



## Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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### “Christmas Grows Up”

Luke 2:41-52

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Our neighbors have a puppy. Early in the fall, they brought him home at just six weeks. He was a cute, small Rhodesian Ridgeback with very big feet. These last months have brought explosive growth. The other day, seeing our surprise, his owners pointed to their dog and said, “This dog ate the other dog!”

Babies don’t stay babies for very long. Days ago baby Jesus charmed and delighted us. This week Jesus grows up. On Christmas Eve, at the 9:00 service, we sang the hymn “Once in Royal David’s City.” We sang:

Jesus is our childhood’s pattern; day by day like us He grew;  
He was little, weak and helpless; tears and smiles like us He knew. <sup>1</sup>

Today, on the first Sunday after Christmas, in only one week, we see Jesus grow from a baby to a twelve year old, just like that! Whatever Jesus experienced as a toddler and a child – his first steps, his first words, his first prayer, all that is lost to us. Our reading today is the only story in the Bible about Jesus’ childhood.

What we find is what Mary and Joseph found in the temple: a twelve-year-old Jewish boy, a precocious young man who makes his parents proud. He interacts with adults with respect, rapport and curiosity. Almost a teen, Jesus explores independence. As a person raised in the faith, he asks questions to shape that inherited faith into his own faith. <sup>2</sup>

Even today, at age 12 and 13 a Jewish boy becomes *bar mitzvah*, son of the Law. *Bar mitzvah* then, and *bar* and *bat mitzvah* now, are rites of passage, as is confirmation for 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders here at Broad Street. Jesus has just celebrated his *bar mitzvah* in Jerusalem. Now his family heads for home. His parents don’t notice him missing because they don’t travel as a nuclear family. They travel in a caravan, with extended family and friends. If you wonder how such a separation could happen, you probably missed seeing the movie *Home Alone*.

Years ago, when our daughter was three, we were in Macy’s. Suddenly she was gone. I call, I search. First, I am worried. After a few minutes, I panic. Where is she? I find an employee. “Please, help me find my daughter!” We search through racks of clothes. Where could she be? At last, I find her, hidden inside a rack of coats, happy, cozy, playing. Relief floods my senses. She has not a care in the world; she doesn’t even realize anything is wrong. Yes, I’m quietly furious, but she’s only three. At 12? Jesus should know better.

Mary and Joseph journey back to Jerusalem to search for their missing child. The annual festival has ended. The temple is peaceful, with plenty of seats available; plenty of time to talk about what matters. And there is

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<sup>1</sup> *Glory to God Hymnal*, #140.

<sup>2</sup> “Our Childhood’s Pattern,” sermon by Victoria Curtiss, December 27, 2015, Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago.

Jesus. Mary and Joseph find him in the temple courts, learning from the rabbis, engrossed in intellectual adventure. He's oblivious to their consternation. His parents may have thought they lost him, but if Jesus has any sense of being lost, it's only being lost in thought and conversation. As the hymn "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling" puts it, "lost in wonder, love and praise." He doesn't understand his parents' anxiety. "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?"<sup>3</sup>

No, his mother doesn't know that, any more than Joseph does. His relationship with his parents, especially Mary, sounds stretched. "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you with great anxiety." In the temple, Jesus figures out to whom he belongs. He is in his Father's house, growing in awareness of his unique relationship with God.

Children – and puppies – grow at the same rate, one day, one year at a time. And yet at times they seem to grow so fast. That quick aging of children and grandchildren goes down hard with some of us. What parent hasn't wondered, as Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof* sings, "Is this the little girl I carried? Is this the little boy at play?"<sup>4</sup>

Christmas Day is over, but the message of Christmas is with us always. It's a message that's meant to grow, meant to surprise us with its growth. Our job is to let that message grow up in us. We all have capacity for a spiritual life – a universal, human capacity to receive and respond to the Spirit of God.

In the temple, when Jesus is twelve, he figures out to whom he belongs. Every one of us faces and makes decisions about our own belonging. Our understanding of our belonging to God shifts as we grow throughout our lifetimes, as we allow God's Spirit increasing vitality and sway in us. Imagine it as the magnificent choreography of the Holy Spirit in the human spirit. This dance of the spiritual life is all about relationship - God's way of relating to us, and our way of responding to God. Spirituality is about the patterns of life and practices of faith, the beliefs and values that allow Jesus the Christ to be formed in us, to grow up, in us.<sup>5</sup>

When it comes to spiritual growth, we are like plants. We need structure and support in order to have enough space, and air and light to flourish. Tomatoes need stakes. Beans need suspended strings. Creeping vines like wisteria grow on any structure they can find, but they flourish on a trellis. Without support, these plants collapse in a heap on the ground. Structure gives us the freedom to grow. And when the structure is there, the growth can amaze us.<sup>6</sup>

Our Christian tradition has a name for the kind of structure that supports spiritual growth. Through the centuries it has been called a rule of life. A rule of life is a pattern of spiritual practices, meant to help us establish a rhythm for daily living, a basic order within which our spirits grow. Jesus has that in the rhythm of home, village life, and synagogue. Think of it like a stake for tomatoes or suspended strings for beans, or a trellis for wisteria. It curbs our tendency to wander and supports our desire to grow spiritually.

The Roman Catholic Rule of St. Benedict is probably the best known of all rules, because of its common sense wisdom and moderate tone. This week I rediscovered a rule that Martin Luther King Jr. developed to guide the non-violent protests of the civil rights movement. Each participant in the Birmingham protests was required to follow Dr. King's "Ten Commandments." Together they form a remarkable rule, a rule that is still relevant in our current context.

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<sup>3</sup> *Glory to God Hymnal*, #366.

<sup>4</sup> "Sunrise, Sunset" from *Fiddler on the Roof*, lyrics by Sheldon Harnick

<sup>5</sup> Marjorie Thompson, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1995, pp 6-7.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137.

1. Meditate daily on the teachings and life of Jesus.
2. Remember always that the nonviolent movement in Birmingham seeks justice and reconciliation, not victory.
3. Walk and talk in the manner of love, for God is love.
4. Pray daily to be used by God in order that all might be free.
5. Sacrifice personal wishes in order that all might be free.
6. Observe with both friend and foe the ordinary rules of courtesy.
7. Seek to perform regular service for others and the world.
8. Refrain from violence of fist, tongue, or heart.
9. Strive to be in good spiritual and bodily health.
10. Follow the directions of the movement and the captains of a demonstration.<sup>7</sup>

King's powerful commandments include sacrifice. Sacrifice personal wishes in order that all might be free. He knows that the Christmas baby doesn't get to grow old in a Bethlehem retirement community. He knows Jesus is headed for the cross.

When we grow up in faith we wrestle with questions about our purpose. As we grow, we listen for God, and we find ourselves being interested in what interests God. Hear again the verbs on King's list. Meditate, remember, walk and talk, pray, sacrifice, observe, seek, refrain, strive, follow. Verbs that call us to an engaged and faithful life, verbs that point to justice, care of creation, sacrifice, connection, commitment, persistence and love. Powerful words from King echo powerful words from Jesus.

Jesus grows up. Christmas grows up in us. Christmas is always growing up in us, even in the New Year, after we take the tree down and pack up the ornaments. Every day, God goes before you, walks beside you, stands behind you, and is at work within you, empowering you to make a difference. Every day, by the Spirit's power at work in us, we continue growing toward maturity, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 139-140.