

29 December 2024

9am Service All Saints' Belmont

Rev Murray Wills

Luke 2:41-52 : Jesus in the Temple

May the words of my lips and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord. Amen

Merry Christmas!

As many of us know, there are twelve days to Christmas and the season of Christmas continues today. When you see each other today, and for the next several days I encourage you to continue to use the greeting that reminds us of the Gift of Jesus. You can even say Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year on New Year's Eve.

Do you remember being twelve years old? Maybe that was a long time ago or maybe just a couple of years. If you can't remember exactly, think about somebody you know who's twelve.

In our culture twelve is an in-between time, not yet fully grown but no longer a little kid.

In some countries twelve-year-olds are working full-time, picking through rubbish dumps searching for copper wire or computer parts to sell, or pounding rocks into small pieces

to make gravel, or minerals for our electric cars, earning pennies a day for their families. In some parts of Africa, a girl who's twelve now heads her household caring for younger siblings after their parents have died.

A Jewish Boy became a man when he was twelve years of age.

Luke places the story there in between the dedication of the infant Jesus in the temple and Jesus' baptism as an adult in the River Jordan. Luke is the only one who tells this story. He's the only gospel writer who includes anything at all about Jesus' childhood.

Don't you wish we had more stories? Some Bible movies have imagined things, picturing Jesus working in the carpenter shop with Joseph or sitting on Mary's lap listening to stories. Some of the writings that didn't make it into the Bible tell stories of amazing events from Jesus' boyhood, such as bringing a dead bird back to life or punishing bad neighbors with miraculous feats. But Luke doesn't try to overwhelm us with magic or miracles. His story is far more ordinary, and he seems to know something about growing up.

Like lines on the door frame marking a child's growth, Luke marks Jesus' life by scenes in the temple. Earlier in this chapter Jesus was dedicated in the temple. It was then that Simeon held Jesus in his arms and said, "Lord, now let your servant go in peace...for my own eyes have seen your salvation."

In the rhythm of Jewish life, age twelve would be about the time of the rite of bar mitzvah, meaning "son of the law." No longer would others speak for Jesus, neither angels nor Simeon, now he would speak for himself. And so he did. There in the temple he listened and he asked questions. He spoke and gave answers that amazed his teachers.

And it was only natural, that his parents would wonder where in the world he was after a day's travel. If you know anybody who's twelve, you won't be surprised that he didn't spend every minute with his parents. Nor is it hard to imagine that Mary and Joseph assumed that Jesus was with the other parent. Women often set off home together as a group and the men followed so perhaps Mary thought Jesus was with Joseph and Joseph thought he was Mary, or he was with his friends.

It wasn't odd for Mary and Joseph to assume that Jesus was with people they knew. But when they hadn't seen him after a day's travel and nobody knew where he was, they did what was only natural. They returned to Jerusalem.

Who knows why it took them three days to find him. You'd think their first stop would have been the temple. Luke gives no explanation why it took so long. And his parents were beginning to panic.

And when they found him, Jesus was hardly the picture of someone who honored his father and mother. "Why were you searching for me?" If you're a parent, you've heard something like that yourself. "Why were you worried? I knew where I was."

Well, you might argue that wasn't exactly what Jesus said. His words were stronger and stranger than that: "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" His parents probably should have known who he was and where he would be.

Mary heard Elizabeth greet her as "the mother of my Lord." The shepherds who came to see the baby in Bethlehem shared everything the angels had revealed to them—including news that this child was the Saviour, Christ the Lord. Had Mary forgotten all of this?

Or were they only thinking that Jesus was twelve, thankful to see him again, no matter what he said to them—even if they didn't fully understand?

Jesus is growing into being who God sent him to be; steeped in Torah, he is drawn to his Father's house in a way he may not yet fully understand.

There are many rich themes within this short story from the childhood of Jesus. We might reflect, for example, on the "Jewishness" of Jesus, and notice how important the temple is in these early stories from the Gospel of Luke. (This week's passage brings to a close Luke's entire birth narrative, and next week we turn our attention to Jesus the adult, beginning his ministry.)

Reading the entire second chapter of Luke's Gospel, we get a sense of how faithfully Mary and Joseph raised Jesus, having him circumcised (2:21), taking him to the temple to

be presented to God (2:22-24), and going back to Jerusalem regularly for the required festivals (2:41).

Luke puts the story of Jesus' birth and childhood in context by following Mary's Magnificat in Luke 1: 46 with the prayers and blessings of Simeon and Anna, those wise Jewish prophets who encountered the holy family in the temple, and recognized Jesus.

The temple becomes a kind of home for Jesus, and Luke will take us back there many times: Jesus will one day have to "clean house," because he understands the significance of whose house it really is.

Where is our attention?" How much do we see the church as our home? Is church a place where we can, as Taylor says, "talk together about things that matter"? And are we paying enough attention to the young people in our midst who may have gifts and thoughts to share with us, and who need the church to recognize what their parents might miss in an everyday, close-up relationship? Are we helping our young people to discern God's gifts in them, and God's call.

I yearn that our youth have the sort of experience (probably not in the same way) that I had as a youth and some ministry available to those between 12 years of out and 18 years of old. It is when I was about 14 or 15 on a youth camp helping prepare communion that I first felt a call to ministry.

We have tried and failed to provide this for many years save for a short stint where some of us ran Ablaze when our kids

were that age. We currently have youth in the parish attending elsewhere in order to have this fulfilled. Hopefully this is a very high, possibly number one priority on Vestry's agenda. It is the key to viability and to what we are called to do.

Another approach to this reading might be a challenge to develop our own faith, which isn't just dropped on us, a finished product, from one source. I found theological study essential in this development for me, and I would like to see more education, like the seminar series we used to run revitalised if possible.

It is necessary to grow our relationship with God. Our spiritual growth. It is a lifelong experience of questioning.

The challenge for us in the new year may be our ongoing commitment to a deeper and more mature faith.

For example, would anyone find us in church, discussing the "things that really matter"?

Do we simply read the Bible the same way we might have read it as children (alas, as so many "adult Christians" do today), or are we continuing to grow into an informed, inquisitive, open - and critical - approach to Scripture, using the tools scholars have given us and seeking the guidance of the Spirit of the Still speaking God?

I really encourage everyone this year to engage with the Scriptures. One way of doing this is also joining a Lenten studies group.

On the edge of a new year, our lives feel new in this moment, and we too are still young, still growing, still seeking God's guidance and wisdom for the direction of the life we share together here in our family at All Saints' and the Parish.

Where are the places, and when are the moments, when we may be called away from the safe and the familiar to new and risky experiences of faith?

"As we seek Jesus this year, perhaps it is Jesus who will find – and use – us"

Amen.