

# “Seeking Spiritual Growth”

Luke 2:41-52

1/7/2001 – Maryvale Drive Presbyterian Church, Philip Siddons



During Jesus' twelfth year, His family made a trip to Jerusalem for the Passover holiday. It was Jewish law that every male living within fifteen miles of Jerusalem's grand temple had to go to the Passover festivities. Most Jewish men brought their families, if they could afford it, and even though Mary and Joseph and their household lived further than fifteen miles, they went anyway. They'd be back next year for Jesus' Bar Mitzvah when He turned thirteen.

Their family carefully observed the holiday rituals at the temple and the priest would joke about seeing them only once a year. During the few days there, they even did a little shopping in the city. But at the arranged time and place, they met with the caravan of travelers from their county and began their trip home.

The women and younger children went first, surrounded by the merchants, slaves and the animals which carried the luggage. The men and the boys followed. In all, there were probably five hundred travelers in this caravan, taking up a mile and a half of the road from beginning to end.

As they circled up their wagons that first evening, near a well, Joseph and his brother Cleophas met Mary and the others and began to talk about where they would sleep in the campsite. Suddenly they both spoke at once, saying: "Where is Jesus?"

Mary continued: "I've had James and the girls with me, but I thought He was with you."

"You mean He hasn't been with you?" Joseph said with his face becoming flush.

They left their children with their relatives and for the next hour, they searched the campsite without success for their Son. Joe and Mary didn't sleep a wink all night. They finally decided to send their other children on home with Joseph's brother and go back to Jerusalem in the morning. For Joe and Mary, traveling alone would be out of the question but fortunately there was another caravan headed back. They happened to be camping at the same rest area that night.

For the duration of the day's walk, Mary and Joe felt a mixture of anger, depression and yet some confidence. Jesus was in those transition years between youth and adulthood – something like what the years 18 to 21 are today.

Still, no matter how mature and self-motivated Jesus was, they had that edge of worry as parents. What if something happened to Jesus? Yet Jesus had always been able to take care of Himself. But how depressing to have to go all the way back and then come again the same way. Joseph didn't like traveling at all.

That night they were back in Jerusalem but by then, it was dark so they quickly checked with the Roman police in case they knew His whereabouts. Receiving no news, Mary and Joseph slept in an inn in which they had stayed on the previous evening.

The next morning, as soon as they woke up, they skipped breakfast and spent the day looking all over the city. They tried the library, the market, the police again and the social services. They even tried a few pubs but still no Jesus.

Finally, after what was nearing the end of an exhausting and exasperating day, they entered the temple to sit down, say a prayer and perhaps have a good cry. But as they were walking down the courtyard leading into the temple, they glanced in one of the instruction rooms and there was Jesus. He was sitting around a table with seven of Jerusalem's professors of religion. Jesus was all right.

As soon as they saw Him, they breathed a sigh of relief and their fears drained from them, only to turn to anger. Actually Mary and Joe had been inwardly angry with themselves all day and they had no place to put that anger. Each of them, without telling the other, had been fearful that their own failure to see that Jesus was along on the trip might have resulted in terrible consequences.

With some frustration, the first thing Mary said, as she came over to Jesus' table, was: "Where on earth have You been? We have been looking all over Palestine for You. How could You treat us this way?"

But as soon as Mary released her frustration, she put her arm around her boy and hugged Him. Joe was so mad that he stomped out the door, across the street to the pub, and ordered a double.

Jesus pulled back from His mother with a look of astonishment and said, “What do you mean, you’ve been looking for Me? I thought you had gone home and had decided to let Me stay here for a few days and talk to the rabbis. As for looking, why didn’t you come here to begin with? You should have expected that I’d be spending time at my real Father’s house.”

The rabbi, who was chairman of the division of Semetic studies, quickly came over to Mary and said: “Ma’am, you should be proud of your Boy. He has amazed us all with His questions and His brilliant propensity to learn and grasp the Torah. I have never seen anyone like Him in all my life.

“He has stayed with us for the last two nights in our guest quarters for visiting priests. Clearly He has a future as one of our teachers.”

