

Growing Up Jesus • Luke 2:40-52

I don't remember being two or three or four and I have only fleeting memories of being seven and eight. But I remember being twelve. That was the year I graduated from sixth grade and started junior high school. It was just before my twelfth birthday that my dad took me to my first major league baseball game, a World Series game in New York City. It was also the year our family moved to a new house in a new town with a new school, away from familiar places and long-time friends to a small town where everyone had grown up together. I was an outsider. Adolescence is seldom easy, but this relocation made mine more difficult. It was a turning point, a different chapter of my life, a new beginning.

Perhaps because of my own memories I find Luke's story at the end of chapter two in Jesus' biography so interesting. Luke is the only one of Jesus' four New Testament biographers who tells us anything about Jesus, growing up years. Luke's source was Mary. We can guess that Mary probably told him stories about Jesus' childhood, but only this one was chosen to be included in the New Testament. The story must be very important. It tells us a lot about what it must have been like growing up Jesus.

Growth seems to have characterized Jesus' life. He grew from a baby to a man, from weak to strong, from ignorant to knowledgeable and wise. Growth is the central theme to this story, repeated at the beginning and the end. It is obviously meant to encourage us to grow like Jesus—from the way we are to all God wants us to become!

At least in part, growth came for Jesus through the traditions of his growing up years. He was born into a Jewish family that carefully followed religious traditions. For a millennium and a half his Jewish ancestors had celebrated Passover. For the past 1000 years they had come to Jerusalem for the seven-day festival. The tradition continues among Jews today. Not much has changed—same schedule, same food, same words, everything exactly as it had always been. It's tradition.

Every year Jesus' parents traveled from Nazareth to Jerusalem for the Passover—whether it was easy or difficult, whether they could afford it or not, even when Mary was pregnant, when their children were very young and when Joseph had work to get done.

Whether Jesus traveled with them all those years or not we do not know for certain, but it was especially important that he come when he was twelve years old because it was just a year before Jesus' Bar Mitzvah. When he turned thirteen he would officially become a man, an official member of the Jewish religious community, a "son of the commandment". He would no longer be just a participant in the traditions; he would become responsible for the ongoing of those traditions.

Traditions are an important part of growth for everyone. Although sometimes minimized or marginalized, traditions can be very good. They give fixed points to our lives. Family meals together each day often stabilize and strengthen us through crises. At least there is one time we all gather, one event where everyone has a place, one piece of our lives that stays the same when everything else is changing.

Prayer before meals, taking children to Sunday School each week, Bible reading, church services, communion, regular giving—these are all long traditions that help us grow like Jesus.

While some of us may balk or rebel at traditions they still remain a lifelong point of reference to which we can some day return. We have a basis on which we can make decisions about the future. G. K. Chesterton once said, "Tradition is the way of giving the past a vote in present decisions. And although it should never be a majority vote, tradition always should have a vote in what we choose to do." As far as Jesus was concerned, Luke 2:41-42 says, "Every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover. When he was twelve years old, they went up to the Feast, according to the custom."

The next seven days were routine. It is what happened after Passover that makes the story so inter-

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esting. They forgot Jesus! Mary and Joseph left without him. They were more than a day's journey outside Jerusalem before they realized he was missing.

Anyone who has ever lost a child knows the feeling of panic that brings—the fear, the blaming, the crying, thinking the worst. That's what Mary and Joseph felt. But imagine how much worse it must have been for them, too. They not only lost their child, they had lost God's Son! Here God had entrusted them with his Son. It was as if they had betrayed the greatest trust that could possibly be given to anyone. But such things happen, even to the best of parents.

I heard a story from a church in Michigan where the parents and grandparents each thought the other was picking up the baby from the nursery after a Sunday evening program. A custodian arrived on Monday morning to be greeted by a baby standing in his crib with a big smile on his face.

In those first century days, extended families traveled together in caravans because the highways were dangerous places with bandits. Because women with younger children traveled more slowly they would often leave first and then the men would leave with older children a few hours later. They would all catch up around the evening campfire when the family would reunite. Mary must have thought Jesus was with Joseph and Joseph thought he was with Mary. They searched and realized he was not with the caravan party, but it was dark by then and too dangerous for just the two of them to go back to Jerusalem at night.

After an agonizing night of worrying and praying, at the break of dawn they set out for Jerusalem. But it took them another day to get back to Jerusalem and by the time they got there it was dark again and too difficult to search for him in the city at night. It wasn't until the next morning, by then the third day, that they were finally able to find Jesus. Twelve-year-old Jesus was hanging out in the temple courtyard talking with the leading religious teachers of Judaism.

