

Date: 12/26/22

A Precocious Preteen At Passover

Texts: **Psalm 148; Colossians 3: 12-17; Luke 2:41-52**

Who am I, and what am I doing here? ... No, I didn't just bump my head on the communion table while I was standing up! But I was asking a question in anticipation of the New Year which is just ahead.

It's that time of the year again when we pause to take stock of our lives, of who we have been this last year, and who we would like to become. We dream up new possibilities for the future, like losing weight or becoming more organized, or taking more risks, or fewer risks, and we make plans to become that new person by this time next year. These are all questions of identity in the world. Who am I and what am I doing here? As adults, we usually only ask these questions around New Year's, and even when we have answers about how we want to change, it's difficult to see them through. But when we were younger, when we were teenagers and adolescents, we asked questions about our identity a lot as we tried to figure out how we fit in or how we stood out, and what we wanted to do with our lives.

Questions of identity were of paramount importance, especially as the end of high school approached. Will I go to college, and if so, what will I study there? If not, where should I look for a job? What am I going to be for my life? Sometimes our parents seem to understand us and can help us make our decision. Sometimes we feel like they just don't get us at all and are pushing us in a direction we don't want to go, more like they want us to live out their dreams rather than help us figure out how to live out ours. But whatever our history, these are the kinds of questions that everyone has to ask. It's part of being human. Who am I and what am I doing here?

It almost never occurs to us that Jesus must have had to ask these questions as well, but we confess that he is fully human as well as fully divine, and as his human brain grew and matured, he would have been more and more capable of understanding, more and more capable of discovering, who he was and what he was going to do here. Some people have thought that Jesus first became aware of who he really was at his baptism, when he came up out of the water and heard the voice of God saying, "This is my Son, in whom I am well pleased." That happened when he was about 30 years old. But I think he must have figured it out at a much younger age. I think we definitely see him asking the questions "Who am I, and what am I doing here?", and *answering* them, in our story from Luke this morning, which is our one and only story of Jesus between the time that he was born and the time of his baptism.

I know, I know, right! It seems like just yesterday that Jesus was being born, and here he is already 12 years old! The baby in the manger is now the boy in the Temple! They grow up so fast, don't they? Time is rushing past in Luke's gospel – 12 years in a just a few verses of chapter 2 to get us to where we are today, and it'll be 18 more years by the time we get to the beginning of chapter 3. So let's pause for a moment and take a look at where Jesus is at 12. Jesus has gone from being an infant to being an adolescent in no time flat. This is the experience of parents everywhere who can't believe how quickly their children are turning into young adults, how quickly they are becoming the people they will be when they are grown up.

As a newborn, it was up to others to say who Jesus was: the Shepherds saw him as the baby the angels had spoken of, a Savior. The Magi saw him as the king of Israel whose star appeared to them in their homeland. King Herod saw him as the competition. Mary saw him as the gift of God, a miracle in her young life, and Joseph saw him as the child God had entrusted into his care –not his own child, but a child from God, verified by the voice of an angel! When Jesus was presented

in the Jerusalem Temple as a newborn to fulfill the law through the offering of sacrifices, the aged Simeon had prophesied that he would be “a light of revelation to the Gentiles and the glory of God’s people Israel.” Moments later, an old woman, Anna, had given thanks for the infant Jesus and spoke about him to everyone who was looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

When we are young, older people often say who we are and maybe project their hopes on us for what we will do in the world. After Jesus was circumcised and dedicated in the Temple, Luke only tells us that he and his family “returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth. And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was on him.” This is all we know about Jesus until we reach the age of 12.

Well, we know one other thing which we get from verse 41 of the story that we heard today: Every year Jesus’ parents went to Jerusalem for the Festival of the Passover. That actually tells us a lot about Jesus’ family. They were a family of faith. Only the men in the family *had* to go up to the Temple to celebrate Passover, if they could, but both of Jesus’ parents went up, and the text says it was their custom for Jesus to go up with them. The trip up when Jesus was 12 is the setting for the events we heard about today. Now 12 is an important age, mostly because it is one less than 13! Thirteen was the age that Jewish boys celebrated their Bar Mitzvah’s and were considered men, responsible for their own religious lives before God. But here is Jesus, just 12 and not yet 13, and the events of the Passover week mark him out as a remarkable young man who already knows who he is and what he is to become, a young man who has deep insight into his blossoming identity.

