

The Twelve Year Old God

William Cwirla

Luke 2:40–52

“And they did not understand the saying that He spoke to them.” Luke 2:50

We’re fascinated by peoples’ childhoods, for some reason. I’m not sure why this is. Perhaps it’s a reflection of how we idealize childhood as some kind of pure and innocent time. We always try to look back to see if there were any indications of how the kid was going to come out. My parents tell me that I used to come home from church and preach in the basement. Maybe there is something to it.

There isn’t much about the childhood of Jesus. Luke tells us of His circumcision and naming on the 8th day (that was yesterday), and His presentation and redemption at the temple when He was 40 days old. Matthew tells us of the hasty flight to Egypt to escape Herod and the return to Nazareth where He grew up as the son of the carpenter, probably learning Joseph’s trade, working side by side with his surrogate father. Surprisingly there is nothing unusual to report regarding Jesus’ childhood. Later Gospels made up some miracle stories to spice things up a bit, but the 1st century record has nothing unusual to report. Which is unusual.

You’d expect holiness to stick out just a bit, wouldn’t you? You’d expect that when the Word becomes Flesh, when the second Person of the undivided Holy Trinity makes His appearance in this world, there might be something just a bit “different” about Him. You’d expect to be able to pick Jesus out from a crowd, wouldn’t you? Yeah, there He is. Over there. The one with the glowing nimbus floating over His head. And if He didn’t exactly glow with heavenly brightness, you’d at least expect Him to be such a good kid that everyone kind of wondered what was “wrong” with Him. What’s it like to be twelve and sinless? We’ll never know. And the current crop of twelve year olds aren’t going to be much help.

Can you imagine what it must have been like to have a sinless twelve year old in the house? No, you can’t. None of us can. We’re born steeped in Adam’s sin. That’s why we baptize the little ones as soon as possible. They are born with the inherited disease of Sin. Not so Jesus. His mother is Mary but His father is The Father – God. He is Adam 2.0, humanity without

the stain of Sin. And the weird thing about it is that nobody really notices this. His teachers are amazed at His wisdom, which seems well beyond His years, but the amazing thing is that they are amazed. For all intents and purposes, Jesus was indistinguishable from every other 12 year old in Jerusalem. Which is also why they lost Him.

They brought Jesus to Jerusalem that year to be taught and examined by the temple teachers. The custom was that all men had to appear in Jerusalem three times a year for the various feasts including the Passover. This was the year of Jesus' preparation. The next year, when He was thirteen, He would be expected to take His place with the men of Israel. Stop, breath, and ponder that for a second. Thirteen years old and considered a man. Notice that at the end of this reading it says, "And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature..." Earlier in verse 40 it said, "And the child grew and become strong..." He's no longer a child but now a man. Twelve is the turning point.

Ahhh. Those were the days before we invented the artificial state of adolescence where we indulge childishness in an adult body. In Jesus' day, a child was prepared for adulthood not adolescence. A young girl was prepared to become a wife and mother. And a young boy was prepared to join the men of Israel. This was Jesus' last year as a child, which is why Luke records this incident. It serves to cap off this section of the narrative. Luke then picks it up when Jesus is 30 years old and revealed in His baptism by John in the Jordan. So for the next 18 years, He lives in absolute obscurity as the carpenter from Nazareth. You might say that holiness has dirt and splinters under its fingernails.

There are at least two things we can glean from this reading today that are important to our salvation and our faith in Jesus. The first is that He was obedient to His parents under the 4th commandment. Though He was their Lord, He obeyed them as their Son. Though He was the Wisdom of God in the Flesh, He was obedient and respectful to His teachers.

He came under the Law for us. To keep it perfectly in our place. To actively fulfill it. That's what's underneath His circumcision, His presentation, His appearance at the temple. He is there in obedience to the Law for us, in our place, for our salvation. He is being prepared, yes. But not simply to be numbered with the men of Israel and participate in the Passover liturgy. He is being prepared for His own Passover, His sacrifice on the cross. And that preparation begins with His circumcision under the Law, it continues with His obedient life under the Law, and it all culminates in His perfect death under the Law, all to save you.

