

THE 12-YEAR-OLD GOD

Luke 2:40-52

Second Sunday after Christmas (Series A)

January 5, 2020

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for the Second Sunday after Christmas comes from *The Gospel According to Luke*, chapter 2, verses 40 through 52. It is on page 725 of the pew Bible. In this gospel lesson, we get a rare glimpse into Jesus' childhood. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Luke 2, beginning at verse 40, we read in Jesus' name.

⁴⁰ And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him.

⁴¹ Now his parents went to Jerusalem every year at the Feast of the Passover. ⁴² And when he was twelve years old, they went up according to custom. ⁴³ And when the feast was ended, as they were returning, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. His parents did not know it, ⁴⁴ but supposing him to be in the group they went a day's journey, but then they began to search for him among their relatives and acquaintances, ⁴⁵ and when they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem, searching for him. ⁴⁶ After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. ⁴⁷ And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. ⁴⁸ And when his parents saw him, they were astonished. And his mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been searching for you in great distress." ⁴⁹ And he said to them, "**Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?**" ⁵⁰ And they did not understand the saying that he spoke to them. ⁵¹ And he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was submissive to them. And his mother treasured up all these things in her heart.

⁵² And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

This is the kind of story that I would like to have more of in the Bible. It, at least partially, satisfies some of our curiosity about Jesus. What was Jesus like as a child? When did Jesus come to the realization that he is the Son of God? This passage gives us at least a little bit of insight into those questions, but I would still like to have more.

This is the only story we have from Jesus' childhood. From the time that Joseph and Mary returned from Egypt and settled in Nazareth, at which point Jesus was maybe about two years old, until Jesus comes to John to be baptized in the Jordan River, we really don't know anything else about his life. That's almost a thirty-year gap, and all we have from that time period is this account of his visit to Jerusalem when he was twelve years old.

I'm curious about this; perhaps you are too. His childhood must have been unique. How cool would it be to interview Mary and hear all about Jesus as a child? What would it be like to have a child who doesn't sin? How old was he when he figured out that he's different from anyone else? How early did he know that he is the Son of God? How did he learn that he has supernatural power?

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We assume, and I think rightly so, that he was not born with this knowledge. He emptied himself when he took on the form of a servant and was born in the likeness of men (Phil. 2:7). At the beginning and end of this passage Luke states that Jesus grew and increased in wisdom (2:40, 52). If he grew and increased in wisdom, then there must have been things he did not know. This is one of the mysteries of the incarnation. The nature of God is that he is perfect and all-powerful and all-knowing, besides lots of other things. But the Son of God set his divine attributes aside when he took on human flesh. He still possessed these attributes, along with the fullness of deity, but he humbled himself by choosing to not make use of them. That means that there was a time when Jesus was God, but he did not know that he was God. He had to learn it.

Do you see what's mysterious about this? Jesus is God, and the nature of God is to know all things, but there was a time when Jesus didn't even know that he was God. How is that possible? That's the mystery. So we're naturally very curious about his childhood.

This story in Luke is really the only thing we know from Jesus' childhood. We're left wanting more, but there must be some reason this is the only story we have.

One of the attributes of Scripture that we confess is the sufficiency of Scripture. "Sufficiency" means that Scripture is enough. It does not tell us everything about God. It does not tell us everything we *want* to know. But it does tell us everything we *need* to know. Furthermore, it tells us the right amount of information. The Bible is a big book by our standards. But in comparison to everything that could be said about God, I suppose it is quite brief. But what we have in the Scriptures is exactly what the Holy Spirit saw fit to reveal. So there must be some reason this is the only story we have from Jesus' childhood.

Most likely, Luke learned this story from Mary, the mother of Jesus. Luke was not an eyewitness to Jesus' life and ministry. Two of the gospel writers—Matthew and John—were eyewitnesses. They were among Jesus' disciples, so that's obviously where they got their material. But Mark and Luke were not eyewitnesses. Mark seems to have gotten his information from Peter, who was an eyewitness. And Luke did historical research, interviewing several eyewitnesses (1:2). There are several clues in *The Gospel of Luke* that he interviewed Mary. For one thing, everything in chapters one and two is information Mary would have known, either because she witnessed it directly, or because she learned about it from her relative Elizabeth. There are also two statements about how Mary remembered these things. First, after Jesus' birth Luke tells us that "Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart" (2:19). And then again, at the end of this story, even though Mary didn't understand the saying that Jesus spoke to her, she "treasured up all these things in her heart" (2:51). These are our best clues that Luke interviewed Mary. Imagine being a fly on the wall when that happened. That's one of two conversations I would love to have a recording of. And I suppose Mary probably told him several stories from Jesus' childhood. But ancient writers had a limited amount of space—they had to fit everything on the scroll they had—so Luke records just this one story for us. And he does so because it's very significant.

