

Ready as we'll ever be
Sermon by Jan Wiersma
Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota
1st Sunday after Christmas - December 26, 2021
Text: Luke 2:41-52



JESUS MAFA. Jesus among the teachers, from *Art in the Christian Tradition*, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN.

From Cameroon: People first heard the story told, then re-enacted it, and their portrayal was translated into this painting. Notice the intent look of the teachers, the serenity of young Jesus - and the anxious parents hurrying up to find their missing child. Like so much of Jesus' life, this story juxtaposes the amazing and the ordinary!

<https://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=48280> [retrieved December 22, 2021].

GOSPEL READING

Luke 2:41-52

In this text, we have our only biblical account of Jesus between infancy and adulthood. So... was he a typical adolescent or not?

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 favor.

Heaven and earth will pass away, but the word of the Lord stands forever. TBTG

So what do you think? Was Jesus a typical adolescent? For that matter, were his parents typical parents? Imagine how it was for them, when they heard from the angels: “Yup, he’s gonna be holy, God’s Son. And, incidentally, he’s the savior. Got that? OK, we got the ball rolling, now it’s up to you. Raise him right!” Ulp. Puts a whole new spin on the term “god-parents,” doesn’t it? As someone said, Mary *must* have been a teenager, because only a teenager would be naive enough to say yes to something that daunting. Anyone older and wiser would have asked about the return policy. Was Mary ready? Probably not. But she agreed anyway. How did she and Joseph do?

In this brief text, we have a quick TikTok-type glimpse of the family twelve years later. Notice that in this one little trip to Jerusalem, we see Mary and Joseph run the gamut from devout, clueless, panicking, angry, to astonished, and, finally, obeyed. Unpack that: devout, because they went every year to worship in Jerusalem, no easy journey. Clueless, because they lost him on the way home. Panicking, when they realized they’d mislaid him. Angry when they found him and relief replaced fear. Astonished because he really was *that good*. And finally, obeyed. Is there anything there a typical parent of a teenager can’t identify with? Sounds pretty normal to me.

In Jesus’ TikTok video, we see that he is independent (staying behind alone), self-confident (engaging the teachers), well-educated (amazing his listeners), puzzled (“Mom. Dad. Duh!! Where did you think I’d be? *I* knew where I was!”), and, finally, obedient. Obviously, his parents had raised him well, or at least well enough for what God had in mind for him. Other than actually being super-smart, when most teenagers just think they’re super-smart, he sounds kind of typical, too. Was he ready for what lay ahead of him? Yes...but he still had room to grow, in wisdom and in years. Like any normal twelve-year-old.

What is normal anyway? Quite a few years ago there was a popular song that went, “What if God was one of us? Just a slob like one of us? Just a stranger on the bus, trying to get home?” It struck a chord with a lot of people. It sounds so absurd. And so true. The point of Christmas, the incarnation, the Word made flesh, is that God *is* one of us. None of our human feelings are foreign to God. We don’t need to be ashamed of them, or pretend we’re not having them.

Now is a good time to keep that in mind. You are not crazy, and you don’t have to act like you’re superhuman. As one person put it, “It’s normal to feel tired in tiring times. It’s normal to feel anxious in anxious times. It’s normal to feel sad in sad times. These are tiring, anxious, sad times.” About the only thing I personally feel ready for is for this pandemic to be over. I know I’m not ready for the omicron variant. I know our worn-out, dedicated health care workers probably don’t feel ready, either. But the future is coming toward us, ready or not. We’re all just trying to get through, trying to get home.

For me, it’s comforting to know that the way I feel is normal. And that God understands it. That God feels it, too. But God is more than just another stranger on the bus. God is already at home,

and God's home is with us. *You* are God's home. Ready or not, you're as ready as you'll ever be for God to grow in you. In fact, you're ripe for God.

It's when we are at our most vulnerable that God is most likely to get through to us. The writer Kathleen Norris says, "It is precisely because we are weary, and poor in spirit, that God can touch us with hope." She adds, "This is not an easy truth."

No, it's not an easy truth, that at our weakest and feeblest, God touches us with hope. It's, at best, an uneasy truth, maybe even a hard truth. I don't want to be sad, anxious, and tired. It makes me feel so inadequate to the task of setting the world right. I don't want to be weary and poor in spirit. I want to be like the young Jesus in the temple, bursting with confidence, ready to take on the world. Ready to tell God, "I'm your person. Tell me what you want; I'll get 'er done."

I'm *so* not ready. But only *because* I'm not ready to do it on my own, I can be ready for God to take over for me. Let God use me. Not because I'm perfect but because I'm not. It's the same for you. Time to let go and let God.

In that spirit, I need to say a word about one of the contemporary world's most extraordinary religious, moral, and political leaders, whose death I learned of just this morning: Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa. In a very bleak time, his voice was among the most powerful calling for a peaceful end to the evil *apartheid* system that oppressed and dehumanized the black majority of his country. He deplored the violence perpetrated by both sides; he made clear that to dehumanize another person is to dehumanize yourself. After the end of that system, he was appointed to lead the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, bringing victims of brutality face to face with their torturers, and moving beyond forgiveness to reparation, to a justice that doesn't simply mete out punishment but restores the fabric of community. Hearing the victims' first-hand accounts, he wept openly, for the world to see. This great man said, of that time, "One can only be deeply humbled by ordinary people, in their resilience and their magnanimity of spirit." This Nobel Peace laureate bowed to the greatness in ordinary people. He asked to be remembered with these words, "He loved. He laughed. He cried."

Those words could describe you, or me, or any of us. They describe Jesus as well, don't they? What made 12-year-old Jesus typical was that he still had to grow in wisdom as well as years. What makes any of us human is that there is always room to grow. This gives me hope. When we stop feeling, stop seeing one another as human, we cease to grow. We forfeit our own humanity.

What gives me even more hope is God's ready reminder that when I am weak, I am strong in Christ. When I am confused, with Christ as my vision, the way grows clear. When I am feeling sick and tired and unready for anything, I can lay that, too, at the manger as my gift. What gives me hope is that no matter how far you and I have come, there's room for us to grow in wisdom. What gives you hope this year? As you ring in the New Year this week, take a little time, like Mary, to treasure this in your heart. Amen. Thanks be to God.

Prayers

God of all, creator of the universe in all its stunning beauty, author of love, fountain of mercy, beyond our understanding, we thank you for becoming one of us, and making us part of you. Thank you for giving us growing space.

Help us approach the new year in hope, knowing that when we are weak, we are strong in you. Help us to see all people as you do, as part of an interconnected whole, as part of one another. As we lift up our personal concerns, help us remember your greater purpose.

We pray with undivided hearts for peace on earth, for health and safety for all; we pray for those who have lost so much in weather events here, and in the Philippines; we pray for all those falling sick of covid, and for those caring for them.

We pray for those who mourn losses: for the world, on the death of Desmond Tutu, and for all we known and name in our hearts. We ask your protection for those who travel; for healing for the sick, companionship for the isolated, peace for the distressed in spirit. We pray for all the adolescents of this world, that they may grow in years and in wisdom into a more hospitable world than we see at present. Remember us in your kingdom and teach us to pray: Our Father and Mother in heaven...