

Jan. 2, 2022 Christmas 2

Luke 2:40-52

They Grow Up Fast

Kids grow up awfully fast these days. 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 and live. Then only moments after that, you are waiting on that same boy to give you your first grandchild (6 ½ weeks away 😊).

Jesus is growing up fast too. Here we are, a week from Christmas, from the baby lying in a manger. Now Jesus is already an adolescent wandering off on his own. Last week Jesus was "prophecy miraculously fulfilled." This week He is questioning the teachers of that very tradition.

The confession of the church holds that Jesus is "fully human, fully God," and in today's familiar story from Luke, we can see both sides. Jesus, fully human, is growing up as all mortals must. In the process, Jesus has scared His parents half to death as all teen-agers do. Jesus is asking questions, as should we all, and He is listening to learn, as all we must. And in this story, we see the twelve-year old Jesus fully divine with everyone amazed at His understanding and His answers. We hear Jesus declaring His unique relationship with God the Father as only the Son can do.

His parents, however, are not so quickly impressed. They have not come back to Jerusalem for a theological discussion. Just last week, angels sang and shepherds came to celebrate His birth. Priest and prophet proclaimed Jesus to be God's answer to the yearning of all humankind. Now, His parents just want some simple answers. "Just where have you been? And what do you think you're doing?"

As the father of three boys, I can easily identify with Mary and Joseph in this story. "Child, why have you treated us like this?"

Our questions are best directed to the gospel writer Luke. "Just what, Dr. Luke, are you trying to tell us in this story of Jesus, boy wonder?"

First, Luke wants to reinforce the point he's been making from the beginning. Jesus is unique among all humankind. The devout Simeon has proclaimed this child "God's gift of salvation for all peoples--a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."

The aging prophet Anna has spread Simeon's revelation about Jesus among all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

Again, Luke's first point: Jesus is unique among all humankind.

Now his second:

Jesus is anchored in the faith of ancient Israel. His family is immersed in the practice of Jewish piety. "Jesus lived as a Jew among Jews." Mary and Joseph had their son circumcised, given the sign of the covenant. They had presented their first-born son in the temple and offered sacrifices according to the Law of Moses. Every year, Luke says, they go up to Jerusalem for the Passover Festival. Here is a family serious about faithful practice of the Jewish faith providing us with an example of what it means to be practicing Christians in a secular world. Practicing Christians? What an uncommon turn of phrase. And yet practicing Christian is precisely what Biblical faith prescribes. Practicing Christians observe the Lord's Day each week with worship, study and rest. As Jesus and His family participated in the great festivals of the Jewish faith, so practicing Christians observe the seasons and high holy days of the Christian year--Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost.

Christianity, like the Judaism of Jesus, is a communal faith. We unite with sisters and brothers in the community of the church. Not a perfect person among us. And yet all of us together experiencing the perfect love of God. Practicing Christians keep the commandment—Love God and love neighbor. Practicing Christians pray without ceasing and seek opportunities to serve rather than to be served.

First and foremost, St. Luke would have us know Jesus is unique among humankind, and, second, this Jesus is a practicing Jew as we ourselves are called to be practicing Christians.

Now point three in the story:

The great Gospel writer wants us to know that questions are as natural to faith as fish to water, as butter to bread. Surely, Theophilus, to whom Luke has addressed this work, has been asking questions. Luke says he's writing to provide an orderly account of Jesus' perfect life, innocent death and victorious resurrection. Apparently, Theophilus has expressed some interest but perhaps some reservations too.

Otherwise, Luke would not have gone to the trouble of writing the work we know in Christian tradition as the Third Gospel.

Today we are only at chapter 2 and already the characters in this story have had many questions. Zechariah and Mary have questioned the angels who appeared to them. Elizabeth has questioned Mary. The people who form a kind of Greek chorus in Luke's Gospel have questioned one another. Now, in today's episode, there are more questions: Mary and Joseph questioning Jesus and Jesus questioning His parents and the religious leaders.

I think that all of these questions flying back and forth in the story represent the Gospel writer's concession that comprehension of Jesus as the Messiah, the Holy One of God, is a complex issue.

This, against the claim of many devoted church folks who say that there is nothing in Holy Scripture to question, and many equally sincere skeptics who claim that God's Holy Word has no believable answers. Here at the outset of his orderly account, Luke assures us that in biblical faith, the floor is always open for questions.

In my own story, I spent my early years attending a Presbyterian church infrequently, then went to a Lutheran school and joined the Lutheran church and began to take my faith seriously and ask lots of questions. I attended a Southern Baptist High School and an Episcopal liberal arts college. I had questions! I still do. Questions are good. They are ok, even healthy.

Jesus is growing up fast in Luke's Gospel. The irony of faith is that to grow with Jesus we have to slow the story down. To grow with Jesus, our living Lord, we must give one another and we must allow ourselves the time to ask our questions, to seek in order that we might find, to doubt our doubts.

Jesus is growing up fast, but the irony of faith is that it will not be rushed. As today's story concludes, Jesus is obediently returning to Nazareth where He will grow in wisdom and in years and in divine and human favor. More than twenty years will have elapsed on the time line of Jesus' life when Luke resumes his narrative in the next chapter. More than two decades. That is a long time for spiritual formation. But consider the everlasting benefit to you and to me and to all of humankind.

So let's slow down, ask our questions and grow up with Jesus.