

Precocious Jesus

1st Sunday After Christmas - Year C - 12/30/2018

Psalm Reading: 148

1st Reading: Col. 3:12-17, 2nd: Luke 2:41-52

No it is not a misprint. The title in your bulletin for the Sermon today was not supposed to be “Precious Jesus”. This is not one of those errors that I can blame on my spell checker. No, I really meant to type “Precocious Jesus”. Precocious is defined in the dictionary as a young person with abilities advanced for their age.¹ And no doubt Jesus was such a child. But the term can also have negative connotations. I have often heard the word put to use in another way. Calling a child “precocious” is occasionally used as just another way of saying that a young person is “getting a little too big for their britches!”

You know we have several stories about the baby Jesus. We have four Gospels and many letters that talk about the life of Christ. But there is only one story in the whole of the Bible that refers to the boyhood of Jesus. And that one story is our Gospel reading from the book of Luke. I want to say that calling Jesus precocious is not meant as a negative comment on the young boy who would grow up to be our savior. But it is an unavoidable observation for anyone who takes a look at our reading from Luke. This is a boy, twelve years old, who is certainly intelligent, he certainly is wise, he certainly understands scripture. He has a definite understanding of who he is and his place in the world.

1 <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/precocious>

Our story from Luke begins with Jesus going up to Jerusalem with his parents to celebrate the Passover. (NIV, Luke 2:41-42) Passover in those days, like most celebrations in Israel or Judah, was celebrated in the great City of David. People would come from all over the region to celebrate, and it was considered the devout thing to do. The populations of whole towns would crowd the road to Jerusalem during these times. There would be considerable hubbub. Often an extended family would trod on together for safety and support.

And you all know that a trip like that, going on a week or more, would create a logistical nightmare. There would be food, clothes, and bedding to bring, not to mention containers to carry water and perhaps even wine. A pilgrim going to Jerusalem might be able to get what they needed from a roadside vendor, but the prices would be high. It was not like today, the pilgrim could not count on a gas station or a hotel accommodation every few miles along the side of the highway. So, people would be jumbled together and the only way to keep track of everything was to rely on your extended family to herd the children or carry the heavy water containers on their donkeys.

I am sure we have all experienced a long trip where we go out highly organized and return with a jumble of luggage filled with dirty laundry and trinkets that you can't remember why you bought or what you planned on doing with. This is what it was like coming back from the Passover feast. Mary may have thought Jesus was with the other children skipping along the road, playing and laughing. Joseph was probably walking with some of the other workers from Nazareth and thought Jesus

was with Mary. (v.44) You can see how they could trod on for an entire day not knowing the boy had been left behind in Jerusalem. Besides, the boy was twelve years old! The age a boy became a man in that time was thirteen.² To a degree, he should have been able to take responsibility for himself!

So at the end of that first day of travel out of Jerusalem returning to Nazareth, when the nuclear families were getting back together to eat and find a place to rest for the night, you can imagine their bewilderment at not being able to find the boy. (v.44b) I am sure, as they questioned their fellow pilgrims, they got the same answer from all of them. They had not seen the boy all day! Which could only lead everyone to the same conclusion. Jesus was probably still in Jerusalem!

Now, if I were Mary or Joseph, I can see myself being worried sick at this point. I would be setting off down the road for Jerusalem in the pitch black of night, no matter how tired I was. But I am sure cooler heads prevailed on this night. After all, “What if Jesus was with a group right behind them, now camping off the side of the road?” He would be missed in the night. What if, in the darkness, Mary and Joseph took a wrong turn? It is so easy to do at night when the landscape looks so different and the landmarks are seen from the opposite direction. No, it was better to wait and start the journey in the morning. So, Mary and Joseph would have gotten what sleep they could and then started the journey back to the big city.

They would have been moving against the flow of traffic. Most people on the road would have been heading away from the city. They would be talking about the most likely places to

2 NIB, Vol IX, 77.

look to find the child, and they would have been scouring the faces coming north toward them. They would also probably discussing how this thing could have happened, and what they were going to do when they found Jesus.

