

Jesus: Answering to the Father
December 31, 2006
Luke 2:41-52

My husband, Mark, received a new book for Christmas. It is called, *Yes, Your Teen is Crazy: Loving Your Kid Without Losing Your Mind*. It is a timely gift, for our son is embarking on the teenage years in less than two months! The first chapter was enough to “scare me out of my wits!” I’ll take the author’s advice that a sense of humor is essential to living through these years.

Dr. Bradley writes that brain science has determined that “the most advanced parts of the brain don’t complete their development until adolescence is pretty much over.”¹ In the meantime, teens cannot fully understand why they do what they do. He tells these true stories out of his practice of psychology:

“Following her arrest for deliberately driving Dad’s Range Rover over 10 grand-worth of new landscaping in front of the private school at which she consistently achieved excellence, Susan’s parents asked her the dumbest question you can think of: ‘Why?’

“That was the same dumb question Ronald’s parents asked when he decided to push the big plastic gas can up the driveway with the lawn tractor, blade running, causing the can to rupture, spraying flaming gas everywhere. (Ronald escaped with singed pride, but the tractor was toast.)”²

Why did you do such a thing? That’s exactly what Mary asks her twelve year old son, Jesus, after searching for him in Jerusalem for three days. “Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.” Jesus replies, “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” In Luke’s telling, Jesus has a perfectly rational explanation for his behavior. He is where he is supposed to be, where he is meant to be, where he is called by God to be.

This is the only childhood story about Jesus told in the four gospels. Luke may have included it as a transitional story between Jesus’ infancy and his public ministry which began around age 30. Such anecdotes are typical of ancient biographies which were “concerned with showing the greatness of the hero by elaborating how the person was great from the very beginning.”³

The scriptures do not address our curiosities about the early and lost years of Jesus’ life before his public ministry began. Most of Jesus’ life remains shrouded in mystery. Scholars and archaeologists have been able to piece together some understanding of Jewish life in the time of Jesus. Let’s

backtrack for a moment to look at life in first-century Palestine to get a glimpse of the world in which Jesus was shaped. The following insights are drawn from a variety of biblical scholars.

Jesus grew up in Nazareth, a peasant village. His father, Joseph, was a manual laborer, a carpenter by tradition, but the Greek word *tekton* could mean stonecutter or “handyman.” Nazareth was a rural community with a population of between 200 and 400 people, mostly agricultural laborers. Peasant homes were humble, generally made of uncut stones with dirt floors. Four miles to the north was the city of Sepphoris, the capital of Galilee and home of Galilee’s ruling elite. It was the residence of Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great and the executioner of John the Baptist. It is possible that Joseph and even Jesus went to work in this big city four miles away from their home.

Nazareth was a Jewish village which followed the sacred traditions of Judaism, including scriptures and stories, worship and festivals, prayers and practices. The three foundations of Jewish life were practice of the faith in daily life, recitation of the Hebrew Bible, and pilgrimages to the temple in Jerusalem, which was the center of Jewish devotion.⁴

“The responsibility for education in the home fell to both parents and to grandparents who lived nearby....Both male and female children participated in the religious rituals of the home and in some of the rituals of the synagogue.... ‘Religion and society made no sharp distinction between childhood and adolescence. The Jewish practice of celebrating the Bar Mitzva when a boy reaches the age of thirteen, marking the fact that at this age he received the obligations to observe all the commandments, originated in a later period [later than the first century]. In the first century both boys and girls began to participate in social life and observe the law as soon as they were mature enough to be able to perform and understand these activities.’”⁵

The early years of a child’s life “were spent almost exclusively in the women’s world. The bond between mother and son remained the strongest emotional tie throughout life. This meant that the transition for young boys into the male, public world was often painful, difficult, and lengthy....At seven or eight years of age, boys are abruptly and harshly thrown into the hierarchical and authoritarian world of men...Since the male world was the public world, it was the arena in which males defended the family honor. Eloquence, cleverness, aggressiveness, and courage were fundamental male values.”⁶

In today's reading from Luke, Jesus appears to have successfully navigated this transition into the public world of the male. He is comfortable with entering into the thought-provoking dialogue among the teachers in the temple.

In responding to his mother's frustration of his absence from the family caravan traveling back home, Jesus establishes a distance between himself and his parents. "Didn't you realize that it is time for me to be about my Father's business?" We know that separation from one's parents is one of the growing pains of adolescence. Another developmental task is discovering and affirming one's own identity.

