

OUT OF THE MOUTH OF BABES

Rev. John R. Annable, University Baptist Church
DECEMBER 29, 2024

Luke 2:41-52 - The Boy Jesus at the Temple

⁴¹ Every year Jesus' parents went to Jerusalem for the Festival of the Passover. ⁴² When he was twelve years old, they went up to the festival, according to the custom. ⁴³ After the festival was over, while his parents were returning home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but they were unaware of it. ⁴⁴ Thinking he was in their company, they traveled on for a day. Then they began looking for him among their relatives and friends. ⁴⁵ When they did not find him, they went back to Jerusalem to look for him. ⁴⁶ After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. ⁴⁷ Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers. ⁴⁸ When his parents saw him, they were astonished. His mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you." ⁴⁹ "Why were you searching for me?" he asked. "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" ⁵⁰ But they did not understand what he was saying to them. ⁵¹ Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. But his mother treasured all these things in her heart. ⁵² And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man.

If you listened closely to the passage from Luke's Gospel you probably are wondering what the sermon title "*Out of the Mouth of Babes*" has to do with Luke 2:41-52, which is a story about a twelve-year-old. The truth is we do not have anything in scripture to tell us about the infant life of Jesus except what we have already read in the gospels about his birth, and the lesson we will hear next week about the coming of the Magi to see the child born to be the king of the Jews.

This Sunday's gospel begins by discussing Jesus's parents, Mary and Joseph—what they are doing, and where they are going. They have gone to Jerusalem to celebrate the festival of Passover, which Luke tells us they did every year as was the custom. And, if you lived within 25 miles of Jerusalem you were required to do so. (Some say the number was 15 miles—but you get the point.) They took Joseph with them on this trip, he was now twelve and that was the age they considered to be the time when a boy became an adult and was expected to learn and be obedient to the teachings of the law. It ends by telling us what they are thinking. Even though Mary has given birth to Jesus, even his own mother has difficulty figuring him out.

The fact is after this story about Jesus at the age of twelve we will hear nothing about him until John the Baptist in the wilderness tells of the Christ whose sandals he is not worthy of untying.

The young Jesus has been at his home in Nazareth with Mary and Joseph, and since the scriptures go to the trouble to mention that Joseph was a carpenter, we may assume, like other children of his day, if this was a family business, he learned the trade of a carpenter from his father. (I learned most of the things I know about carpentry by simply observing my father at work.)

As far as other things are concerned that are not found in scripture, there are many tales told in other literature about some miracles that the younger Jesus might have performed, but the nature of the miracles do not seem to fit the nature of the miracles to fit the sensitivity of the Christ—child or not.

Luke says that Mary and Joseph go to the temple every year to observe the Passover. Jesus's family are presented as faithful Jews, knowledgeable about and active in the rituals and practices of Israel. Luke thus grounds anything he will say about Jesus and his future ministry in Israel's faith. Luke wants us to keep this Jewish grounding of Jesus in mind as we witness Jesus moving into his ministry. He will have a lot of conflict with the Jewish authorities. Still, any conflict he has is not with Judaism itself but rather with their conflicting interpretations of the historic faith of Israel. From the first, even from his childhood, Jesus is portrayed as thoroughly knowledgeable and grounded in the faith of Abraham and Sarah and their heirs.

And yet, from the first, at least since he was a wee lad, Jesus has had tension with the faith and the

faithful. We watched Jesus being born just last week; this week he demonstrates wisdom beyond his years.

I guess we could have entitled the sermon, “The day Mary and Joseph lost God since Jesus is God in human flesh.”

Just about every parent has had an experience of fright when they cannot find their child. The most prevalent examples are those times when we are in a busy store shopping and paying more attention to finding the item we want than watching the child we were expecting to stay close to us. The panic persists until we found them wandering among the clothes that were nearby. Another example is of larger families traveling going into a rest stop or gas station and leaving without one of the kids and feeling the terror until they make it back to find them safe.

Our scripture for today is not meant to be an example of bad parenting on behalf of Mary and Joseph. Rather, this gives Luke the opportunity to assert that the boy Jesus is a very special sort of child with a particular relationship with God, whom he refers to, in the very first words we hear Jesus speak, as “myFather.”