As far as Mary and Joseph were concerned it was an unremarkable Passover until they started on their way home. It’s hard for us to imagine how they could have left Jesus behind, but that is because we live in an age of nuclear families with only mother, father, and child or children. When there are more people, things get confusing and complicated. If you just watched the movie, *Home Alone*, over Christmas, you know what I’m talking about.

A nuclear family of just parents and child was not the kind of family that Jesus knew in his world. Families were grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, and other sundry relatives. And, of course, since all adult males were supposed to go to Jerusalem for the Passover whenever they could, many other families from Nazareth were going up to Jerusalem with them, and Jesus would have been well known to all of them. We also have to remember that the age of manhood started for them at 13, as I mentioned a minute ago, and so Jesus would have been considered a near adult not requiring the same kind of supervision that a five-year old might have needed. Somehow Joseph and Mary assumed Jesus was travelling with some other members of the party, and they only discovered his absence when they stopped for the night. And although Jesus at 12 was almost a man, almost a man is still not fully a man, and so his worried parents headed back to Jerusalem to try to find him. When they do find him after an ominous three days, he is in the Temple. But he’s not just looking around at the building, or taking in the rituals, or admiring the crowds, or crying in a corner of the Lost Children’s Center.

No way, not Jesus! He’s in the Temple courts surrounded by teachers of the Law, listening to their answers and asking *them* questions. The 12 year-old Jesus is teaching the teachers! He’s the one asking the questions and they are the ones who have to give the answers!

And, in the style of teachers of the day, after the students have struggled through with an answer or two, Jesus offers his own answers to questions about the Law. And everyone who heard him was astonished at his understanding of the Law and at the answers he gave.

Jesus already knows who he is at 12. He is a teacher of the teachers of the Law. He is an authoritative interpreter of God’s Law. And he is totally at home in God’s Temple and among God’s people. He’s only been sitting in the Temple courts at most three days, and already he has

a crowd of scholars around him who want to hear what he has to say! As a child, the religious people were willing to listen to him and even learn from him. His precociousness doesn't threaten them, but rather delights them. As an adult, they will be far less willing to hear what he has to say, because it is in these same temple courts that some of Jesus' greatest controversies will take place.

Mary and Joseph are as astonished as anyone, and Mary says to him, "Child, why have you treated us like this?" And then she pointedly says, "Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you." These are words of identity: Who are you? You are our son. Where do you belong? You belong with us. Who are we? I am your mother, and this is your father. What are you doing here? You should be travelling home with us! And the very first quoted words out of Jesus' mouth in the Gospel are also words of identity: "Why were you searching for me? Didn't you know that I had to be in my Father's house."

We cannot help but hear the distinction that Jesus is making in what he says: Mary says that she and his father have been looking for him, but Jesus says that he's been with his Father the whole time – meaning with God his Father, and that his earthly parents ought to have known that he would be in his heavenly Father's house! This is a 12-year-old who knows who he is: he is the son of earthly parents, but he is also the Son of a heavenly Father. He is a teacher of the Law and an authoritative source on it. He is the Son of God who has a special role to play in the redemption of the world. He already has a very clear understanding of his identity, even if Mary and Joseph don't understand what he's talking about. But Jesus, being ever the good son, is obedient to his parents and goes back to Nazareth with them, where Luke tells us, he increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor. Jesus already knows who he is. He didn't have to wait for his baptism to find out. He knew at 12, maybe earlier.

But this brings us back to the question of our own identity. Who are we, and what are we doing here? In the light of our Christian faith, at least part of the answer has to be something like this: Who am I? I am a follower of Jesus Christ. I am a child of God, redeemed by Christ through his life and death. I am a person living in the hope of resurrection. I am part of Christ's church family. I am a worker in building Christ's kingdom. And what am I doing here? I am preparing myself for eternal life by growing in love, mercy, compassion and the ability to forgive. I am trying to become more like Jesus as the years pass so that I will feel at home in his Father's house just as he did. I am learning to love others as I love myself, and to love God with all my heart and soul and mind and strength. All that is at least part of who I am and what I'm trying to do. It comes with the Christian faith.

This year, instead of our usual resolutions, why not make some new ones that will bring us closer to finding and living out our identity in Jesus Christ? As well as losing weight, let us resolve to lose some of our quickness to judge others. As well as becoming more organized, let us resolve to become more compassionate. As well as figuring out how we could make our own lives better in the year to come, let us figure out how we could make other people's lives better. And as well as figuring out what we really want to do with our lives, let us spend time with God to figure out what *God* really wants us to do with our lives.

Who am I in Jesus Christ, and what am I doing here to get ready for his coming kingdom? These are the questions that God puts before us as the New Year is about to begin. Amen