

## **“They Grow Up Fast”**

Dear friends, Greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus. Before turning to our text, I want to simply echo what Pastor Judy said (at the beginning) and offer a word of thanks to each of you for the cards and cookies and the financial gift we received on Christmas. Once again, the show of support (from this congregation) is overwhelming. It's humbling to be on the receiving end of such generosity.

Thanks, also, for the ongoing support you give throughout the year. Mary and I have now been here for 21 years. (It's hard to believe.) We had no idea (when we first arrived) that these years would have been as blessed as they have been. Even now, it continues to be a joy (and a privilege) to share with you in the work of the gospel. Thanks for all that you do (and have done) for us. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for the gift of your Son, born into our world at Christmas, and now (here among us) as our Savior and Lord. We ask that you would speak to us through your Word and through your Spirit that this time we share would strengthen our faith and further our resolve to live each day for him, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Let's get right into it. The story we read today is one that comes early in Luke's gospel and early on in Jesus' life. In fact, it's one of the few stories we're given in the Bible that tell us much at all about the growing years of Jesus. Until the time he reaches the age of thirty and is baptized in the Jordan by John, we don't know too much of what took place in Jesus' life. At the same time, we do find a number of stories that give us, if nothing else, at least a glimpse into what those early years were like.

We know, for example, that Jesus was born in Bethlehem and grew up in Nazareth. We're told of the visit of the Wise Men, who came to see Jesus, not on Christmas Day, but probably sometime in that first year or maybe even (first two years) of his life. We learn about his circumcision on the eighth day; the time at which he was given the name “Jesus,” the name the angel of God had given him before he was conceived. We know he was taken to Jerusalem on the 40th day, for the rite of purification and presentation in the Temple. That's where we find the stories of Simeon and Anna, two very old, and yet very wise and faithful children of God, who had been waiting and watching for the coming of the Christ.

We learn how Joseph and Mary had to flee with Jesus from Bethlehem, when they heard about the threat of King Herod to kill all of the boys under the age of two. As a result, Jesus was taken down to Egypt until the time the threat had passed. And we know Jesus was the son of a carpenter and, like nearly every other Jewish boy in his day, learned that same trade from his father while he was growing up.

Apart from those somewhat scattered events (and details) there isn't much we know about Jesus' early years, with the one exception of the story we read today. At the age of twelve, Jesus travels with his parents to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover.

The details we're given in our text help us to follow not only what's happening in the story (and why), but also provide us with some good insight into the family in which Jesus grew up. The opening verse (in the story) says, “Every year Jesus' parents when to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover.”

Now, I don't know how much you remember (or know) about the Jewish customs, but every Jewish male in those days was obligated to observe three festivals. The first was the Festival of Booths or, what was sometimes called, the Festival of Tabernacles. It commemorated the time when the Jewish people were led by God, through the wilderness, toward the Promised Land, a time during which they lived in temporary shelters or booths.

The second was the Festival of Weeks, known also as the Festival of Harvest. In the spring of the year, the people would gather to celebrate the harvest. It was a time of tremendous thankfulness for what God had given.

And the third was the Festival of Unleavened Bread, or the Feast of the Passover, a celebration of the time when God led them out of their bondage in Egypt, and a remembrance of how they hurried away from the Pharaoh and had time only to bake bread without yeast.

Every Jewish male was obligated to observe these three festivals every year, with the exception of the Feast of the Passover, the one being celebrated in our story today. That was (according to their tradition) to be an annual celebration, unless a person lived more than 20 miles away from the Jerusalem Temple. If that was the case, then it was to be observed at least once during a person's lifetime.

Now, how far was Nazareth from Jerusalem, the place where Joseph and Mary and Jesus lived? About 80 miles, about a 3-5 day journey each way. And so Joseph, according to their tradition, didn't have to go each year. And I would imagine many in Nazareth didn't. But he did. Luke says, "Every year Jesus' parents went to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover."

Now, you can make of that what you want. I don't want to exaggerate its importance. But I believe we find two very important insights in that one verse. Number one, Jesus grew up in a strong Jewish family. The roots of his religious upbringing went deep. His parents were faithful. They were devoted. They were committed to following the ways of God.

And, number two, Jesus grew up with a very clear example to follow. He watched his parents as he grew. He learned from them as they lived out their faith. He saw in the way they lived, what it meant to be a faithful and trusting child of God.

Now, again, you can make of that what you want, but (I believe) the implications for us are obvious. Children learn what they see. They grow up and reflect in their own lives, the examples they've been given early on in life. (We all know that.) Every parent knows that.

Now, there's no guarantee. (We all know that, too.) It doesn't happen automatically. As much as we might like, we cannot live our children's lives for them, nor would we want to. Every child has to grow up and make decisions of their own. At some point in life, there's only so much a parent can do. But to think that what we model for our children while they're growing doesn't matter, is to ignore one of life's basic and fundamental truths.

Our children grow up quickly. The years we have to help shape their lives don't last forever. One day they're young. The next day they're in Middle School. Before you know it, they're off to college, married, starting careers and on their own. The time goes fast.

Suffice it to say this morning, if we want our children/our grandchildren to know Jesus and to understand the importance of their relationship with God, then we need to teach them and (model for them), from very early on, what it looks like to live as God's children. If we're not living it in our lives, given them an example to follow, we cannot expect it to happen (in their lives) when they grow up.

In the story this morning, (Luke tells us) that Jesus travels to Jerusalem with his parents. (And then he says), "After the feast was over, while his parents were returning home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but they were unaware of it."

