

The Boy Jesus July 11, 2020

This Sunday's scripture is the only story we have in the Gospels from Jesus's youth. It's a familiar reading. The two-volume Luke - Acts was believed to be written after Mark, certainly after Paul's letters, and most likely after the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 70 A.D., yet before the end of the first century. Luke wasn't an eye witness to Jesus himself, but he would have known many who were, even quite likely Mary, Jesus's mother, who tradition says later resided in Ephesus. I would imagine Luke received this story from Mary herself. That close connection is reinforced twice in Luke's narrative by Mary's personal reflection: "His mother treasured all of these things in her heart." (Luke 2:51,19).

There are other "apocryphal" gospels, or infancy narratives, that circulated within the church much later, with the earliest two ascribed to Thomas and James dating to at the earliest sometime in the second century. There may be some authentic fragments of truth preserved in these and the various non-canonical gospels, but how can one tell what to accept or not? The early church fathers decided that none of these belonged in our Bible. There is some pretty bizarre stuff in these, and the general picture does not seem to ring true, at least to me.

The lesson writer makes a detour to the "Wisdom" book of Ecclesiastes. This book, like Proverbs, is ascribed to Solomon, although formally ascribed to "The teacher" (Heb. "Koheleth") in verse 2. Proverbs is a collection of sayings (very likely collected to a substantial extent by Solomon) with added motivational and instructional material for young men. Ecclesiastes, in contrast, is an adult level reflection on the problems of human life. The answers offered are not satisfying. "Vanity of vanities" is how the human condition is characterized. Life seems pointless. How can some meaning, some satisfaction, be found? The seasons come and go, lots of different things happen and each has its time, and we all ultimately die. Do we live just for the few pleasures we may find between birth and death? I can imagine Solomon, lounging on the roof of his palace, attended by his wives and concubines, eating grapes, sipping his wine, and meditating, "What's the meaning of life? - it seems so pointless." (See 12:9-14 for a summary written later that takes a positive view on these reflections.) I am ever so thankful that we have The Gospel – we have meaning and direction that the writer of Ecclesiastes did not find. For those who reject God, and seek to answer the hard truths of human existence through their own wisdom, Ecclesiastes may give about the best answers available.

The lesson writer's point in quoting Ecclesiastes, from Verse 3:7, is that there is, "A time to keep silence, and a time to speak; ..." This is indeed wisdom. Similarly, one cannot afford to fight every battle that is available; the wise choose to fight when it is important, and avoid confrontation when it is pointless. It is not easy to make such decisions, and therein lies the value of experience and accumulated wisdom. So, how does this apply to the story of Jesus visiting the temple? Let's look at the details.

Jesus is twelve. That is an age where a young man is on the brink of adulthood, but still is a boy. Development is uneven. From personal experience, one can have a fascination and fairly deep knowledge of one thing but be absolutely clueless in others. It's a difficult time. What we see here is that Jesus is committed to, as the King James puts it, "my Father's business". Sometimes this incident is portrayed as "Jesus teaching in the temple." But I think, more accurately, what is portrayed here is that Jesus is discussing religious matters with these learned men, and they are astounded by his understanding and knowledge. He is learning from them. Did they learn something from him, too? I wonder if any of these scholars were still around when Jesus began his ministry, after the passage of perhaps 20 or more years. If so, I would imagine they were saying, "Oh! I remember him! That lad from Nazareth! My, but were we surprised by his insight! It is no surprise, now, that he has these new words of wisdom."

You may well have known children who showed amazing talents or knowledge at an early age. Cindy's and my godson was a pre-school student in the children's center at our church. We heard from our pastor that he had met with the children for his weekly Children's Time as Easter approached. He asked the children what Easter was about, and had heard the expected talk of the Easter bunny and Easter eggs. Our godson went along with all of this. Finally he pastor asked, "Does anyone have anything else to say?" Then he piped up and said something like, "Yes, but what Easter is really about is Jesus's death on the cross and His Resurrection." He went on to explain the Easter story. This from a pre-schooler. Needless to say, the pastor was astounded. Also, no surprise, our godson much later went into the ministry, and currently serves as an Episcopal priest in Nebraska.

Many children show wonderful gifts when young. They don't always follow them up. They may not lead to wealth, fame, or notoriety. A life dedicated to a worthy pursuit is enough for great satisfaction. When such a gift or talent is later fulfilled, people will often look back, and say, "Do you remember when ..." You

probably have such stories in your families. Perhaps even about yourself. Signs of a special insight for something that would play an important part of life later. That is what this story is for Jesus.

There are other stories from antiquity of precocious youths of the same age. There is a story about a grandson of Pharaoh Rameses II of Egypt. “The boy grew and became strong ... He surpassed the scribe who had to instruct him. The boy ... began to talk to the scribes in the school [in the temple of Ptah; all who heard him] were much amazed.” (Das Lukas-Evangelium Tubingen and Mohr, 1929, “Handbuch zum Neuen Testament”, p45) citation from Interpreter’s Bible, v8, p67, 1952. There is also a self-serving story by Josephus about himself at fourteen.