It appears that Mary and Joseph have done a remarkable job of parenting Jesus. Now he is about the appropriate developmental task for an adolescent and young adult: discovering his identity and his vocation in relationship to God. Mary and Joseph have built the foundation on which their son will now shape his life. They have provided a solid grounding in their social customs, their religious way of life, the scriptures of faith, and the rituals of Judaism. Jesus marvels at their astonishment at his presence in the temple. After all, it was their excellent parenting that led him to this time and place in his life. He is doing exactly what they reared him to do. Aren't they pleased at his devotion to the faith?

Jesus is moving out of the circle of his parents, although he will continue to be obedient to their earthly authority. He will honor his father and mother, as the law commands. However, he is moving into the larger circle of his heavenly Father, the real authority in his life. His parents have dutifully introduced him to God. Now he is allowing God to become the prime mover and shaper of his life.

Notice that Jesus is claiming relationship with God as the authority for his life, not the institutional religion and all its trappings. Jesus will return to the temple later in his life to overturn the money-tables and upset the authorities. Unfortunately "the theology that developed around the temple claimed for it an institutional monopoly on access to God. Not only did temple theology affirm that God dwelled there as nowhere else, but the temple was the one and only place of sacrifice."⁷

Counter to the temple theology, Jesus taught that people can have immediate access to God. They need not find God solely through institution and tradition. Jesus had his own powerful, mystical experience of God. Such an intimate relationship is available to all who seek God. At their finest, religious institutions and traditions will foster a personal experience of God, but they do not have a monopoly on access to God.

In claiming God as the center of his life, as the authority for his ministry, Jesus models for us the movement toward maturity in faith. The life of Christ followers is not one of simply going to church and going through the motions. The life of Christ followers is one of relationship with God. Hopefully the church, its worship and traditions, and practice of the spiritual disciplines are tools whereby people experience the very presence of God. They are not the ends in themselves; they are the means whereby we intimately know the gracious love of God.

What is really known of the missing years of Jesus' life is Luke's final statement in today's reading: "Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor." Jesus grew in relationship with God and his fellow humans. Jesus immersed himself in God's presence and allowed God to be the primary influence in his life. His relationship with God was the source of his vocation, activity, and teaching. God's presence with him, in him, and through him empowered Jesus to be a passionate advocate for God's justice. A living, dynamic, personal experience of God was the center and source of his life and existence. God had first place in Jesus' life.

We stand here on the seventh day of Christmas, the festival of incarnation, the celebration of God with us in the person of Jesus Christ. We stand on the eve of a brand new year, the 2011th year after our Lord's birth (someone was about four years off when they established the calendar according to the year of Jesus' birth!). New Year's Eve has traditionally been a day of covenant renewal for Methodists. John Wesley encouraged us to be methodical in renewing our commitment to put God at the center of our lives; the beginning of a new year is a good time to do so. Our dedication of the offering this morning is the Wesleyan Covenant Prayer, in which we pledge to give God first place in our lives, as Jesus did.

It's a time to contemplate some heavy questions: Whose business are we about: our own, our employer's, our family's, God's? It's not necessarily either/or, for sometimes God's call is to develop our skills, fulfill our vocation, care for our families, serve the church. The ultimate question is: who or what has a claim on our lives? Are all those forces that claim a piece of us addressed in proper proportion? Or have priorities gotten out of alignment? Does Jesus have reason to question us: "Why are you doing such a thing? That has nothing to do with God's desire for your life!"

Norman Cousins wrote a tribute to Albert Schweitzer when he died. He mentioned all the influences on Schweitzer's life, trying to understand why he became such a hero, such a marvelous human being. He talked about the culture in which he grew up. He talked about his family life. He talked about his religious beliefs. Then he concluded with these words:

"But beyond these explanations, it seems to me there is something else about Schweitzer. The best way I can say it is that somehow or other, he seemed to understand what God wanted from him, and he responded with a glad and willing heart."⁸

Friends in Christ, may we follow in the footsteps of Jesus, subordinating all other demands and priorities to God's purpose and desire for our lives.

¹ Michael J. Bradley, Ed.D., *Yes, Your Teen is Crazy! Loving Your Kid Without Losing Your Mind* (Gig Harbor, WA: Harbor Press, 2003), p. 6.

² Ibid, pp. 9-10.

³ Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Interpretation*, Vol. 36, No. 4, p. 400.

⁴ Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2006), pp. 92-95.

⁵ Charles R. Page II, *Jesus and The Land* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), p. 53. Quote is attributed to Shemuel Safrai and Menahem Stern, eds., *The Jewish People in the First Century*, 2 vols. (Assen: Van Gorcum; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974-76), 2:771-72.

⁶ Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), pp. 299-300.

⁷ Borg, p. 106.

⁸ Rev. Mark Trotter, "They Grow Up Fast," www.clergyresources.net, retrieved December 27, 2006.

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