

December 26, 2021

*"The Hidden Years"*

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Luke 2:41-52

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“And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man.” I love this last sentence of today's scripture reading. Because I can see in my mind's eye the life of Jesus beginning to unfold, leading from his preteen years into adulthood, to his baptism, to his ministry, and finally to his great sacrifice for us on the cross. But don't you just wish we could know more about Jesus? What he experienced as a child, as a young man, as a carpenter. All the things that may have happened in his life. I do! I've said it before, but the Gospel writers always seem to me far too brief when it comes to telling Jesus' story. Just think – the years between the beginning and the end of his life are left almost blank in the New Testament. His birth and his family's flight into Egypt is documented for us. And his last three years, including his death is covered almost completely. But of all the years and time in between, we only have a record of just one week. Just one week. St. Luke alone tells the story we heard today about the Passover week. When Jesus was 12 years old, he and his family traveled to Jerusalem to celebrate this annual feast. Now just to give you some context, back then, several families would have traveled together in caravans to go to Jerusalem and back to Nazareth. So, assuming that Jesus was a responsible child, Mary and Joseph likely believed that Jesus was with some friends or relatives as they all started back home. But... Jesus was not with them. So they hurried back and, after three days, finally found him. And Luke tells us what happened in such a wonderful fashion. Here is the boy Jesus standing before the religious teachers, in the Temple no less, answering their questions with the perfect, matter of fact assurance of a child that is divinely gifted from above. And the men are surprised, amazed, flabbergasted, astonished at his knowledge. And there's more. When Mary and Joseph question Jesus about his absence, his again matter of fact response is, “Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?” Imagine Mary's initial reaction as to what he was saying. She knew her child was special, the Magi had hailed him as a king, but now he is implying that he is much more than that. However – he's still a twelve year old boy, so they all head back home to Nazareth. And that's the end of the chapter. The next thing Luke tells us is that Jesus is getting baptized.

So what happened during those eighteen or so years in between? Well, like I said, we don't know exactly. But let's see if we can surmise more from the rest of Scripture about those hidden years of Jesus and what it might tell us. For example, in both Matthew and Mark's gospel, there's an incident in Jesus' ministry where he returns to his hometown of Nazareth and teaches in the synagogue there. The

townspeople are at first amazed at his teachings and the miracles he has performed and his reputation. But then it's almost too much for them to grasp and comprehend, and they exclaim, "Wait a minute! Isn't this our carpenter, the brother of James and Joses and Judah and Simon? Are not his sisters living right here with us?" Now this tells us that Jesus was one of at least seven children. So you can imagine what his early family life must have been like. Seven children and two parents, nine people total, probably living in a humble one room house. Keep in mind, Joseph, Jesus' earthly father, was just a carpenter. And under the combined Roman and Jewish taxation system, his family was probably very poor. In fact, there's an incident shortly after Jesus birth, where we learn from Luke that Mary and Joseph could only afford two pigeons for the temple sacrifice, rather than the normal sacrifice of a lamb. So later in his life when Jesus said that two sparrows sold for a penny, perhaps he was remembering how hard it was for his family to make ends meet. When he spoke of patching cloth, he was probably recalling his mother's sewing many upon many a patch on their clothing. And consider how siblings argue and fight among each other. Then consider how many times Mary may have had to intervene, teaching all of them to say, "I'm sorry," and learning how to forgive and forget in order to keep harmony in the house. With seven kids, perhaps seventy times seven times? And yes, there may have been struggles, but I suspect, with parents like Mary and Joseph, it still must have been a childhood filled with much happiness, laughter, and joy. Because why else in his later years would his character and personality be such that saint and sinner alike would be drawn to him. Why else would he be welcomed at so many parties and feasts? And why else does he imply that the kingdom of heaven is like a home full of happy children, because he said no one might enter there except as a child. Yes, doesn't it make sense that he radiated joy and love because of the memories and experiences of his childhood, which shaped his life and his ministry?

Now somewhere along the line, Joseph died and Jesus, as the oldest, had to become the man of the house, and he followed in his father's footsteps as a carpenter in order for the family to survive. And maybe this was the time when Jesus learned admiration and respect for women, by the strength and resilience his mother had shown as a widow raising seven children. Time and time again throughout his ministry, in stark contrast to the thinking of the period, Jesus treated women with an acceptance and understanding that made them not only his good friends, but his disciples as well. And, another thing, besides working as a carpenter to help support the family, I would think that, as part of his role, Jesus also had to have helped raise his younger sisters and brothers. And remember, they didn't have storybooks back then. So is this how he developed his prowess as a master storyteller?

But getting back to his carpentry, I can imagine what an excellent carpenter he must have been. And still is. I'm reminded of a wonderful poem by George Blair, called *The Carpenter of Nazareth*. It goes like this...

*In Nazareth, the narrow road up, that tires the feet and steals the breath, passes the place where once dwelt the Carpenter of Nazareth.*

*And up and down the dusty way the village folks would often wend; and on the bench beside him, lay their broken things for him to mend.*

*The young maiden with the doll she broke, the woman with a broken chair, the man with broken plow, or yoke, said, "Can you mend it, carpenter?"*

*And each received the thing they sought, in yoke, or plow, or chair, or doll. The broken thing which each had brought, returned again a perfect whole.*

*So, up the hill through long years still, with heavy step and longing eye, we burdened souls our way pursue, uttering each our plaintive cry.*

*"Oh Carpenter of Nazareth, this heart, that's broken past repair, this life, that's shattered nigh to death, oh can you mend them, carpenter?"*

*And by his kind and determined hand, his own sweet life is woven through our broken lives, until we stand a new creation... "Yes, I will make all things new."*

*The shattered idols of my heart; image, desire, ambition, hope... mold them please for me, into the perfect part, O Jesus, Carpenter of Nazareth."*

Yes, Jesus is still the carpenter, repairing the brokenness in our lives – the mistakes, the regrets, the sorrows, the pain.

And finally, there's even more that we can glean from scripture. This is found in the opening lines of St. Matthew's gospel, where the genealogy of Jesus is listed in its entirety, stretching forty-two generations back from father Abraham himself. If you take the time to analyze the genealogy, you'll find Jesus was part of a family that was, like most of us, a mix of both "normal" and dysfunctional. There is a long line of characters: saints, sinners, cheats, prostitutes, murderers, poets, kings, insiders and outsiders. Like Ruth for example. She was not an Israelite, she was a Moabite, a dreaded foreigner. But she married a Jew, Boaz – so there's a mixed marriage in Jesus' bloodline. How does that fit the sensibilities of many today? Or how about Rahab. She was a prostitute living and working in Jericho – there's a woman of ill repute – a black sheep so-to-speak, in Jesus' bloodline. And, of course, there's King David. A great

figure in the Bible, but also an adulterer and a murderer which is in Jesus' bloodline. And from this long line of greats, and not so greats, came "Jesus... who is called the Messiah." Jesus, who is called the Messiah. Yes, God became one of us in all our grace and our embarrassment, in all our beauty and our ugliness. And by considering the hidden years of Jesus and the way he had to have lived his daily life as one of us, we realize to an even greater degree just how much Jesus understands us. Yes, because he was human, he knows what we must go through on a daily basis and he knows what we need. And then, because he is God, he can meet our every need. And that, friends, is really good news for you and me! Amen.