This time, though, Jesus interrupted and indicated that they should return home. They parted company with the faculty of rabbis and found themselves home in Nazareth two days later.

Luke was the only one who included this incident in his gospel and ended the story, summarizing that Jesus grew in wisdom, stature and in favor with God and people. Luke had probably heard this story from Mary when she was in her retirement years, long after her husband Joseph had died and after Jesus’ death and resurrection. Luke may have remembered what was said about the boy Samuel where scripture said that Samuel ‘grew up and was in favor both with God and with people.’<sup>1</sup>

But Luke was not trying to show any supernatural events in this narrative. He probably was using the story and Jesus’ words about “His father’s house” and His maturing in relationship with God and people in order to connect the birth and infancy narratives with Jesus’ baptism and public ministry that would soon be described.

But Luke’s passing glimpse into this incident did not, by any means, satisfy the curiosity of later generations. The writers of what we call the

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<sup>1</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel 2:26

apocryphal gospels and other extra Biblical writings, wrote of alleged boyhood experiences of Jesus that were so fantastic and childish that they seem distorted – out of character with the gospels.

The apocryphal *Gospel of Thomas* changes this story to have Jesus doing the instructing of the rabbis. We’ve been influenced by Christian art which represents Jesus on a throne-like chair – teaching the rabbis, (if you notice the picture in your bulletin.) But Luke was just trying to show that Jesus was interested in matters of religion and He had astonished the rabbis with His questions and comments.

Elsewhere, in the apocryphal writings, Jesus is portrayed as the boy wonder, the exhibitionist Who one day says to His friends. “Do you see those mean boys throwing those rocks at that little fellow down by the river? Watch this!” And immediately Jesus turns the rocks, in mid air, into birds which fly away.

On another occasion the young Jesus is said to hear of a poor but kindly dyer of cloth. Out of sympathy for the fellow, who was too poor to purchase dye for his business, Jesus magically turns all of his inventory of linen into the richest of purple which becomes the envy of all in the trade.<sup>2</sup>

You see, through the generations, Christians have struggled with the paradox of Jesus being Who He was, as the Nicene Creed stated, “fully God and fully a person.” We simply do not know nor understand what was going on in Jesus’ life for those 16 years between this incident in the temple and the beginning of His public life. Neither do we know much about his family’s life after this temple story.

We do know that He grew up in a large family with brothers and sisters.<sup>3</sup> He obviously worked with Joseph as a carpenter until he apparently died because we hear nothing about Joseph after this.

Jesus, as a carpenter in his father’s business, built and repaired homes. They made furniture, plows, oxen yokes and other agricultural machinery out of wood. And Jesus’ experiences in the trades crept into his

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<sup>2</sup> Norvel Gelenhuys, *Commentary on the gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951)p.126 and *The Gospel of Thomas*, C.F. M.R. James, *The Apocryphal new Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924)p.49-70.

<sup>3</sup> Mark 6:3

parables. Remember He would talk about houses built on rocks or sand foundations. He talked of one's yoke being easy, and so on.

Some wonder about Jesus' growth. They nervously wonder that if Jesus grew in terms of His knowledge and wisdom, would that imply there were things that Jesus did not know? If so, one would wonder if that contradicts our notion of Jesus being divine and all knowing.

But God in Christ did accommodate Self to the human condition ("the Word became flesh" as John put it). This means that the divine somehow limited Self to the limitations of being a person. On one level, it means that Jesus limited Himself to walking around from one place to another, rather than supernaturally flying through the air.

In terms of the area of growth, I think we have to realize that there were some things that Jesus did not know. As a toddler, He did not know the names of people living on the other side of the Jordan river whom He never met. He did not enter synagogue school with a knowledge of algebra or the rules of thermodynamics. Later on, He was surprised and even taken back at the disciples' lack of faith. Sometimes Jesus became truly disappointed in their continual lack of trust in God.

Just being a person involves a gradual accumulation of facts, knowledge and wisdom. You pick things up as you make your way through life.

The first time you go to a dental hygienist, you are a little surprised that you're treated like a two year old. They often talk to you in slow, short, patient sentences as they demonstrate how to floss – even telling you to brush your tongue and the roof and floor of your mouth.

