

“A Truly New Year” – Luke 2:41-52

When I read this episode from Luke’s gospel about Jesus and his parents in the Temple when he was twelve years old it brings back some long-ago and not-so-good memories – memories of a time when I was about the same age as the young Jesus in the story. Apparently today children are never, never – like in the land where the buffalo roam – to hear a discouraging word, but this story reminds me of the time when I was 12, a time when my mouth would often say things long before my brain had a chance to be fully engaged. If my brain had had a chance to intervene it would never have allowed me to utter some of the things that I said. I’m sure I’ve tossed off a flippant, “where did you think I would be?” to my parents and although I can’t recall the details of their reactions – suppression of memory is an effective avoidance technique – I do have general and not pleasant vague memories of such occasions being turned into painful learning experiences!

So when I read this account in Luke’s gospel I cringe a bit, and always stop to ponder the effect on Jesus’ parents, and about the circumstances. And when I do ponder, I realize that his response was not nearly the sass that it seems to be on first reading. Even today in a Jewish context a young man being precocious is often seen as an asset and even an indication of extra intelligence and character rather than a problem. Recall also that Jesus is specifically identified as being twelve, an age that seems rather young to us, but Luke’s signal is that Jesus had reached the age of adolescence, a significant stepping-stone on the way to manhood. That significant milestone was further underscored by the serious attention that was paid by people in the Temple to his questions and his answers. In Jesus’ day the next and final step into respectable adulthood would occur at age thirty ... the assumed age of Jesus when he began his ministry.

Apart from the nature of Jesus’ response to his parents there are some other intriguing questions that arise from this text as well. Take for example the claim that his parents had gone up to the festival every year. While there was a legal requirement for males to attend at least three festivals a year, practicalities such as the cost and time of travel were often huge challenges. That Jesus’ mother also went was not particularly unusual, but it does signal that his parents, in addition to being very devout, were most likely fairly well off, giving us a clue that Jesus’ early life was likely not one of poverty and struggle. After all, the journey was at least several days (at a very minimum two, since they discovered he was not in the caravan as they made camp after the first day’s travel) ... it was a major trip, and thus an expensive adventure on a yearly basis.

But perhaps the most difficult question raised in the text is how Jesus’ parents responded to the content of his reply: “Why were you looking for me? Didn’t you know that I could only have been in my Father’s house?” Here is the first indication from Jesus of his sense of divinity or at least direct connection with God. His parents were confused about this, as according to Luke, “they did not understand what he said to them.” One wonders whether over the past decade or so the parents had already forgotten all the highly unusual events that surrounded the unusual conception and birth of this child, but there are no ready answers to that in scripture. There is one hint that Mary was aware, and an even stronger hint that Luke might have had the chance to speak with her about the early years of Jesus, a hint given in the poignant statement that “his mother treasured all these things in her heart”, words which echo Luke’s recording of Mary’s reaction right after the shepherds had departed from the stable in Bethlehem, “But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.” However, in the end, like a good Jewish boy, Jesus returned with the family and all was well back in Nazareth.

I suppose we can hardly blame Joseph and Mary if they had already after twelve years forgotten some of the details around Jesus’ birth ... in today’s online society that takes most

people less than twenty-four hours. By the time the stores open for Door-Crasher Specials on Boxing Day most people have put the angels, the magi, the stable, and especially the Baby Jesus aside for another year. No more Christmas carols pronouncing his birth, because we've been saturated by them in the media since Halloween! The Little Drummer Boy has been mercifully silenced, and the silence and calm of 'Silent Night' has succumbed to "Attention Shoppers! A new shipment of doodads has just arrived in aisle twenty-seven ... medics are standing by!" Sadly the transition from Christmas reindeer to Easter bunnies is already well under way.

I shouldn't be too critical, I suppose, for that same transition happens almost as quickly in Luke's gospel, as this incident in the temple at age 12 is the final account in that brief description of the child between his birth and his ministry. All the incidents in that transition have a similar theme, namely that Jesus is clearly connected with God right from the beginning, affirmed by those who have dedicated their lives to God or who are active worshippers. The difference in Luke's gospel however is that the transition is filled with reverence and awe for God and for the grace of God in Christ, and as we continue on through Luke's account of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus we hear that theme proclaimed and praised over and over.

Today we are also in a rapid transition, for not only are we in that "in-between time" just days after Christmas and a few days before the New Year, but we are in a major transition in the life of our congregation. The immediate transition has been into our temporary worship, office, meeting, and Day Care spaces but this is only a beginning. Very early in this New Year we will see the demolition of the church building that has served us so well for the past four decades and the breaking ground for the magnificent new facility we await. We are learning to be comfortable in our temporary spaces, and we are grateful to God that we have found this stability that should last us until we enter the new portals of the building to come.

Moreover, the coming year will provide us with an opportunity to begin to hear what kind of changes God has in mind for us as a congregation. Hopefully it will be no surprise to you that the flavour and essence of the congregation will change once we begin worshiping and serving in the new building: people are likely to be drawn to check out the attractive new facilities, and they will be checking us out as well – and God willing they will find us to be not just friendly and welcoming but more, actually inviting and embracing them into our lives. New facilities will offer us new opportunities to act as Christ's hands in our community – will we have willing volunteers to put those facilities to good (and God's!) purpose? More importantly, will we be willing to stand back and let new volunteers have their opportunity to also serve? New leadership almost always evokes feelings of uncertainty and angst, but also provides the mechanism for meaningful growth and sense of fulfilment. Oh yes, we stand at the start of a truly new year in the life of Central Church!

But even as we anticipate celebrating the start of what will likely be a very challenging and yet exciting year we should still let the sounds and the smells of Christmas linger as long as possible. Savour the transition of the Babe in the manger into adulthood, even with the attendant challenging theological questions, and perhaps just take it on faith that in ways we probably will never fully understand Jesus was fully human and fully divine at the same time. That was ultimately the whole point of Luke including this episode as one of the very few ascriptions we have of Jesus as a child. Luke did not set out to flesh out all of those years with fanciful accounts of Jesus as some kind of weird kid doing magical tricks as did later writers, for example making birds out of clay and breathing life into them because he was bored – a story found in what is known as (the non-biblical, and for good reasons!) Gospel of Thomas. Instead he shows us Jesus as a very knowledgeable and responsible young man, responsible both to his earthly

parents and to his heavenly Father. While Jesus obviously relished spending time in the Temple - “in my Father’s house” at the same time he honoured his earthly parents, for “he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them.” For Jesus, the question “who’s your daddy?” seems to have been answered with “both”, reflecting his duality of being fully human, one with us and at the same time fully divine, one with God.

And so, with the echoes of rejoicing and thanksgiving of Christmas still ringing in our ears, give thanks and rejoice for Jesus’ parents, Mary the mother and Joseph the father, who tended the child and raised him well. That could not have been an easy task in many ways. Give thanks to God, the divine father of Jesus, who in this child dwelt among us full of grace and truth, establishing a new covenant of accessibility to him through faith in Christ. Give thanks and rejoice for the gift of Jesus, Babe in a manger, child in the temple, adult on the cross, and resurrected Saviour, a gift from his Father and our Father, a gift that will last us not only into this new year but into all the new years to come.