Let’s focus upon the parents of Jesus and their reactions to his actions and words. Mary and Joseph know that they ought to be at the Temple to celebrate the holiest of days in the faith of Israel—that is Passover. But they don’t know what to make of their own son. He is a typical, growing boy, but he is more and the more is baffling to them.

Last Sunday, we celebrated the birth of Jesus, welcoming him as Emmanuel, God with us. This Sunday, we note that Jesus may be God with us, but not as we (or even Mary and Joseph) expected.

Here we are, on the Sunday after Christmas. We have come here to be close to and to understand more about Jesus. And we preachers pray that will indeed happen in our sermons this Sunday. It is our job to present, explain, and help God’s people understand more about Jesus.

And yet, let’s all be forewarned, from the first, from his earliest youth, Jesus confused people. His identity and meaning were far from self-evident.

Are you not sure what to make of Christ? Are you not absolutely clear on his meaning for your life—this child who is beginning to be very much aware of what his life and mission was going to be? Take heart! Even Jesus’s parents didn’t know what to make of the child who was born to and for them and to us.

Maybe you find it easier to relate to Jesus as a baby. Who doesn’t love babies? But be honest now: one reason why we love babies is that babies are not only cute and cuddly, but they are a sort of blank tablet on which we can write anything we want. We can project upon a baby anything we please—babies are so cute, so adorable, so loveable. We can project our imaginings on a baby because babies can’t talk back. No baby can say, *“No, I’m not like that at all. I don’t like to be pinched and cuddled. I have no idea who you are. You’re violating my boundaries. Put me down!”*

In between a child’s baby days and its’ twelfth birthday there are a lot of things that come out of their mouths that will amuse and confound us. This Sunday, Jesus is an adolescent. He talks back, not just to the temple authorities but also to his parents. And in a sense, he also talks back to us!

Is it possible for us to embrace the adolescent Jesus as much as we embrace the infant baby Jesus? The one who is God’s *“Son, the Beloved”* is presented to us as a twelve-year-old who is a learner, a student who is able to grow *“in wisdom and...in divine and human favor”* and also a teacher who confuses with what he says and does.

It may be easier to receive Jesus as we have done this past week, Jesus as a cuddly baby in a manger, than as a smart-aleck preteen. It is also somewhat of a jolt to some of our preconceptions of God to find that Jesus grows, learns, and has ambiguous interactions with his parents. Young Jesus not only asks questions but answers questions.

Young Jesus stays behind in Jerusalem, and *“His parents didn’t know it. Supposing that he was among their band of travelers, they journeyed on for a full day while looking for him among their family and friends.... After three days, they found him....”*

Again, this has a simple explanation. Families often continued to live close by even after people married and had families of their own. And they would make the trip to Jerusalem together. I am familiar with large families and it would be natural to assume that the child would be with cousins playing and present

within the family group as they traveled and played along the way back home. It was at evening that the children would be expected to make their way back to their parents. It was then they discovered they had lost God.

Realizing Jesus was missing they rushed back to Jerusalem and retraced their steps and finally on the third day they found him.

There was little Jesus, disputing with the Bible scholars in the Temple, examining them, amazing people with his knowledge. As for his parents, Mary and Joseph, they were shocked.

His mother said, *‘Child, why have you treated us like this? Listen! Your father and I have been worried. We’ve been looking for you!’*”

When Jesus replied that he was busy in *“my Father’s house,”* Luke said, *“they didn’t understand what he said to them.”*

Mary, even though she seems befuddled by Jesus’s words, *“treasured all these things in her heart.”* Jesus is Mary’s child, yet even in these early days, his perceptive mother knew that he was more than her child. He is marked as favored and as having a unique vocation. His own mother must grow in her comprehension of him.

Let us take this rare glimpse of Jesus's childhood in Luke 2 as Luke’s post-Nativity portrayal of the complexities of Christian belief. Jesus confused even his own parents. This episode reminds us of all those times during the ministry of Jesus when he says or does something, and the crowd around him asks, *“Who is this?”*

If even Mary and Joseph are confused by Jesus, no wonder the crowds (and we) are befuddled by him from time to time.

