Discovering the Boy Jesus

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 29 December 2024

1 Samuel 2:18-20,26 • Colossians 3:12-17 • Luke 2:41-52



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

The Gospels are the stories of the life of Jesus Christ. They are short biographies, written for a particular purpose: to reveal who Jesus Christ was and is, and to teach the truth of the Good News he brought to the world. They are not meant to be complete histories of Jesus' life, and so we find large gaps in time. Just four days ago we celebrated Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, and already, today, he is twelve years old. And that is all we get to see of his childhood.

There were other stories floating around in the early centuries, gospels written by other people, which contained some other childhood stories. In one of them, Jesus is shown as a little boy playing with some not so nice children. One particular child made Jesus angry, so he spoke a word and the child fell dead. Then Jesus brought him back to life. In my view, such a story is unbelievable on the face of it: would Jesus, even as a little boy, really kill a playmate? And that is why such stories were not accepted into what we call the canon, the set of books which were settled on in the 4th century as the established Bible, as we know it today. The councils of church elders which made these decisions were

guided by the Holy Spirit in their efforts to accept only true writings into the canon.

So we have the stories of Jesus' birth, of his presentation in the temple as a newborn baby, and today's story of his journey to Jerusalem as a 12-year old boy with his parents. And I would guess that this story made it into the canon because it is believable and gives us a little insight into who this boy was. He was apparently an intelligent boy, one who picked things up quickly, and could reason about them. The elders around him were astonished at his knowledge. We naturally ask ourselves, "Is the boy Jesus just very intelligent and self-assured for his age, or are we seeing his divine side here?" That is, is he impressing the elders out of the knowledge of a 12-year-old boy, or the supreme knowledge of God, which we know Jesus to be?

If we think Jesus at 12 had the knowledge of God, then the discarded story of him causing his playmate to die becomes more understandable, as least as far as his ability to do so is concerned. It may still be troubling from the moral standpoint, even if Jesus brings him back to life. Jesus did other things which seemed a little mean, such as the episode in Mark when he curses the fig tree for not having any fruit, even though it was out of season (Mark 11:12-14). Or when he overturned the tables in the temple, perhaps destroying the livelihoods of several vendors. But he does these things for good reasons, in order to teach his disciples some truths about the kingdom of God and the proper respect for our Father. The story of him killing his playmate might fit under that heading.

But I don't think this view fits in with Jesus' mission. Jesus came to earth to save us from our sins and show us the way to salvation. God decided that the best way to do that was to have his Son become flesh, become like one of us — and not just like one of us, but really one of us, a human being, with all the abilities and all the limitations of human beings. And one of the limitations of being human is that we are not born physically and mentally mature. We are not like the Greek goddess Athena, who sprang fully formed from the head of Zeus. We take 15-20 years to mature. (And guys take longer, I know). During our childhood and adolescence, we are constantly learning, growing, making mistakes, and developing into the adults we will be. So, I believe, did Jesus. When he took human form, he started as a baby, with the limited mental and physical abilities of a baby. And when he was 12 years old, he was still a boy, not yet in possession of an adult intellect. A very bright boy, to be sure, and so he could impress the elders with his knowledge; but I believe he was not supernaturally bright. He was a bright human boy.

At the same time, though, as directed by his heavenly Father (and he was directed by his Father in all things), what he did in the temple at 12 had a purpose. First, it showed the importance of worship, and of growing in the

knowledge of God's wishes, as revealed through the teachings of the Bible. Temple worship, with its sacrifices, its prescriptions, its rules, was important. Jesus was showing himself an example to all young people. The church he was later to establish is built on the early faith and practices of Judaism, as the New Testament is built on the Old. God's relationship with and revelation to his people is a continuum, from Abraham through Jesus: all parts of God's revelation are important.

Second, the fact that Jesus could outdo the elders at their own trade symbolises the coming of a new faith, which would supersede the old. The rabbis' knowledge was not unimportant — as we said, the new faith is built on the old — but it goes beyond the old faith. As Jesus' ministry began, it became clear that the rabbis and Pharisees and others were being left behind, and could not accept the new teaching. Jesus, at only 12 years old, surpassed them, hinting to us that God is doing a great new thing now.

And third, the boy Jesus shows us, as he did on other occasions, that our true Father is our God in heaven. Human fathers and mothers are not unimportant, but as I've often talked about, the priority for us is God. God is first, and our human families must be second. It must have been particularly astonishing for Joseph, for his son to speak in that way, when Jesus said, "I had to be in my Father's house." We are not told what Joseph's reaction is. It is a moment of new understanding for Jesus himself, and the start of a new relationship with his parents. Mary merely stores this up in her heart, as she did when the shepherds came to the stable. By now, she truly realises that this boy is like no other, and his life will be dedicated to God. She will endure much pain over this, and her worry as she searched the city for Jesus is a foreshadowing of the pain she will suffer when she finally does lose him to the cross. When Simeon spoke to Mary on the occasion of Jesus' presentation in the temple, saying, "And a sword will pierce your own soul too," he spoke the truth (Luke 2:35). Although Jesus would not truly begin his mission until about age 30, this incident at age 12 is really the beginning of the separation and the maturing of Jesus as the Messiah of God. From that point (and 12 was considered the beginning of adulthood for Jewish boys), Jesus' life was wholly given over to his Father's will — and the hope for our salvation truly began.