

*Texts: Eph. 1:3-14; Luke 2:41-52*

*Subject: The Boy Jesus in the Temple*

*Theme: Learning and Growing*

*Second Sunday of Christmas; Jan. 3, 2021; Reformation Lutheran Church, Las Vegas, NV*

Grace and peace to you from God our Father in heaven and our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.

I love being a father. I do. It's not easy. It's not boring or predictable. If I think back to when our first child was born, I remember just being amazed with everything she did, and the faces she would make, the songs she would sing, and the questions she would ask. The truth is, that hasn't really changed. I'm still amazed. And when a new child would join our family, the feelings would all come back. If you're a parent, you have felt this. You watch with excitement for the baby to do something, you imagine what the child will become, and you try to introduce new experiences, nurture their gifts, and prepare them for the future. We used to write this stuff down in baby books. Remember those? Now, it's all on our social media pages, and we can go back and remember. For a while, it's possible to think that we know our children better than they know themselves. Then around 11 or 12, the 'tween years' - things start to change. Children begin to declare their own autonomy - to claim for themselves the things they value and enjoy. Their questions will be deeper and more complicated, as they begin to become themselves in new ways. It's still beautiful and exciting, and amazing, sometimes painful and difficult, but necessary, nonetheless. It can be a difficult time to be a kid too, no longer just a child, not quite an adult. You are truly something in between. When I was twelve and thirteen, I was learning and growing, definitely seeking more independence, discovering my own identity, and pursuing new interests. My mother shared Luther's Small Catechism with me, but I wasn't involved with the church

very often. I was focused more on friends than school. I was playing guitar, and riding my skateboard everywhere, and looking forward to being in high school.

Last week we heard about Jesus being presented in the temple as a baby. Now, the boy is in the temple again, where he is *learning and growing*, and claiming his identity for himself. Luke's account of the good news includes this story of the young Jesus, where other gospels do not. It seems important to Luke to let us know that Jesus is following in the tradition of his family and his ancestors. Kathryn Schifferdecker from Luther Seminary notes that Jesus is doing his part in fulfilling the law, and also bringing to reality God's promise of doing a new thing. He is young, and part of a family, and has experiences. He's human.

At age twelve, Jesus has not yet reached the age of *bar mitzvah*. He's still seen as a kid. He's taking part in the process of learning the faith, and taking it seriously. After the crowds have gone home from the festival, he's hanging around in the temple with the rabbis, engaging the scriptures, listening intently, and asking questions, demonstrating his understanding. Kids ask some of the best questions about God. They get it, and they don't have to hide their lack of expertise, but ask what is really on their minds. Many of us have heard the questions, "If we can't see God, how do we know God is real?" or "If Jesus died, does that mean He's a ghost?" or the one so many of us struggle with, "Why would God allow bad things to happen?" Have you stopped asking those questions as you get older? They're important questions. If we are learning and growing, maybe we find some insight in scripture and studies, or maybe we stop asking if we think we ought to know better, or we find ourselves focused on other things. It's good to ask, to wonder, and to seek answers.

Mary and Joseph are a day away from Jerusalem when they realize Jesus is gone. Nice parenting, right? This part of the story reminds us that the responsibility for raising young ones belong to the whole group, the extended family and friends who were along for the journey. As much as we rarely let kids out of our sight in our time, we can see how it would be possible for them to lose track of Jesus. It's hard to be a parent, sometimes. If you've ever misplaced a kid, and frantically searched the park or the store, until you had them in your sight again, you know that panicked sensation. Mary and Joseph must have ran back to the city where they searched for him for three days! We can imagine the anger and frustration from the worry in their voice when they found him. Why didn't they look in the temple first? Did no one else know there was a young boy there for three days? "Where were you, Jesus?" they'd ask him. "Why would you do this to us?" More than two thousand years later, parents can relate to what Mary and Joseph are feeling.

We love our children, but we don't own our children. I know there will be times they do things that I may not understand or agree with, but I want them to know they will always have my love and support. Not everyone has received that kind of love and support from their parents. If your father wasn't around, or wouldn't listen to your questions, or had few answers to give, you know what I mean. There might be folks out there whose parents didn't turn and come back to find them when they got lost along the way. There have been ones who were afraid, or who were injured themselves, and unable to offer the kind of support that you needed as a kid.

For all its flaws, this is why we need a faithful community around us. Even in the best of circumstances, young people, yes - but *all* human beings require trusted friends,

mentors, and leaders in their lives to show them the way to go, to listen and help them grow into who they will become. And we're all still *learning and growing*. We need the church. We need a village. We need ones who are different from us, older, wiser, with different experiences, identities and understandings, with insights and histories that are different from our own. The message of Christmas - of God who comes to dwell with us - who knows us inside and out - reminds us that we belong to each other, we are loved by God, and we are not alone.

Even at age twelve, Jesus knew it. When his family finally shows up looking for him, he's a little sarcastic (he could be that way sometimes).

*"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?"*

Joseph doesn't speak a word in this story. But, this episode offers us a glimpse into the relationship Jesus has with his Heavenly Father. Jesus' response to his frantic, worried mother is to note that he is where he is supposed to be - it was necessary for him to be in his Father's house. He is the Son of God - he has a calling to take up, and a mission to complete. It's just beginning. His parents did not understand. How could they? Luke says Mary treasured all these things in her heart. She pondered them. She held onto them. She wondered about them. Mary heard this before - this revelation - from angels, from shepherds, from Simeon and Anna - and now from Jesus himself. He went home with them, where he increased in wisdom and years, and grew in divine and human favor.

Parents and children, friends, neighbors, church - we are always *learning and growing*. We learn through failures and difficulties, sometimes intentionally, and at other times unintentionally. As we enter a new calendar year, we can expect to face struggles, receive blessings, have some wishes come true, and other dreams deferred. Bible scholar N.T. Wright reminds us that in the difficult times, when we feel we've lost sight of Jesus, we can seek Him and see Him most clearly in prayer, in scripture, and in the sacraments.

Jesus is where he's supposed to be. With us.

Like Jesus, we have a heavenly parent too, who knows us, and leads us, who loves us and claims us. No matter how you've been lost in your life, or just far away from a community of faith, Jesus' arms are still open for you. If you've been baptized or what what that's all about, God's love is for you. If you've made so many mistakes you think the church is going to burst into flames when you walk through the doors, don't be afraid. This place has been standing for a long time and it hasn't happened yet. God's presence in Jesus is God's nearness to us. The fullness of our humanity is known to God, who came to us as a child, who grew and learned, and loved, and wept, who died and rose for us. And now, every aspect of our lives, our needs, and wants, and feelings, and frailties, have been taken up through the cross and the broken parts and pieces of our stories that make us ashamed and keep us from one another have been repaired and redeemed and renewed for a life that is more than we could ask or imagine because we are his. You are loved. You are beloved. The gift of God with us, Jesus, our Immanuel, is still ours. Merry Christmas and Happy New Year.