joseph probably had something else to say to Jesus, and they would probably like to thank Luke for not including those additional words in the story.

Luke concludes the story by saying that Jesus went back to Nazareth and was obedient to them, and he "grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men."⁶

³ Ray Summers, "Commentary on Luke." Waco, TX: Word Books, 1972, p. 43.

⁴ Luke 2:48, NIV

⁵ Peter Storey, "Stirrings of Divinity" *The Christian Century*, December 13, 2000, p. 1299.

⁶ Luke 2:51-52, NIV

So, in today's text, we get a glimpse of Jesus as a pre-teen. In today's culture, he would have been in middle school, probably sixth grade. Now I'd like you to think about the middle schoolers you know or think about your own experience in middle school. It's a time of transition. It's a time of change. It's a time that I have often said I would never want to re-live! My ten years of experience in youth ministry have confirmed that thought!

During this time, our bodies change, causing awkwardness all over the place. Our brains develop, allowing for increased ability to think in the abstract and less black and white. This can cause confusion as the things we once took for granted begin to be less certain. Our sense of identity changes as we begin to understand who we really are. This can make friendships difficult when we discover that our own path isn't necessarily the same path as our long-term friends. We begin to assert more and more independence from our parents as we figure out our own identity. This can cause a tremendous amount of stress in our family life.

As I've shared with you before, I like to play with my ideas of Jesus a little bit, and it's been fun this week to think about what Jesus would have been like if he was a middle schooler in one of my youth groups. What would he have struggled with? What issues in his life would he have stayed after youth group to tell me?

The story that Luke tells gives me a bit of an indication as to one issue Jesus had already begun to figure out. Jesus had a strong sense of his own identity at this point. When Mary and Joseph finally find him in the temple, Mary says, "Your father and I have been looking for you." Jesus responds by saying, "Why were you searching for me? Didn't you know I had to be in my father's house?"⁷ In his response to his mother, Jesus is making a statement about his understanding of his identity. Notice how he shifts the title *father* from Joseph to God? Jesus is making a claim statement that he knows who his father is, and that understanding is what will drive his life from this point on.

As William Barclay points out though, "This discovery did not make him proud. It did not make him look down on his humble parents, the gentle Mary and the hard-working Joseph. [The scripture says that] He went home and he was obedient to them." Barclay concludes that "Truly Godly people do not despise earthly ties; rather because they belong to God they discharge human duties with supreme fidelity."⁸

The invitation to Christian discipleship from today's text is to think about our own sense of identity. What defines our identity? Is it our family ties, a sense of vocation, a personal creed, our own dreams, desires and ideals, or is the foundation of our identity our relationship with God?

⁷ Luke 2:49, NIV

⁸ William Barclay, "The New Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of Luke" (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001) p. 36-37.

One way to answer this question is to ask ourselves whether our faith is a peripheral matter for us, or does it shape our lives in some fundamental or profound way. What role does God have in our lives? What difference does our relationship with God make on a day-to-day basis?

God's claims may stand in tension or even open conflict with our human desires for social acceptance, loyalty to family, economic prosperity, and other worthy ideals. The hard decisions are not those between right and wrong, but those that call for us to choose between options when both represent worthy claims. How is God a part of these kind of hard decisions that we make?

In this time of New Year's resolutions, maybe this is the year for you to take the next step in grounding your identity in a fundamental way on your relationship with God. This new year represents a new opportunity for deepened faithfulness, a new opportunity to develop our relationship with God, a new opportunity to allow God to lay claim upon our lives, a new opportunity to follow Jesus' model of faithfulness.

One of the ways we are reminded of this opportunity is through the sacrament of holy communion when we remember what God has done for us through Jesus and are given the opportunity to be made one with God and with one another through Jesus. As we partake of holy communion together now, I invite you to receive the invitation God is offering for new and deeper relationship in this new year.