

Watching the Child Grow

Luke 2: 41-52

Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. When the festival was ended, and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him, they were astonished; and his mother said to him, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." He said to them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" But they did not understand what he said to them. Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart.

And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.

In the doorway at Grammy and Papa's house in Detroit is a doorframe with lines and dates marked on it. Once a year, when the family gathers, all the grandkids take turns stretching out their spines as high as they can as Grammy and Papa get out the tape measurer and etch a line just above their heads, marking how much they've grown in a year. Some years it is a couple inches, some years they sprout up! We mark the years because, otherwise, they can slip by too quickly. It's amazing how it seems that one minute we are reading them bedtime stories and making room in our beds at 3:00 a.m. because they are scared, then the next they are off to college and having families of their own—marking the doorway with their own children's growth. In Luke's gospel Jesus shoots up from being a baby in a manger to becoming a twelve-year-old student at the temple—all in the same chapter. It is a rare moment in the gospels: we get to watch as Jesus grows.

Begin by wondering, what does the story mean? Why do we get a little pericope about a puberty-aged, pimple-faced Jesus who is learning, growing, asking questions? What does it mean? Maybe we are supposed to see signs of promise in the child? Jesus is pictured as sitting at the temple teacher's feet offering divine-inspired answers. Sort of like our own children do during our time with them on the carpet. Sometimes we hear what they have to say, and we begin to see signs of promise, yes? I remember hearing a pastor colleague speak about driving her daughter to Kindergarten one morning. It was before she had a chance to drink her coffee, so she wasn't completely awake when she noticed her daughter contemplatively gazing out the window so she asked:

"Is everything alright, honey?"

"Mommy?" he daughter responded, "How does God see everything we do?"

Her mother thought real hard for a moment and then remembered what she was taught to say in seminary whenever she didn't have the answer to a deep theological question:

"Well honey," she said, "Some things are a mystery."

Except her little girl wasn't satisfied with that answer so she offered her own opinion: "I think

God can see everything we do because God lives in every single person's heart.”

My friend said that in the moment she saw the signs of a budding theologian.

Maybe Luke is showing us an inquisitive Jesus who is a budding theologian filled with a promising future? Maybe.

Or turn it around and look at it from another angle: perhaps we are simply being shown that Jesus was a kid too—who learned and developed just like the rest of us. And while he was clearly a little different than the other children, even Jesus needed Sunday School. He needed to be taught the stories and traditions. He had to memorize psalms to pray and recite Torah just like every other child his age. While it might stretch us to think about, I bet even Jesus had moments when he acted like a twelve-year-old kid. I mean, did you hear the way he spoke to his mother? There his poor parents were, scared halfway out of their minds. He’s been missing for three days and finally when they find him, with tears in their eyes they say, “Child, why have you done this to us? Look, we were worried sick!” To which Jesus snaps back in twelve-year-old fashion, “Why were you looking for me? Didn’t you know where I was?” Translation: “Are you dense? Of course, I was here the whole time—now stop embarrassing me in front of my friends!” Maybe Luke isn’t trying to show us only a picture of Jesus’ promising future, but also of his humanity. A glimpse into the life of a kid who learned and developed, matured and began to gain his independence from mom and dad. Just like the rest of us. Maybe.

Except, pay attention to what comes next. It says Jesus grows up. Jesus keeps growing in *both divine and human favor*. Look up the Greek word for “favor” and it might not be what you think. On the surface it sounds like Jesus keeps growing in God’s favoritism or human popularity, but the word used here is *charis* as in “charisma.” It means grace. Jesus keeps growing in the charisma of God’s grace. Perhaps you were listening to NPR when they were doing their campaign drive. They were partnering with H.O.P.E. (Help Our People Eat), a local organization that puts food into backpacks for children on the weekends when they aren’t getting food at school. They highlighted a middle school-aged boy who, for his Christmas gift from his parents, wanted to help a child eat. That kiddo is growing up in God’s charisma. We know that one day Jesus will grow up to unfurl the scroll of Isaiah announcing good news to the poor, release for the captive and justice for the oppressed. We know that one day Jesus will preach about a God who is willing to leave the ninety-nine sheep behind to bring home the one who has been abandoned. What kind of shepherd leaves behind all but one sheep? Answer: only a shepherd who has a huge heart for the lost. Jesus is a child who is growing up with God’s huge heart for all of us, especially the least, the last and the lost. Jesus continues to grow in grace over the years. And it is grace we keep growing in over the years as well.

So: let’s reflect on the past year marking our growth. Let’s measure the ways we’ve grown in grace together. We’ve hosted classes on Wednesday nights taught by Rev. Eversley—from our sister African American church—about reading the bible through the black experience. We grew as we were taught about the struggles and transitions a transgender person faces in our society, as well as how we can grow more welcoming to include them. We partnered with other churches to feed children and families at Bolton Elementary School. And when listening to Laura talk about her experience there, it wasn’t as much about her helping them as it was the relationships that they have grown together—which has helped *her* to grow in grace. We hung a banner that says, “Black Lives Matter” and *this little church* seeded an overture that will now encourage churches

to partner with organizations of color to benefit people of color across all 136 churches in our presbytery. Our children lead us in worship once a month, we've hosted VBS over the summer for the first time in a while, and last week we watched the first Christmas pageant we've had in decades. Our children are growing under our care. If we reflect on the past year, there has been significant growth!

Well, so how do we continue to foster the growth pattern into the new year? Maybe we get serious about making space in our lives for God to grow grace in us. Maybe we release something that has been draining our soul; maybe we take on something new. Whatever it is, we keep growing in the charisma of a God who has a huge heart for all of us.