Well, we are told by Jesus, himself, in the Gospel of Matthew (7:7), “Seek and you will find...” So Mary and Joseph get back to Jerusalem and by that time it is too dark to search. The next morning, they get up bright and early to scour the town. It has been three days since they have seen their son! (Luke 2:46) So, after looking here and there, they go into the temple courts and there the object of their worry sits, calm, cool, collected and even aloof among the teachers.

Well, you can imagine the mixture of emotion going on inside the hearts of Joseph and Mary. First, there would be relief and joy, and then there would be just a bit of irritation at the whole situation, what with three extra days spent away from Nazareth, three days that Joseph can't afford to be away from work. Well, no matter, they had their child back and that was what was important. Then there would be the realization that Jesus, still a boy, is respected in this group of wise people. It would be an astounding validation of what they knew all along, Jesus was special. (v.47) Then, the irritation comes again when it dawns on the parents that Jesus stayed behind on purpose!

So Mary gently chastises him, “Why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you.” (v.48)

Jesus replies, “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know I had to be in my Father's house?” Now, here is

where we see all the precociousness of the young Jesus. There are a couple of layers to this. First, Jesus is lecturing his own parents. Second, he is saying that his father is God, not Joseph. Third, he is saying that he was independent to the degree that he did not need to let his earthly parents know what he was up to. Fourth, he has shown that he is far in advance of the average person in that he can even teach things to the teachers in the temple courts.

Now, I have to say, for myself, as a father, I would have found this reply just a bit more than I would be willing to accept in silence. But by the same token, I am sure I delivered a few cheeky statements to my parents back in the day.

I think this whole episode points up one very looming fact in our theological understanding of Jesus. And this is that Jesus is fully divine and fully human. In order to be fully human, Jesus had to experience what humans experience, and part of this is growing up. It is exploring familial and social relationships. This episode was a natural outgrowth of what had to happen to Jesus.

I find the final response of Jesus to this episode to be interesting. We are told, “He went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them...and Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man...” and presumably his parents (v.51-52) So, Jesus becomes the suffering servant that is prophesied in Isaiah. Jesus becomes that person who suffers and dies for our sins. Jesus, becomes the one who understands who we are and where we are at because he has, indeed, been human. He has felt what humans feel even to the extent of

doing something, at least this once, that his parents did not approve of. No doubt, this experience was formative in his life.

But you know, where I am at in my own life right now, and where most of us in this room are at, is not contemplating what is up with Jesus in this story. That is just theological musing. I think it is more about what is going on with Mary and Joseph. They have been moving along in this life thinking everything is going great. Work is good, family life is good, and suddenly something happens to create anxiety in their life. Something is missing, the thing that goes missing in their life is this precocious Jesus, this Jesus who tells them the truth even when it makes them uncomfortable, this Jesus that is a joy to have around, this Jesus who makes their life worth while, this Jesus who is their redeemer.

It takes Mary and Joseph a whole day of their journey to realize that Jesus is missing from their lives. They are too occupied with the details of the trip back to Nazareth, just as we are too occupied with our trip through this life to see what we are missing. We are occupied with our netflix account. We are too occupied figuring out which restaurant to go to for lunch. We are too occupied with watching the news channel and worrying about the price of gas.

Like Mary and Joseph did after their first day out of Jerusalem I think we need to take stock of where we are at. I think we need to start looking for that Jesus missing in our schedule. We should be questioning our friends and relations and our fellow pilgrims about just where Jesus might be on this road that we are all on. Like Mary and Joseph we should be looking for Jesus on the road we have been on and ultimately

back at the temple. If we seek, there is no doubt we will find, just as Mary and Joseph found Jesus.

We should not be surprised when we find Jesus again that he has the cheekiness, the precociousness, to tell us truths that make us uncomfortable in the moment, truths that might even irritate us. But, in the end our finding Christ will be filled with joy, love, hope and result in a better relationship between us and Christ, and of course, with each other.

Please bow your heads and pray with me...

Eternal God, we become complacent in our lives, and often it is some time before we realize what is missing. We move down the road of life forgetting that the most important part of living is being in relationship with you. Lord, motivate us to seek, for as surely as we seek, we will find.

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