



Growing Before God

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Luke 2:41-52

The Christmas story with its very brief glimpses of Jesus' boyhood has spurred the imaginations of people throughout the ages. Many have proposed miracle stories for Jesus' infancy, not necessarily intending to lead people astray, but to share their understanding of Jesus' importance, Jesus' identity, and the implications of God being present in a young child. We might well look askance at stories of Jesus making clay birds come to life, but we do well to ponder the significance of the Creator of all life being present not only in the man, Jesus, but also in the boy and the infant in the manger.

Our gospel texts have scarce little information about Jesus' early years. We know of his birth, we know of his presentation in the Temple. We know of his growth and development, but the barest of details. We know that at age thirteen he would have been considered to come of age and be treated as an adult. What about our own growth and development? Where do we set the bar for our spiritual growth?

At first blush, today's reading might seem to concern that very event of his travel with his family to the Temple to demonstrate his knowledge of the Scriptures, what today is called a Bar-Mitzvah. A bar-mitzvah was a ritual every Jewish boy would go through, a rite of passage into manhood. It demonstrated first of all that the boy knew God's commandments. It also made him responsible for keeping those same commandments. It was a moment of accountability and the launching of a life in dedication to God. A Jewish boy would participate in reciting one or more large passages of the Pentateuch, as well as discussing the meanings of those same passages.

Luke's story, however, is not about Jesus' bar-mitzvah. What Luke recounts goes beyond such expectations. The timing is wrong for a bar mitzvah, for Jesus was still too young. In the time period, a bar mitzvah would have been celebrated after a boy completed his first Yom Kippur fast, a festival in the fall of the year. Luke tells us that Jesus is in Jerusalem with his parents for a different festival. He is there for Passover in the springtime of the year. It is too early for Jesus' bar-mitzvah. The time stamp is wrong. Even so, we find Jesus fulfilling all and more than would be expected at a bar-mitzvah, for Luke records that he has already come of age in the character of his actions, interest, and purposes.

Three days after Mary and Joseph noticed Jesus missing from the throng of people heading home from their pilgrimage, they found him in the Temple discussing the Scriptures with the elders of the people. We find Jesus described as being seated among the Biblical experts of the day. Luke's words place him not as a child seeking recognition for his learning and initiation into adulthood. We find him already being looked upon as an equal in matters of Biblical understanding. Seated, he is reckoned as one of those who have mastered the Scriptures and participating in the role of teaching others.

He was not there to celebrate a ritual transition to adulthood according to Jewish expectations. We find him living out the expectations of a mature Jewish man seeking to know and serve God. Prior to any cultural or religious rite of passage, he demonstrated his interest and desire to seek and honor God. He was discussing the Scriptures with the teachers of the Law, who were amazed at his grasp and understanding of their meaning. Though he has not yet come of age for a bar-mitzvah, he has taken on the role of a rabbi, normally reserved in Jewish tradition for a man of at least thirty years.

It was expected of Jesus that he learn and memorize Scripture. His parents were undoubtedly proud of his grasp of God's Word, yet they did not expect just how far Jesus would take his development

in terms of knowing God. He accepted the need to know God and the scriptural traditions of his people. While his parents recognized this, they were not prepared to understand the depths of this responsibility, nor the depth of God's interest in the spiritual development of all.

In many ways, they were simply in Jerusalem for a festival in which every Jewish family participated. They were there as a matter of course. They were there to check off the freedom festival in which the whole nation routinely participated. Jesus took the opportunity of being in Jerusalem beyond the ritual, demonstrating a deeper level of knowledge and interest in the things of God. His parents did not really know how to respond. They were comfortable with Jesus knowing God well-enough. They were unprepared for how far Jesus would take his study, preparation, and initiative. Jesus demonstrated a desire to seek deeper knowledge of God, not simply surpassing the standard definitions of the religious expectations of the day.

Luke records the teachers of the Scriptures being amazed at Jesus' grasp of the Scriptures. We do not generally expect children to do much more than memorize passages and quote them back. Jesus seems to have done much more, internalizing the meaning of the texts calling for their application to life. He conversed with the teachers of the Law as an equal among them. He asked questions. He answered them. He fully participated in the religious life of Israel as a matter of course. According to tradition and the Law, he was still a child. According to his attitudes and actions, he had entered adulthood. He had assumed its responsibilities, as well as its rights in regard to God.

His parents arrived and were surprised to find him among the teachers of the Law. Likely, part of their surprise was the fact that he was speaking with them as an equal. His parents were cowed at being in the presence of men who had mastered their understanding of Jewish Scriptures. A rabbi was supposed to be at least thirty years old and have spent much of that time in earnest study. Jesus was only twelve, yet found acceptance within the learned of Israel. Joseph and Mary did not know how to respond. Anxiety, uncertainty, and confusion left them with more questions than they knew how to ask or process.

Jesus took it all in stride. He accepted his responsibilities toward his parents. He accepted his responsibilities toward God. He asked why they did not understand that he would be about God's business, yet he accepted their responsibility for him and his need to respect and submit to them.

Luke wants to tell us that Jesus did not simply obey the norms. He grew up in manner that went beyond the expectations of normal development. Jesus demonstrated God's interest in our development, our growth before others and before God. The expectations of society might have been fine, but they did not measure up to God's measure of sufficiency.

Jesus not only grew into responsibility early, he moved the bar of spiritual growth to a different level. While still considered too young to be held accountable, he was fulfilling the role of one three times his age. While yet a child, he assumed responsibilities we determine to be for others. Those around him did not know what to do with him. He accepted the fact of his childhood in submitting to his parents, yet took on the responsibilities of an adult before God, likely beyond the years of his parents.

Have we settled for cultural norms for our spiritual growth? Jesus did not seem to take them as sufficient. Then again, what do we do with Jesus? Do we treat him as one who has not yet come of age and needs our guidance, or are we willing to learn from him, submitting our lives for growth and transformation. His parents weren't really sure how to respond to him. Do our lives demonstrate that we know much better than they did? It's time we start meeting God's expectations instead of our own.

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