Mary spoke for the family in words similar to tens of millions of parents before and after. Her emotions were mixed with anger and relief as she said, "*Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you.*"

Mary made the common mistake of so many parents of adolescents in every generation. She assumed Jesus' behavior was mostly about her. It

wasn't. You see, adolescence is when relationships change. Parents are no longer the central focus in a child's life. Jesus did not deliberately mistreat his parents. To the contrary, it appears he never thought about them at all. For three days he never noticed that they were gone. Perhaps now Joseph and Mary really understood. Being lost for three days wasn't what most mattered. Their son was becoming a man. They were less important. He had grown up!

Please don't misunderstand what Jesus had been doing. A less than careful reading of Luke 2 might give the impression that all the religious teachers were sitting in a circle around Jesus while the twelve-year-old taught them everything they needed to know. Not at all! Jesus was listening and learning and asking questions. Luke 2:46 tells us, "*After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions.*"

At twelve years old it was already evident what Jesus would be like. First, he was others-centered. Some people center everything on themselves. Teddy Roosevelt was said to be "the bride at every wedding and the corpse at every funeral" he attended. In other words, he made everything about himself. Jesus was not this way. He was consistently focused on others, interested in them, concerned for them. He was always about the other person.

Jesus was also a continual learner. He was asking questions when he was twelve and he was still asking questions when he was in his thirties. His interest in others and asking them questions led them to be interested in him and ask him questions. They were amazed by his understanding and answers.

You can always tell more about a person by the questions that person asks than by the answers they give. Jesus' example is powerful! Be an inquirer. Ask questions more than you give answers. Listen. Learn. Grow.

There is an interesting story about Harry Truman visiting Oliver Wendall Homes, Jr., who was in his 90s and near death. The younger Truman walked into the room and was amazed to see Holmes reading Plate's Republic. He said, "Mr. Justice, at your age, why are you reading Plato?" Justice Holmes replied, "I may be old but I haven't stopped learning."

Growth through learning is not the same as growth through realization. Learning is more of a step-by-step process, the steady flow of a stream.

Growing through realization is more like a flash flood. It is that “Aha” moment when a person understands in a completely different way.

When Jesus was born, did he realize he was the eternal Son of God? I don’t think so. When did Jesus realize who he was? When did he know he was God? When did he figure out that he was the Messiah? It was probably through a series of realizations over the years. Jesus grew into understanding who he is and what he was to do with his life.

One of the greatest realizations was in the temple when Jesus was twelve. Mary said, “*Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you.*” Jesus replied, “*Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?*” Jesus switched the significance of the word “father”. Mary meant Joseph. Jesus meant God. Jesus realized that the leader of his life was his Father in heaven, not his stepfather on earth. He didn’t want to hurt Joseph or Mary. It is just that he realized who he was, the special relationship he had to God and the direction his life was going.

These are the first recorded words that Jesus ever spoke and they indicated that he knew his life’s purpose was doing God’s business. It was as if a bright light of realization turned on. It was one of the most important and wonderful moments of Jesus’ life, the only one recorded in Jesus’ entire growing up—and his parents didn’t understand.

Recently I heard the story of a man in his late twenties who took his mother out for a very special dinner. They have always had an unusually close relationship. He said he wanted to tell her about a wonderful change to his life. He had just recently committed his life to Jesus Christ as his Savior and Lord. He was transformed. She patiently listened and said, “Well, I’m sure this is very nice for you. Maybe I’ll go to church with you next Easter.” She didn’t get it. Like Joseph and Mary she didn’t understand.

Realizations grow us all. We grow with the realization that God wants us to become Christians—that Jesus Christ came and died for “me”. It’s a personal thing. It is the realization that God loves us, the realization that the purpose of our lives is to serve God.

Jesus realized he was the Son of God...yet he did what Joseph and Mary said.

Luke 2:51 tells about a fifth growth area for Jesus and is one of the most amazing verses in the Bible. It says, “*Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them.*” Jesus realized he was the Son of God. He was learning theology in the temple. He was devoted to serve God for the rest of his life. But, he returned to rural Nazareth. He lived with Joseph and Mary. He worked in the carpenter shop. He obeyed! Imagine! Jesus was smarter than they were; he was better than they were; he was of higher moral character. Jesus was more important, yet he did what Joseph and Mary said.

Have you been there? Has someone told you what to do, someone who knows less than you, someone who does not share your faith in God, someone who doesn’t understand you or God’s calling in your life? Whether it comes from parents or an employer, from a spouse or the government or wherever, like Jesus obedience may be a great opportunity to grow.

Put all of this together and “*Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.*” I think to myself, if Jesus needed to grow, so do I! If I am to be like Jesus then I must be always changing, always learning, always realizing, always obeying . . . and always growing.

What about you? What have been your growth areas over the past year? Where are you growing now? If God could grow you in three ways over the next year, what would they be? Tell God, “I want to grow! I want to be like Jesus. Show me where the growth should come. I am open and willing to obey all the way!”

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