

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen.*

The childhood of Jesus is for the most part a mystery. Luke tells us that in the days after the shepherds have returned to their flocks, Joseph and Mary take their baby from Bethlehem the five miles or so to the temple in Jerusalem. There he is circumcised and named as was the religious practice, and they made the expected sacrifice of two turtledoves. Having completed this ritual, the holy family, now with a baby boy in tow, returned to their home in the northern Galilean town of Nazareth. Matthew's Gospel tells a different story, but likewise gives us little to go on as we consider the years when Jesus was growing into adulthood. As you can imagine, some legends have developed over the centuries about the young Jesus, some of them quite bizarre, but none of which deserve examination from the pulpit. This one story we have heard this morning, though, from Luke's Gospel, is a treasured bit of narrative. It offers us some insight into the dynamics of this family, and Jesus' own self-awareness, too.

Having made their annual trip down to Jerusalem for the celebration of Passover at the temple, Mary and Joseph, along with a group of friends and relatives set out for home. But at the end of the first day, they discover that the boy is not among the travelers, and they go back to the city to look for him. It takes them three anxious days to locate their 12-year-old, who had deliberately disobeyed in order to stay behind and spend time with the religious leaders. When, exasperated, they ask him what in heaven's name he was thinking, he answers with this famous and cryptic reply: 'Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?' Luke tells us that, no, they didn't understand what he meant. Despite the angels, and the star, and all the divine activity surrounding that birth a dozen years before, they don't seem to get it. For the second time, Luke tells us that Mary, his mother, is treasuring all these things in her heart. The first time was when the shepherds told their story about a host of angels singing above their fields. Everyone was amazed, but Mary treasured all their words and pondered them in her heart. Now, as the boy Jesus has been found discussing theology with the religious teachers, she again has cause to ponder.

Some years ago now, the priests and deacons of the diocese had one of their regular meetings with the bishop. It was the first such meeting we had had since Bishop Adams announced his coming retirement, and as he addressed the group, telling about the personal feelings he had for us and for the people of our parishes, he became very emotional. His voice, filled with love, cracked and broke as some tears moistened his cheeks. We, too, choked back a few sobs ourselves. We were seated in a circle, and I was just a few feet away from the podium where he stood and spoke. At one point he become so overcome that he had to pause, and for a long minute or two we all sat in silence. That is, until we all heard a woman's voice saying, 'I didn't quite get that, could you repeat what you said?' Within seconds, I and everyone else realized that it was coming from my trouser pocket! Carrie Broadbent, who was sitting next to me pointed and snorted back a laugh. The voice continued, and I was horrified. And it continued while I struggled to get my phone out of my pocket without standing up. It turns out that when you turn off the sounds on your iPhone, which I had done before the meeting, two things still do in fact sound! Alarms will still go off, and Siri, the search tool will still be audible.

So, I keep thinking that Joseph must have had a similar voice going off in his head, one of confusion and misunderstanding. 'What did he mean, in his Father's house?' 'I don't quite get it.' 'Could you repeat that, son?' Could it be that the family and friends of Jesus had forgotten all the prenatal predictions about his majesty, and all the hoopla of that first Christmas morning? Did they think it was all coincidence? Did they think it had all been a dream? Though we have only this one anecdote from Jesus'

childhood, from his first 30 years, in fact, it tells us a lot about his family life and religious training. Next week we will hear the account of his baptism, and later in the month we will hear of his teaching in synagogues and quoting the ancient prophets. These religious activities are foreshadowed here in this story from his boyhood. And when he seems a little too outspoken, like he apparently was at age twelve ('Why were you searching for me...' indeed!), the congregants of the synagogue in Nazareth run him out of town, as we will hear too this month. Meanwhile, Mary has been noticing things, and she is treasuring them in her heart.

The last verse of this reading from Luke sums up the early years of Jesus' life. It says: 'And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.' This might seem just a throw-away line, something to connect Jesus' childhood to his adult baptism in the narrative, a way for Luke to substitute just a few words for any further stories about his adolescence. But I like to think that it can mean more than that, and in fact be a very useful piece of scripture for us. I have a little story about that: When I myself was about 12 years old, I headed out to church camp at Casowasco retreat center carrying my new Bible which I had received as a confirmation gift. Frankly, I hadn't opened it much. Early in that week at camp, we had a small group session, at the end of which our counselor asked each of us to go off on our own and find a quiet personal place. We were to take our Bibles along and when we had found a good spot, to sit and open the Good Book to a random page and then meditate on some verse that we found. So, I went off down the lakeshore until I found a secluded spot, sat on a large rock and opened my Bible. Randomly, I found Luke 2:52, this same verse at the end of the story of the 12-year-old Jesus. I did, in fact, think and pray about this verse that morning, and for years since. Short as it is, it means a lot to me.

Of course, in those days we used an earlier translation than we use today for our Sunday lessons. My first Bible was The Revised Standard Version, compiled in 1945 (I think), not our New Revised Standard Version from 1989. And, wouldn't you know, I like the older translation better. It reads: 'And Jesus grew in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and man.' Sitting there on that rock (which is still there, by the way), I thought to myself that that was a pretty good growth refrain...to grow in wisdom, stature (which could mean reputation, or strength) and in favor with God and neighbor. It was a tall order for a short guy, but I carried the ideal of that verse in my head from then onward. And once in a while I would open that Bible, which I still cherish incidentally, and pray over that verse. After a year or two, it helped me come to the conclusion that I wanted to enter the ministry. Now, I didn't do much of anything about that for some fifty years, but the thought was never out of mind.

But this sermon isn't about me; it's about us, and our ministry. Together we are called to be the earthly body of Christ, continuing the work he began among us. As Christians that task is our privilege and joy. In a couple of weeks, we will hear how Paul tells his new converts in Corinth that they are to be members of that holy body, just as hands and feet, for example, are members of our own bodies. By that metaphor he describes the mission and ministry of the church, and though we each have unique gifts and callings, by working together we strengthen the church and increase its impact in this broken world. When Luke describes how Jesus grew in wisdom, and in stature, and in favor with God and humankind, he has given us, intentionally perhaps, a blueprint for our own development as a community of faith. If we carry this verse in our common mind, even crack open our Bibles and pray over it once in a while, who knows where it might lead us together. As we come toward the close of this Christmas season, we can pause to think of the purpose of the Incarnation: That the Word of God became flesh to live among us, that we might better know him, and that he might better experience that which we experience. We now are the flesh in the world. We are his body for the world. And we do our best work when we, too, increase in wisdom, and in stature, and in favor with God and neighbor. Amen