Today, we celebrate Christmas's grand, glorious truth: Jesus is God with us. But this Sunday after Christmas is a good time to admit that Jesus is God with us, but not necessarily as we expected. From the first, we do not immediately understand him. We must take time with him, even as through Him, God has taken time for us. Don’t expect to “get” Jesus right away. We must grow in our wisdom about him, even as the boy Jesus grew in his wisdom. Having apprehended Jesus in the Gospels, we gradually grow in our comprehension of him through the church’s worship and through our attempts to follow him in the world. Our wonder at him widens even as we come closer to him. There’s a sense in which the more we know of him, the more we are surprised by him. With Jesus, there’s always more.

The Temple authorities are said to be astounded by the wisdom and insights of little Jesus. They were astounded that a little boy could have such wisdom. We look at Jesus—a Jew from a poor Jewish family, the child who, right after his birth (according to Matthew), became an immigrant, an undocumented family who had to flee to Egypt for their safety, the little boy who confused and worried his parents by staying behind after they visited Jerusalem—we look at Jesus and claim that we are astounded that God should come to us and reveal God’s self to us so fully and wondrously as Jesus.

It’s one thing to be in church on Christmas Eve; lots of people are. But it’s another thing to be here on the Sunday After Christmas. There’s a good chance that you are some of our most dedicated, informed, well-formed church members. And yet, even among the First Sunday after Christmas crowd, I bet there are some of you who, from time to time, share Mary’s confusion about Jesus.

Jesus is compassionate they say, so how come we have prayed earnestly for help with a problem but haven’t received the gift of a solution?

Jesus was a healer. We have humbly asked even pleaded for healing but have not received it. Why, Jesus?

We listen intently, as the scriptures are read or the sermon is preached, for a word, a word addressed to us that borrows deep in our soul. But frankly, when the scripture is read, it sometimes sounds like it's talking about aliens from outer space, a Harry Potter episode. We just don’t get it.

I have preached and taught Bible Studies on forgiveness, taking as my text one of the many instances where Jesus urges us to forgive, even to forgive our enemies or those who hurt us. Many people in both those settings—sometimes including the preacher—asks, *“Is Jesus serious? Why would he talk like that to ordinary, weak, sinful human being like us? I can’t forgive people who wrong me. Is Jesus serious?”*

When Jesus said turn the other cheek—really?

Love your neighbor as yourself. That's hard Jesus.

This morning, Jesus says to his worried parents, "*Didn't you know that I'd be doing my Father's business?*"

What does that mean? That he would be here at the Temple, studying the scriptures, or that he would be here at the Temple making the religious authorities very uncomfortable with his impudent questions?

Do any of you ever need Jesus, really need him, to show up and fix some painful difficulty in your life, only to have Jesus say, in effect, by not showing up, "*Didn't you know I'm busy doing my Father's business?*" I've got concerns that are greater than your personal aches and pains. My work is beyond the boundaries of your personal preoccupations or this congregation's membership role. My "Father's business" is greater than you know.

I hope you haven't come to church this Sunday after Christmas thinking that you are coming to our "*temple*" to be confirmed in what you already know about Jesus. Come here, listen to the scripture being read, listen to my sermons, pay attention to the prayers, and be willing to marvel at what you hear from Jesus. Ponder his teaching in your heart so that you might grow closer to the God who has come close to you.

And besides, even if you don't come away from this service with greater knowledge, deeper understanding, wider comprehension of Christ and his business, remember, you are not required fully to understand Jesus to be fully loved by Jesus. We are not saved through our understanding. We are saved because, in Jesus, God came to those who could not come to understand and comprehend God. Thank God that God didn't wait to be God with us until we got the point. God was born among us anyway.

Merry Christmas. God is with us, as one of us, that God might have all of us this day, that God might have us for eternity. Let's move toward the God who, in Christ, loves us.

Let's not be obsessed by our questions, confusion, or doubt. Let's enjoy and experience the mystery of the Incarnation rather than attempt to understand, analyze, or explain it. Therein is great Christmas joy.

And remember out of the mouth of babes comes the words that lead to life eternal. Let us pray for the day that we might see him more clearly, love him more dearly, follow him more nearly, day by day.