

“Jesus Grows Up”

1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26; Luke 2:41-52

Today’s Gospel lesson is the only story in the canonical New Testament that refers to Jesus as a youth. That lack prompted a later tradition to create stories of the young Jesus, many of which are collected in the apocryphal Infancy Gospel of Thomas. Stories there range over an eight-year period, with Jesus from 5 to 12 years of age. They portray Jesus mostly as miracle worker (at five he makes birds out of mud, claps his hands, and makes them fly away; later, when he helps his father in the carpenter shop, he stretches a board too short for its intended use), often with malevolent results (he causes a boy who jostles him in the marketplace to die, strikes blind those who subsequently complain, and raises a boy who fell from a roof to his death so he can testify that Jesus did not push him off, as some had claimed).

Today as we explore the only accepted story of Jesus as a boy we focus on the themes of growth and wisdom. It is too bad that we do not more reliable accounts of his activity between the ages of 13 and 30. The genre of ancient children’s literature is sparse because prolonged adolescence did not exist. When one came of age at age 13 they were considered to be an adult with adult responsibilities.

Another answer that is given for the omission of stories from Jesus’ boyhood is that the Holy Spirit did not deem it necessary to inspire his disciples to write these accounts. It would not have been impossible to have interviewed his mother Mary about this.

And yet another answer to this mystery is that beyond the account that we consider this morning that there was little or nothing during this period of time in Jesus’ life to bear upon salvation history, that is those events that teach us about God’s way in our lives by example of the boy Jesus.

Jesus’ boyhood hometown was Nazareth. Nazareth was an insignificant settlement in Galilee. Nazareth is mentioned throughout the Gospels and in the book of Acts; however, it is not cited in the Old Testament. That is likely because most of the Old Testament narratives were based in Judea and other areas. Isaiah said, “A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a branch will bear fruit” (Isaiah 11:1).

Some theologians have theorized that Isaiah's prophecy in the 11th chapter reference Nazareth as the hometown of the coming Messiah. This is because the word "branch" in Hebrew has the same root word as Nazareth.

This makes good sense of what Matthew's Gospel says when it teaches that the prophets predicted that the Messiah would come from Nazareth. Matthew was able to glean even more from this prophecy in Isaiah with the knowledge of where Jesus was from. So we do find in the New Testament is an assortment of clear references to Nazareth and its connection to the life of Jesus.

At the age of 12, Jesus travels with Mary and Joseph from Nazareth to Jerusalem for the Passover festival. After the festival, his parents begin their journey home, unaware that the boy Jesus has stayed behind in Jerusalem. They find him three days later in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening and asking questions. All who heard him were amazed at his understanding and answers.

How could you miss your 12 year child when making a trip like this? It kind of reminds me a little of the Home Alone movie when Macaulay Culkin misses the Christmas trip by his family to Paris...

All observant Jews travelled to Jerusalem to go on pilgrimage to Jerusalem to observe this most important of all the Jewish festivals. They travelled in large family groups and sometimes had to split up. Somehow Jesus arranged to stay behind or just got left like Macaulay.

Regardless, this story stresses for us Jesus' deep connection to God and his hunger for spiritual wisdom, even at a young age. It serves as a reminder that growth in faith and wisdom is a journey that begins early and continues throughout our lives. Luke invites us to reflect on the often-overlooked period of Jesus' life: his childhood and adolescence. While the Gospels don't provide exhaustive details, the glimpses we have—especially here in Luke 2:40-52—offer profound lessons about growth, humility, and spiritual purpose about Jesus that we can glean for ourselves.

First, Jesus Grew Like Us (Luke 2:40): “The child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was on him.”

Jesus experienced the normal stages of human development. His growth reminds us that God values the process of maturity. Just as Jesus grew physically, intellectually, and spiritually, we too are called to develop in every aspect of life. Even after we have longed reached adulthood we need to be lifelong learners. The word “disciple” in the Greek means “learner”.

Second, Jesus was inquisitive and had a hunger for human and divine knowledge (Luke 2:46-47):

At age 12, Jesus stays behind in the temple, engaging with the teachers. This shows his deep passion for God’s Word even as a boy. Do we foster a similar hunger for God’s truth in our lives?

Third, Jesus practiced obedience and humility (Luke 2:51):

After being found, Jesus returns to Nazareth and he submits to Mary and Joseph. Although fully divine, Jesus embraced obedience to earthly parents, teaching us humility and respect for authority.

Finally, Jesus was not self-centered but “grew in favor with God and others” (Luke 2:52): “And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man.”

Jesus’ balanced growth is a model for us—pursue wisdom, cultivate relationships, and seek favor with God. How are we striving to grow in ways that reflect God’s priorities?

Jesus’ childhood and adolescence remind us that personal growth is a journey shaped by discipline, humility, and a desire for God.

On this final Sunday of 2024 it is only natural to reflect as well. Let’s commit ourselves to a life of continuous growth, becoming more like Jesus as we mature in wisdom, faith, and love.

Reverend Dr. James D. Hegedus
First Presbyterian Church of Mason, Michigan
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