

Beginnings

Luke 2: 41-52

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Just a word of context before we move into the scripture reading. The second chapter of Luke's gospel gives us the most complete window that we have in scripture of Jesus' childhood. We find the birth of Jesus at the beginning of chapter 2, Jesus was presented at the temple at a very early age by his parents, and they brought him there then went back to Nazareth briefly.

During that time, in the temple, there was an encounter with an older man named Simeon and an older woman named Anna; they were both considered prophets. That is the text of the song you just heard from Simeon's declaration of the Lord allowing him to depart in peace.

Now we pick up the story and see Jesus back at the temple at about 12 years of age. This is all we know about Jesus' early life but it's a very rich and warm text for us.

Luke 2: 41-52 Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, 'Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.' He said to them, 'Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?' But they did not understand what he said to them. Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favour.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Now I know you will be so deeply moved by the sermon that you will listen to every word. But I wanted to warn you ahead of time that there's a carol sing right after this. One of the things that we like to do every year is watch *It's A Wonderful Life*. We always watch it around Christmas, we always love to watch it, I always cry at the end – I just can't help myself. The movie touches me deeply in a variety of different ways and reasons and I'm sure it does for you as well. I love the scene where he's in such trouble and all these friends gather round to help him. He's showed how much people love him.

This year as I watched the movie there was an angle that struck me in a different way. Frank Capra spent so much time at the beginning of the movie, probably 2/3 of the movie - maybe more - establishing George's place in the community of Bedford Falls. And he establishes so clearly that George just doesn't want to be there. He wants to go off into the world and make his fortune, build great things and do great acts – be a real big guy in a big world. But circumstances are such that he sticks around, he works at this little, old building and loan and during the course of this time even with this attitude of really not wanting to stay here, we see how George treats people. How he reaches out to those who are poor and he helps them find places to live; he builds homes for them. He reaches out to Violet and to Mr. Martini, Uncle Billy and Eustis, supports his mother. And he does all of these things even when times are not perfect.

It struck me this year as Capra sets that scene that much of life is like that. It's not perfect, it's not exactly how we want it to be and yet there is still a choice for how we are going to live. So it struck me so much how George Bailey lives so well even in the midst of non-perfect conditions.

Lives are built, relationships are built, brick by brick, act by act, moment by moment. And it made me think about the whole life of discipleship for us and it made me think about our church's mission statement. Our mission is to send well-equipped disciples of Jesus into the world – compassionate, generous, resilient and wise. I thought George Bailey would fit in really well here.

We deeply want not only to be that for ourselves but also to help our friends and family to be that way too. So Luke gives us this brief window into Jesus' early life and he makes two statements twice through this....that Jesus grew in physical form and he increased in wisdom and in stature.

It's interesting to me how aware Jesus was at an early age of his heavenly calling. And it's also interesting to me to note how he continues to grow. We think sometimes of Jesus as being completely, fully formed before he starts his public ministry. But Mary and Joseph had a huge role to play in this and, as Luke says, he increasedthat means that he was learning, he was growing along the way until he was ready to take upon the mantle of his messiahship.

In the temple, when Mary and Joseph came back after not knowing where he was for a few days, and it would not have been a surprise – they were not bad parents – they traveled with relatives and friends and for Jesus to get lost in the crowd is not a surprise. But when Mary says to him, “Your father and I have been looking for you”, Jesus says, “Didn’t you know I was supposed to be in my Father’s house?” So he takes the word *father* and he opens it up and says to Mary, “I’m beginning to understand my heavenly purpose. I am growing into this now; I am in my father’s house.”

Now one of the key principles of this text to me is that Jesus grew – he *increased* is the word Luke uses – because the significant adults in his life did their best to make sure it happened. Now the word increase is not what we’d call a miracle word. It’s not something which God does with a flaming fire and a bolt of lightning. It’s a brick by brick, day by day, year by year, moment by moment. So, if Jesus grows in this way, we’re invited to the same kind of growth. If spiritual development for Jesus and for themselves was one of the most important issues of Mary and Joseph’s life, that’s that for us as well. Jesus did not get to the temple by accident. He was there because his mother and father took him there. And so growth increases, it’s a dynamic concept; it is not static and you and I are invited to it as well.