We call this Jesus' "state of humiliation," His humbling of Himself in obedience to the Law unto death on a cross. Mary and Joseph could not have known that frantic day what the future would hold. The angel had only told them that He would save His people from their sins. He didn't say how. They were frantic that day, as they searched high and low throughout the crowded city, looking for Jesus. In twenty years, Jesus would go to His appointed hour on the cross, and again Mary would be there, this time without her husband Joseph, and she would know what it meant that He had to be in His Father's house to do His Father's will. But for now she treasured all these things in her heart, just as she had pondered what the shepherds of Bethlehem told her the night Jesus was born.

He was obedient to them and to His teachers and to the Law. That's the first thing to remember on this second Sunday of Christmas. This Child of Bethlehem was born to be like us in every way, yet without sin. Growing up in a household, growing up under parents, going through infancy, childhood, adolescence. Learning, playing, working. Every facet of Jesus' life reflects your life, except without sin. And it is done so ordinarily, that no one even notices that there is something different about Jesus. Mary and Joseph even seem to have lost sight of what the angel told them in their moment of panic.

So never say it is human to sin. It's not. Jesus did not sin, and yet He was so perfectly and completely human, no one even noticed.

A second thought for today is this: God works hiddenly, humbly, and subversively. We see this throughout the Christmas story and Jesus' childhood. His divinity is buried deeply, completely hidden from human eyes. He appears to be just another twelve year old in the temple. A precociously bright 12 year old, yes. An theologically engaged 12 year old, certainly. But no one said, "Hey, this kid is God!"

You and I would have missed that point too too. We probably would have lost Him in the crowd. And we certainly would not have understood what He was saying when He said, "I must be in my Father's house." The incarnation of God is like that. It just doesn't fit our categories or our way of thinking or our pious religious notions about God. God is Man and Man is God. God is a twelve year old whose parents momentarily him.

The one thing you can't say about Jesus is that He doesn't know what it's like to be one of us. He really is Immanuel – God with Us, and "with us" so hiddenly, so humbly, so subversively that we would not have even noticed Him. But that's precisely the way god works with us and

among us. Not in the seen but the unseen. Not in the powerful and mighty, but in the lowly and humble. A manger, a cross. A child. A teenager. A man. He is us. He is you. He embraces your life in all its humanity. He even knows what it's like to be chewed out by your parents and not have done anything wrong!

That hiddenness is not understood today, nor can it be. Who Jesus is and what He has done must be revealed to us and seen through the gift of faith. There is no other way. Mary treasured these things up in her heart. And that treasured up Word had its way with her, creating and enlivening a living faith in her Son, God's Son.

He comes to you today in the same hidden and subversive way. In Baptism, Word, and Supper. So easily ignored, despised, rejected. As easily rejected as a twelve year old kid in the temple. But the Word says there is something more than meets our eyes, our senses, our reason. This is the power of God to save. God in the Flesh come to save us. A perfect obedience to the Law that is yours not by what you do but by trust in what Jesus has done. Life in death because of the obedient, perfect death of the Son of God in the flesh.

And so once again, on this second Sunday after Christmas, our joy is Immanuel – God with us. The baby of the manger, the child in the temple, the man of the cross, the Word made flesh dwelling among us.

In the name of Jesus,

Amen

SOURCE

William Cwirla · Luke 2:40-52 / 2 Christmas A / 2 January 2011 / Holy Trinity – Hacienda Heights, CA · Text: Luke 2:40-52
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Hacienda Heights, CA (htlcms.org), "The Twelve Year Old God", posted 2011-01-02
(<https://htlcms.org/2011/01/the-twelve-year-old-god/>).