It teaches us two basic truths—one of them is clear, and the other is a little more cryptic.

The first basic truth it teaches us is that Jesus is the Son of God, and that he knew this at the age of twelve. When Joseph and Mary finally find Jesus, she says to him, "Your father and I have been searching for you in great distress" (2:49). She uses the title "father," of course, to refer to Joseph. But Jesus replies, "**Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?**" (2:49). And Jesus, of course, uses the title "Father," not to refer to

Joseph, but to God. At the age of twelve he knew that God is his true Father. Therefore, it seemed to him quite natural that he should be in the temple.

It's kind of funny. To Jesus it seemed perfectly obvious that the temple is the first place they should have looked for him. In fact, it's the only place they should have looked. The logic goes like this: *You're going to Jerusalem to look for God. Where do you think he would be?* The temple, of course! By calling the temple his "Father's house," this twelve-year-old boy is claiming to be the Son of God.

Now I kind of wonder—and I don't know if this is right or not—but I wonder if this is the point in Jesus' life when he figured out his true identity. I can think of two ways it might have happened. One, Mary could have just told him. That's probably the simplest explanation. But the other way is this. He's sitting in the temple with the teachers. He's listening to them and asking them questions. But he's figuring stuff out on his own too, because "all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers" (2:47). So he's talking about the Scriptures with the teachers of Israel. From the Scriptures he heard about the Christ who was promised as far back as the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:15). And at some point he just has to think to himself, *Huh; that sounds a lot like me. That would explain why I don't sin like everyone else.*

I don't really know if this is the way Jesus came to learn his true identity, but it's clear that at this point he knows who he is. And this is an important point.

Every once in a while I hear a liberal theologian say that Jesus never claimed to be the Son of God. It makes you wonder if they've ever read the gospels, because Jesus does it a lot. But when your view of Jesus is that he was simply a good moral teacher, but not actually the Son of God, you can't have him running all over the place claiming to be God, because that would be a pretty big lie, and you can't have good moral teachers telling grandiose lies. So they have to fabricate a different Jesus, one who is quite different than the one revealed in the gospels. But we see here that, even as a twelve-year-old, Jesus knew he was the Son of God, and he said so.

And it's kind of funny that he says this in the temple, and in the presence of the teachers of Israel, because at another Passover, probably about twenty-one years later, the scribes and priests of the Jewish council will ask him straight up, "Are you the Son of God?" (22:70). Perhaps a few of these same teachers are still around twenty-one years later when Jesus says, "Yes" (22:70). But they treat him less charitably than they did when he was twelve.

So this is the first basic truth of this story: Jesus is the Son of God, and he knew it when he was twelve, if not earlier.

The second basic truth is less obvious: Jesus must sacrifice himself as an offering for sin.

Don't tell Matthew, Mark, and John, but *The Gospel of Luke* might be my favorite of the four gospels. One of the things I really enjoy about Luke is the way he tells the story. He likes foreshadowing Jesus' passion, so he has these little clues in the text that no one is going to notice the first time reading it, but when you know where the story is going, and if you remember some of the phrases in the passion narrative, you start to notice certain phrases and structures in the earlier parts of the book that parallel statements from the account of Jesus' passion. And these links reveal that all of this is driving toward the events of three pivotal days in Jerusalem. I usually don't notice these links on my own, so I'm grateful for good commentators (e.g., Arthur Just).

For example, my favorite link is a clever bit of foreshadowing Luke does with the birth narrative, earlier in chapter two. He connects Mary wrapping Jesus in cloths and laying him in a manger with how Joseph of Arimathea deals with the body of Jesus after he dies (2:7; 23:53). I

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won't spell the whole thing out for you. If you're interested, ask me later for the references and you can look it up on your own. But the point of Luke's foreshadowing is to show that even from Jesus' birth, his purpose was to seek and save the lost through his death and resurrection.