Now, Luke doesn't get into the detail of trying to explain what happened, answering questions like, "Why did it take Mary and Joseph a full day's journey before realizing that Jesus wasn't with them? Why didn't Jesus tell his mother and father he was planning to stay behind? What kind of parents were they? What kind of child was Jesus?" Luke doesn't concern himself with those questions. He simply says that when Joseph and Mary finally found their son, after three days of looking, he was in the "temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking questions."

One of the questions often asked about young Jesus is the question of his own understanding of his life's mission. How much did Jesus really know as a child, as he was growing up?

Did he know, for example, when he was only twelve years old, what his 33+ years on this earth would hold? Did he know that (later on) he would gather some disciples, and preach and teach and heal? Did he know that he would (one day) suffer and die at the hands of the Roman soldiers, be denied and betrayed by those he knew and loved the most? Or was the plan of God (for Jesus) revealed to him, much like is it with us, as we learn and grow in faith and in years? The fact is that we don't know how much young Jesus actually knew.

What we do know is that Jesus knew his life was different and, from very early on, knew that he was God's Son. "Didn't you know that I must be in My Father's house?" That's what he said when his parents finally found him in the Temple. His identity, his understanding of who he was, was clear. Beyond that, it's hard to know. Luke simply says that "Jesus was in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking questions."

Now, we could spend the rest of the morning, a series of mornings (if we wanted), talking about how Jesus was both fully God and fully human at the same time. Born into this world, Jesus didn't stop being God. The Bible says, "In him, all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell." At the same time (it says), Jesus "gave up his godliness" when he became human. He set aside his position of authority when he chose to become one of us. Jesus was fully God throughout his entire life. But he was also fully human.

He grew up in a home. He lived in a family. He learned from his parents and from their example. He grew in wisdom as he grew in years, much like you and I do in our own lives. "In every way," the Bible says, "Jesus was just like us, except without sin."

Now, one day, Jesus would grow up and become the Teacher. Later (in his life), people would praise him for his gracious words and the authority with which he would speak. Years later, he would open the minds of his followers to understand the Scriptures and to begin to comprehend what they would mean for their own lives. But for now, Jesus was the student. At the age of twelve, he was found in the Temple, listening to the teachers and asking questions.

You know, it's interesting, when you think about Jesus' life and compare it with ours. In many ways it was different; in many ways, much the same. We talk about those early years as the formative years. Sometimes we refer to them as the rebellious years. For every child it's different. But one thing they were or (they are) for all of us are years in which we grow, we learn, we explore for ourselves, and we begin to find our own direction and identity.

For those of you (here this morning) who are still young, still growing, the lesson is simple. Keep learning, keep growing, keep on asking questions and trying to figure things out. God wants you to be inquisitive. He wants you to experiment and to explore. But as you do, what he also wants is that you do it as Jesus did it, learning from those in your lives who can give you a positive Christ-centered example.

Now, you might not fully realize it yet, but the day will come when you will be able to look back and (then to realize) how important those godly influences really were. Young people, wherever you are (in your growing years), take advantage of these years. Don't be in a hurry to grow up. It'll happen quickly enough on its own. Use these years, while they're here (and while you can), to learn and to grow.

And for those of you (here today), those of us (here today), who are no longer young, (now grown) the lesson is also simple. Take advantage of the opportunities you have to influence the next generations for Christ. Wherever you are, don't miss the chances when they're there.

We've said it before: the Christian faith is as much caught as it is taught. And sometimes (it's caught) more from those who are not our parents than from those who are. (Don't box this in.) Wherever you are, (no matter what the case), live it out in words and in deeds. Set an example by the way you live. Young people are watching. They learn from what they see. And (not only that), but never stop learning and growing yourself, even as you grow in years. The Bible says, "We are to grow up in every way into him who is the Head, into Christ."

They grow up fast. In the next chapter, Jesus is thirty years old, his childhood is finished, and his public ministry is soon to begin. From that point on (as you know), he would travel throughout Judea and Galilee, gather disciples, teach and preach about God, heal the sick, raise the dead, and ultimately go to the cross to pay the price for your sins and for mine. But for now, he is still a child. For now, he's still growing up. And as he grows, he continues to learn.

In the closing verses of our text, we find a summary of Jesus' early life. It's written almost like an epitaph, like something you'd find on the gravestone for a person who had died. It says, "He was obedient to his parents...He grew in wisdom and stature...He found favor with God and men."

I don't want to oversimplify how we're called to live, but how about that as a resolution for the New Year, a closing challenge from our text? No matter where you are in life, no matter what you've done in life, a commitment (in the coming year) to grow in your relationship with God: through regular worship, through an ongoing study of his Word, and through time spent (each day) in prayer. And then, at the same time), to grow in your relationship with others: through time set aside for them, through a willingness to serve and to give, and through a daily living out and sharing of your faith.

How about that as a resolution for the New Year? How about allowing that (as a commitment for 2016), to become an epitaph for your life, as you continue to grow in Christ? They grow up fast. The years go by fast. Don't miss your chance while they're still here. Let's pray.

Gracious God, We thank you for sending your Son at Christmas and for choosing to become one of us in this life. We thank you for his life and for the example we have been given (for ours) in him. We pray that you would help us to be wise in the way we use our time, in the decisions we make, and in the relationships we have with you and with others. Father, help us to live as examples for our children. Enable us to live in ways that would lead others to you. Keep us always learning and growing, even as we grow in years, that our lives might become a reflection of Christ, the one who came to us and who lived among us, that we might live forever with you. In his name we pray. Amen.