

Beyond the Baby
Luke 2:41-52
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
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So today we heard two stories of the child Jesus. And that's really all we can expect because these are the only two stories, in our Bible, of Jesus between his birth and his ministry which began about 30 years later.

So, we get the story of the magi coming and bringing gifts...a story we often connect with the birth stories, although, as Emily reminded us in the children's moment, history tells us that this interaction likely would not have occurred until Jesus was a toddler. Then we get this second story that Sally just read for us - the one about Jesus, at twelve years old, sitting and listening and questioning and imagining and answering together with the rabbis and other faithful Jewish people.

As we hear these stories today, just on the heels of the birth stories, I wonder what they tell us about Jesus, especially what they tell us when we put them all together - from the announcement of his birth through this twelve-year-old story - and look at them as a unit.

Because one of the beautiful things about these stories, some of them individually, but certainly all of them together, is that they give us a balanced picture of who Jesus was.

Jesus was born in humble circumstances to an ordinary set of parents *and* Jesus was understood to be purposed for things much bigger than his humble beginnings.

Jesus was visited by shepherds - outsiders who smelled like a barn - *and* by magi - people of great means and education who were able to travel great distances following a star that they understood would guide them to something great.

Jesus was a helpless baby, needing his parents to feed him and care for him in the same manner as we do *and* even at a young age - remember Herod's role in the story of the magi - powerful people were threatened by his presence and what it could mean, and others were awed by his wisdom.

Jesus, as he grew into a man, was a teenager who was finding his own way and his own priorities and sometimes forgetting to tell his folks where he was going to be *and* he was wise beyond his years and faithful to both Judaism and his family.

And in all of these stories we get the sense that Jesus was as ordinary as we are *and* as special as anyone who ever walked this earth. When we read these stories we can understand why the church landed on a description of him as fully human *and* fully divine.

So it is in this context that we get the story of twelve-year-old Jesus. This is a story that we have done many things with. We often feel free to critique Mary and Joseph's parenting - we wonder how they could not have known where their child was, how they could have headed home without him. And yet, it is appropriate to remember that not only were they traveling with a large group and it would have been normal for a young person his age to walk with other friends or family while his parents were likely tending their younger children, but it is also important to remember that in their culture and faith he was old enough to be considered "coming of age," to have some freedom and independence.

The reality is that Mary, Joseph and Jesus were navigating that awkward time where dependence and independence co-mingle, sometimes sitting in easy company with one another and other times in deep conflict.

And this story also reminds us that Jesus didn't miraculously shift from infant to adult in one fleeting moment, but that his life, like ours, moved from day to day, year to year, through the normal phases of being and becoming.

So, it seems this story provides a great bridge for us. It both reminds us to slow down and pay attention to the details...details of Jesus' life as well as our own. It reminds us to not wish away the years or the experiences, but to be on the lookout for God whenever and wherever God shows up.

Meanwhile, even as it slows us down, this story also moves us beyond the manger.

While we like to think about baby Jesus, and of course we always do so assuming colic and sleepless nights were not a part of his infant days, the reality is that our faith is meant to grow beyond a sweet baby in a manger.

Perhaps you've seen the movie *Talladega Nights* where the main character, Ricky Bobby, prays to "Lord Baby Jesus" and to "tiny Jesus" and when he is criticized Ricky Bobby says, "Look I like the Christmas Jesus best and I'm saying grace."

Friends, sometimes we like Christmas Jesus the best, we sit with him most easily, we allow ourselves to bask in the glow of a sleeping baby. And when he is just a baby it is easier to ignore that even in those stories there are themes of God's care for the poor and the outcast; there are indications that God's intention is for the world to be turned upside down even when it means the powerful are removed from their high places; there are reminders that the way of Jesus is a way that challenges the norm.

So, we are meant to move beyond baby Jesus. And that doesn't just mean a quick shift to the cross. See, too often we focus on two moments in Jesus' life - his birth and his death followed by resurrection. And yet neither of these is complete without everything that happened in between. Our faith has missed so much of what Jesus teaches us if we go from a sweet newborn baby to a death whose brutality we ignore with language of Jesus' sacrifice on our behalf.

So, even though the stories in between his birth and his ministry are few, we need them. We need to pause and watch Jesus grow and engage his faith and the world around him. We need to pause and see not only those 3 years of stories of his ministry, but these stories of Jesus coming of age. We need 12-year-old Jesus. We need to pause and see that his wisdom developed over the years and it is also important that we remember that it was rooted not only in his family, not only in his special relationship with God, but also in his Jewish faith. We need to pause, with this story and with the stories of Jesus throughout his life as we watch to see the ways in which he surprises even us and the ways in which he challenges assumptions and especially systems that hold others down.

And, this story also reminds us that we need to listen even in unexpected places. There might be 12-year-olds in our midst who have wisdom to share if only we will pay attention.

Friends, ours is a God of surprise who keeps showing up in all sorts of places, those we expect and those we don't. And we are reminded not to read past any of these stories too quickly that we refuse to be surprised again.

Ours is a God beyond the manger who invites us to continue to grow and to engage, to question and to discover, to be and become more fully who we are created to be, that we and our faith may become in this coming year and the years to follow more than what we are today. May it be so.