Talmudic tradition has it that attendance at the festivals in Jerusalem was expected for boys of twelve and older. (Women, and perhaps younger boys, were not obligated to attend.) It’s a long way from Galilee, and the route is made longer by the need to cross the Jordan to the east bank, re-cross at Jericho, then make the steep climb over the bandit infested road to Jerusalem. That long detour is needed to avoid Samaria. This may well have been Jesus’s first visit to Jerusalem since his infancy. I’m sure he must have found it exciting. The Passover festival lasted seven days. Jesus apparently was trusted with considerable independence. It was not until a day’s travel (perhaps to Jericho?) that he was missed. You might well ask, Why didn’t his parents make sure he was with them? I think the answer has to be that they found him trustworthy. This occasion was out of character, as they would have seen it. (Notice the words of reproach when they finally found him.) Keep in mind that Jesus also had younger brothers and sisters. If you figure a child every other year, that would mean four or five children by this time. I expect Mary and Joseph had their hands full with them.

“Three days of search” was counted differently then. Count one day as the one when he actually disappeared, one day when he was missing, and the third day when he was found. The distance to Jericho was about 15 miles. Difficult miles. If Joseph and Mary had to backtrack uphill from where they got to the first day of travel, they logically would have found Jesus on the third day. Where did Jesus stay overnight meanwhile? We just don’t know. Somebody must have taken care of him. He may have experienced on this occasion “being lost”, or “being hungry.” He may have come to know a perspective that, in his earlier youth, he would not have seen. Under the circumstances, where would be a better place to go than the Temple? There, in the Temple, he was found by, or found, the company of teachers

discussing perhaps the Law, or the prophets, or other matters of importance that engaged Jesus's attention. Surely they saw that he was cared for.

We can understand the anxiety in Mary's words. Jesus's reply is (RSV), "How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" This is interesting. Jesus does not address his responsibility to his family. It was a major inconvenience at the least that his family lost two days' travel or more, and could no longer travel in the company of the others on the trip. Jesus seems not to have understood their concerns, their perspective, as parents. He had perhaps not realized this was the day they were to leave, so absorbed was he at the discussions and events at the Temple. Other things may have just been forgotten.

If Jesus seems evasive in answering the question, his reference to necessarily being in his Father's house speaks volumes. This is what we usually hear. Jesus is so dedicated to his Father's "business" (so KJV) that he is in the temple, eagerly learning everything he can, in what is an opportunity he cannot and did not give up. He has perhaps two extra days of stimulating and exciting inquiry. Something in Nazareth, at best, heard in discussion at Synagogue only on the Sabbath for a short while. There's only one rabbi, so he maybe doesn't really get into these kinds of discussions. At the temple, there's something interesting going on all of the time!

I imagine it being like a little boy who has read about Thomas the Tank Engine, played with toy trains, and seen railroad tracks here and there, and maybe even seen a moving train while waiting at a crossing signal once or twice. Then he gets to go to Steamtown. He's not happy when, at the end of the day, he has to be pulled back into the car to leave! (I can relate to that. When Cindy and I toured the battleship North Carolina in Wilmington, she wondered what had become of me. I was exploring all sorts of fascinating things I had read about in the interior. She couldn't imagine what was taking me so long as she waited outside.)

We read that Jesus continued "to increase in wisdom and in favor with God and man." (Luke 2:52). If he looked back on that trip to Jerusalem, he might have been embarrassed at his failure to understand his parents' perspective. We just don't know. We do know that, as his ministry began, he carried a wisdom, message and mission from God that was unprecedented. It was validated in the Resurrection. Theory on top of philosophical theory, merely human wisdom, could not explain that. God's wisdom seems foolish to self-important men, but Jesus came for all. Is that not amazing? Who would have thought it? Prior to Jesus, nobody did.

The story also tells us some other useful things. First, Jesus's father Joseph is still in the family. Jesus has known him for twelve years, and no doubt learned much from him. Translators render Joseph's profession, the Greek word meaning "builder," as "carpenter" in most translations. Jesus uses metaphors from the building arts quite often: the stone that the builders rejected, the house built upon the sand, and the building of a vineyard and its tower in another parable. Fathers do matter. Joseph was surely a good father.

If the death of Joseph came just a bit later, Jesus's next youngest siblings would reach a maturity ready to assume head-of-household duties perhaps about sixteen years later. Added to Jesus's twelve years in this story, this would account for Jesus beginning his ministry in 28-29 A.D. (See Luke 3:1.) (Jesus is commonly believed to have been actually born in 4 B.C.) My best guess is that Joseph lived at least a few more years, providing Jesus with additional wisdom and assurance by his example. I would expect Jesus was waiting for both "his time" as God might direct, but also with a dedication and care for his family that the years had given him the wisdom to appreciate. Jesus was the provider for his family. He needed to see that his family was in the capable hands of his next youngest brother when he began his ministry. He would have known that his focus would have to be entirely on what God was calling him to do, once his hour had come.

The lesson focuses on time. A time to speak and a time to remain silent. By the time Jesus began his ministry, he was very conscious of this. The lesson writer points this out in the story of Jesus at the wedding in Cana. We, too, need to be wise in knowing when to speak or act, and when to refrain from speaking and acting. At various times Jesus did both. He did not speak against the woman caught in adultery. He remained silent as all who had heard his few words, "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone," melted away. Yet he spoke God's saving message, at considerable length, in many ways.

As we deal with the complexities of navigating our path through our treacherous times, we can do no better than to emulate Jesus, both in silence, and in speech and action, as God's purpose may lead.

Prayer: *"Holy God, when you agitate our spirits with wisdom from unexpected sources, settle us into new awareness. Amen."*

I hope all of you continue safe in these dangerous times.