For years, we usually ignore that advice until we see ourselves, or a friend, going through painful gum surgery. It usually takes years and more input until we finally learn that one.

All of life contains learning as we gradually gain experience, knowledge and hopefully wisdom – *but only if we are open to it*. Jesus, being fully human, steadily grew in all areas of life and at an astonishing rate – according to the learned and mature rabbis of the Jerusalem temple. But later, when Jesus exercised His messianic vocation, He openly exposed the low condition of our inner life.

Out of fear, people started taking sides for or against Him. Those who "loved the darkness more than the light" resisted Him and His divine claims so that from then on, Jesus was no longer in favor with people as a whole. So Luke's story reminds us that Jesus came to save us as complete human beings, to support our growth in body, mind and spirit.

Today our personal growth is not often even and our society totally ignores some areas of growth while it severely distorts and over-emphasizes others. Look at how Hollywood and the media have conditioned us in terms of the physical areas of life.

We see people with so-called perfect cheek bones and we seem oblivious to the fact that it still takes a team hours to make stars look as they do. If you saw them on the street, you'd say to yourself, 'Wow, they look like someone I've met in high school, ...nothing that unusual.'

Next time you are waiting in line at the grocery store, look at the covers of the magazines and realistically ask yourself what you would say to a person who looked like that if they were sitting in your living room reading a book next to you?' As soon as we ask that question, we realize how un-life-like these people have been made to appear.

Look at the rippling muscles of some of the others. It's a sure bet that they have devoted years of their lives to pumping iron to build up those biceps, almost completely ignoring other aspects of their personal growth and development. And the attention we are expected to give the latest stars is frankly boring – the limos, the floodlights, the tuxes and gowns and smiles.

Sometimes our society has overemphasized the intellectual. In parts of society there is such a push to get their children into the Ivy League schools that unless junior joins the law firm of a parent, the world is thought to be in danger of falling apart.

There can be a distortion of spiritual growth and all of us have met individuals who have over done it with religion. They'll come up to us and say: "Are you born again?" Sometimes people wear their religion on their sleeve and knock you over with their super spiritual rhetoric.

Once someone came up to me, who didn't know me, and bubbled over: "You know, I *just* want to praise the Lord." And inside I felt like answering

back: “Fine, if that’s all you *just* want to do, why don’t you *just* do it.”

Of course I didn’t say that. I think I said: “Yes, I think I know what you mean. God is pretty good to us” and I let it pass.

“Where’s the balance” we might ask.

We try to grow in our own ways. We want to grow in wisdom and to take care of our bodies. We want to grow in our knowledge and relationship with God and we want to be able to develop our social skills and maintain positive and supportive relationships with others.

If we study the life of Jesus, we see that He obviously managed to do this. He was not a somber and foreboding personality Who couldn’t win the loyalty or affection of anyone. He was One Who had, about Him, the quality of openness and acceptance and yet the reflective capacity that caused some, at a few points, to call him a ‘man of sorrows.’

He had a sense of humor and turned water into wine for a party. He not only dined with PhD Pharisees but also with low life swindling IRS agents. He took criticism from every segment of society because Jesus didn’t fit into the predictable and drab conventional religion. You see, in Jesus’ accumulation of wisdom, knowledge and spiritual depth, He maintained a balance.

Through the years, Jesus saw how people had separated religion from real life and had turned it into an oppressive, obligatory, legalistic set of rituals. Jesus tried to teach the difference between religion and true spirituality. He taught it to the servants who were grumbling out in the field because they all got the same pay (even though it was union scale). He taught it to the little children whom the disciples were trying to get out of their way. Jesus simply ignored both the clergy and the laity who had the formal piety but who were poison to the creative soul.

As we have begun another year of our lives, remember to relate your faith to all of your experiences. Wherever you find yourself physically, mentally or spiritually, God is there. You are the Church – the body of Christ on this earth.

Enjoy your life. The most wonderful thing about our life is that no matter what age we are, we can always grow. And our growth in Christ is what can

make all of life something of wonder. Every minute is lived in God’s presence and it is precious.

So be very sure you’re opening yourself up to growth somewhere in your life. If you don’t, your life may be over before you know it. ■