And there seems to be another link here, between this story in the temple and Jesus' passion. The link shows that when the twelve-year-old Jesus says that he must be in his Father's house, he's foreshadowing his own death.

I'll do my best to explain it. There are at least six connections to Jesus' passion. I don't expect you to remember all of them, so if you want to look it up later you'll be able to find this on our website.

The first connection is the mention of three days. Now, not every reference to three days is necessarily a foreshadowing of Jesus' passion. It could be that three days are mentioned simply because that's how long it was. But whenever we see a reference to three days, we should look to see if there are more connections to link with Jesus' passion. Sometimes a reference to three days is an introductory clue.

Second is the word "must," when Jesus says, "Did you not know that I *must* be in my Father's house?" This is a clue we might not think much of, but Jesus often uses this word, especially in *The Gospel of Luke*, to refer to the necessity of him going to Jerusalem to suffer and die (9:22; 13:33; 17:25; 22:7, 37; 24:7; 24:26, 44). Here, of course, is the first place we hear Jesus speak of what he *must* do, because these are his first recorded words, and when he uses the word later to speak of the necessity of his death, it reminds us of the first time he spoke of what he *must* do.

The third connection is that the temple is the place of sacrifice. There were synagogues all over Israel where Jesus could discuss the Scriptures with the teachers of Israel. And, of course, there was teaching that took place at the temple, but the real purpose of the temple, and the one thing that distinguished it from all the synagogues, is that it was the appointed place of sacrifice. This is the place where, every single day, animals were killed as a foreshadowing of Jesus' sacrifice. When Jesus says he must be in his Father's house, he's saying that he must be in the place of sacrifice.

Then there are a few phrases in this account that seem to be paralleled in Luke's passion narrative. Jesus' question, "Why were you looking for me?" is paralleled by the angels' question of the women at the tomb, "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" (24:5). That's the fourth connection.

The fifth one is similar. Mary treasuring these things in her heart is similar to how the women remembered Jesus' words after the angels' announcement that Jesus had risen (24:8).

Finally, the sixth connection has to do with being lost and found. In Luke 15, the parable of the lost son, Jesus equates being lost with being dead and being found with coming back to life (15:24). Now Jesus is, of course, very different from the lost son, but they are similar in this way, that he was lost, or at least seemed to be lost, and then was found. And this parallels what will happen in this same city about twenty-one years later. Jesus will seem to be lost. And I don't just mean that nobody will know where he is. I mean that he will seem lost for good. The kind of lost for good that only happens at death. And then after three days he will be found, not *in* the temple, but *as* the temple of God, which is his body raised from the dead.

Now if there were just one or two of these connections, we wouldn't think much of it. But when you put them all together, it begins to appear that Luke chose this story from Jesus' childhood and told it in this way to show that even from the age of twelve, Jesus knew who he was, and he knew why he had been sent.

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The purpose of Jesus' mission is veiled at first. Joseph and Mary did not understand Jesus. If any twelve-year-old thinks their parents don't understand them, Jesus can relate. And it's not that they didn't understand the part about him being the Son of God. They already knew that, because angels had told them that part. But they didn't understand the part about his mission. They didn't understand why he must be in his Father's house. They didn't understand how this foreshadowed the cross. The purpose of his mission was veiled at that time. It's not really until after his resurrection that people begin to understand. But Jesus knows what he must do, and he is resolute.

So these are the two basic truths we learn from Jesus in this passage: he is the Son of God, and he must sacrifice himself for the sin of the world. He even knows this as a twelve-year-old child.

I realized as I was writing this that all of my sermons, going back to the last Sunday in Advent, have followed the same two-point outline: first, Jesus' identity as the Son of God, and second, his mission to sacrifice himself for the sin of the world. I didn't plan for them all to work out this way, but it's there in every text. And it's there in all of the texts, because this is the basic message of Christmas. In fact, it's the basic message of all of Scripture and all of Christian doctrine. Jesus is the Son of God, and he sacrificed himself for the sin of the world. And that, of course, means that he sacrificed himself for you. This is the persistent and unchanging message of Scripture, and that is why we repeat it, over and over again. Our lives change. Our commitment wavers. We stray. We fall. But "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Heb. 13:8). He is the Son of God who gave himself into death for our sake and was raised from the dead. This is what he must do, for our sake, and so he did. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.