Everyone in the Bible who was praised showed some kind of evidence of spiritual growth. They are not perfect. First example: King David, a man after God’s own heart. He messed up in some really big ways in some really big

times and yet because he continued to lead into the grace and forgiveness and the desire of God in his life, he was called favorite for that way. So constant desire, even in failure is important. If you and I have failed in our spiritual growth or feel like we have, don't give up. There are people before us who have failed worse than we have.

Timothy, Paul's protégé, is raised by a godly mother in a lifetime of service. The apostle Paul says in Philippians 3, "I press on for the goal of the upward call of Christ Jesus. There's a commitment, there's a tenacity, there's an attitude on Paul's part about what is important.

And so it was not an easy walk to get a child to Jerusalem but Mary and Joseph did it anyway because they shared that attitude, that tenacity, that spiritual growth is important. We think often times of families being the prime building block of spiritual growth and you can certainly make the case for that. I believe that. But I also believe that the church is also that primary family as well. That being with God's people is something that God invites us to do. In places and times that focus on God, such as today, in our worship – we had a lovely time Christmas Eve – as the school year starts again we will be back into the other values of our church which are learning and serving and inviting and connecting. And it takes a church to help a family to raise a child. We made promises, just a couple months ago to these lovely children that we would help to raise them to know Jesus Christ, to help their parents. So, it not only takes a church to raise a child, it takes a church of growing adults. So we don't just invite our children to learn, we learn as well and it spills over into

our children's lives. Our families are key, our church is key – we help one another.

The means of spiritual growth are of course obvious. There are personal spiritual disciplines, scripture, prayer, service. There is a set of church disciplines as well – worship, learning, missions as well. And those are important for us to engage in if we want to increase even as we celebrated Jesus' increase this morning.

I was doing some wood working a few days ago and I had to cut a particular piece. And you know the old adage of wood working, you measure twice and cut once. I'm kind of insecure about it. I measure about four times before I cut the saw to it. Let me just say I've learned from my mistakes. But there are some types of measuring that are measured in yardstick sorts of lengths. There are others that are measured in thousandths of an inch. And you can do that in wood working, you can do that in metal working but we need to make sure that the measurement that we often times take for spiritual lives is in what I would call worldly terms. Let me share a quote with you from Catholic theologian, Carlo Carretto, in his book *Desert Journal*. The natural progression of life is from childhood to old age. On the contrary, the kingdom of God within us goes from the age of an old person to the childhood of the spiritually renewed person. This calls for two yardsticks during the natural course of life one grows in prudence, wisdom and responsibility. But in

spiritual life one grows in childlikeness – simplicity, impulsiveness, joy, clarity, unity and purpose.

So as we are on the verge of the new year we celebrate the growth of Jesus and the priests in the temple. May we grow as well – not just to the things that we have to do but those wonderful characteristics of a childlike simplicity, impulsiveness, joy, clarity, unity and purpose, worshiping, sharing, loving, inclined to those around us.

So with this in mind, I encourage us each to make a goal. We do sports goals, we do academic goals, let's look at some spiritual goals which lead us to joy and joyful service. If you want to stick some dates on the plan you need to be involved in the plan as well, not just our kids. We all need to grow. I am struck every year by how much more I need to grow. I was hoping it would funnel down a bit but it seems to be getting wider all the time. And in that invitation that we also would increase in wisdom and in stature and in the joy of the Lord.

Dear God, we are grateful that you love us. We are grateful that we can grow and increase. We are grateful that Jesus is not only our Lord and Savior but also our companion. Lead us Lord to grow, we pray in Christ's name. Amen.