

Date Preached	03-Jan-2021	Date Initiated	22-Dec-2020
Where Preached	SAK	Appointed Readings	Xmas 2, All Yrs

" 'Did you not know that I must* be in My Father's house?' "



It's hardly a reverent thing to say about today's Gospel lesson, but the first thing it called to my mind was the 1990 hit comedy *Home Alone*, which starred Macaulay Culkin: the adventures of a little boy whose family accidentally leaves him at-home by himself when they set off for a vacation. Today's lesson from St Luke could almost be a sequel: Loving parents pack up the family for a holiday vacation in the big city. The time comes to go home, and they set off ... and it isn't till they're halfway there that they realize, to their horror, that their oldest isn't in the backseat! They turn the car around, and search the city high-and-low. By the time three days have passed, they're pretty much beside themselves: They desperately want to find him, of course, but they're also ready to let him have it ... until, that is, they finally discover that the reason he stayed behind was to attend more worship ... to read more Scripture ... to learn more about his faith.

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There is very little about the childhood and upbringing of Jesus in Scripture, and our lectionary lets us hear even less. We hear today's lesson, for example, only in years in which *two* Sundays fall between Christmas Day and the Feast of the Epiphany on January 6th; and, even then, only if the preacher chooses not to preach on the Epiphany, with its Wise Men, camels and gifts, or the Holy Family's flight to Egypt, to avoid King Herod's murderous rage. This is, I think, a real shame. For the entire thrust of the Incarnation ... of God's taking on and appearing to us in human form ... is the Divine's newly-assumed *humanity*: as the means of our salvation; as the visible, tangible and indissoluble marriage of God to God's people; and as a readily appreciated point of identification ... of accessibility ... of mutuality ... between God and those whom God loves: God living a human life.

And so, when we encounter the young Jesus, who among us doesn't remember those gangly, emotional, awkward years of early adolescence, when we struggled to fit in ... to know who we were and were meant to become? when we simultaneously sought to hurtle ourselves, prematurely, into adulthood and to remain, nostalgically, in the relative safety of childhood? We get only the briefest glimpse of this period of Jesus' life, but it merits a pause, to consider what it might have been like to *be* the boyhood Jesus.

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If we turn to theologians, they'll provide us various theories about Jesus' true identity and knowledge of Himself. They range from Jesus' merely being a charismatic story-teller and folk-ethicist who managed to attract a following in first-century Palestine ... to His not only being fully divine but also being fully *aware* of His divinity: actively deploying Godly omniscience and

* = δεῖ (it is necessary that) - *i.e.*, as opposed to "that I (surely) would be." Connotes a statement of objective fact about Jesus' identity, rather than a subjective knowledge Mary should have had about her son.

omnipotence during His earthly life. But most of this particular debate centers on how and why Jesus came to die upon the Cross, which is not our focus this morning.

If we turn to the extra-biblical traditions of our Faith, we find an abundance of stories about Jesus the Boy-Miracle-Worker who, according to just one such tradition,[†] brings dried fish to life; sets clay birds to flight; resurrects a friend who's died after falling off a roof; carries water in a piece of cloth; and uses His hands to stretch a piece of wood to help his father Joseph, who is building a bed. All great yarns, perhaps, but none of these stories appears in Scripture. They are probably attempts to 'back-project' Who Jesus later *became* ... onto Who He may have been earlier in life.

I think it's far more interesting to simply ponder the image Luke presents. We see Jesus being raised in a family, and a traditional and devout family, at that. In accordance with Jewish teachings, they make pilgrimages to Jerusalem from Nazareth—a distance of more than 60 miles—for the holy days. His parents are conscientiously shaping Jesus' identity as a Jewish young man. And what we don't find in Luke's account is significant, too. There is not an iota of divinity to be found: Just sixty-five verses after the Annunciation, Mary is a human mother, not the *theotokos*, the Bearer of God. Joseph is not, as St Matthew would have him, the protective guardian of the Christ, but an ordinary, anxious father. And Jesus Himself is a normal—which is to say: both inquisitive and willful—twelve-year-old. He doesn't telepathically communicate with his parents to let them know He's OK; my goodness—he can't even persuade them that His staying behind to study in the Temple was a good thing. No, Mary and Joseph bundle Jesus off to dusty Nazareth for remainder of an "obedient" childhood.

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And yet, we do see a few glimmers that begin to set Jesus apart a little: not wholly, not radically, but still noticeably. He 'escapes' His parents *not* to take in the novelty and attractions of the big city or to escape His parents' control, but to immerse Himself in worship and scripture study. His teachers in the Temple are "amazed at understanding and answers": There is little reason to think His wisdom is the product of the training He received in the provincial synagogue in Nazareth, so it must be coming from somewhere ... or Someone ... else. And *also* note the divergence between Jesus' sense of being called to the Temple and His parents' inability to comprehend this: Even though the Angel Gabriel, Mary's cousin Elizabeth and the elderly Simeon in the Temple have *all* told Mary and Joseph that Jesus is from God—is of God; is the Messiah—they are nothing but perplexed by Jesus' explanation that His place is in His Father's house. Unbeknownst to them, their son is maturing, evolving. We are witnessing the budding of Jesus' self-awareness of His own divinity, but this remains hidden to His frustrated, relieved thoroughly-human parents.

The adolescent Jesus is, I think, in the process of *becoming* the Christ, the Messiah. Or perhaps it's more accurate to say that He's in the process of *recognizing* this is Who He is. We, as readers, know of His being conceived by the Holy Spirit ... know from St John that as the Word of God, Jesus has existed since before time. But in *also* being fully human—in a co-equal way; in a way not eclipsed or diminished by His divinity—Jesus faces a learning curve. The Son of God must grow into this identity, through vocation and discernment.

[†] *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, which is not the same as the gnostic *Gospel of Thomas*.

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The collect appointed for this day, which is one of my favorites, speaks of God's wonderfully creating and still *more* wonderfully restoring all humanity ... and then we pray that we may *grow into* the divine life of Christ. Though fully restored by God, none of us is born holy or spiritually wise ... or even Christian, for that matter. Just as God worked and worked with humanity to bring us to our salvation in and through Christ, so, too, must *we* work at *accepting* this salvation—not just with our lips, but also in our lives. And in this, we follow the very pattern of Jesus and His life. Our realization of God's 'hold'—*complete* hold—on our lives is sputtering and episodic; it competes, and often at a distinct disadvantage, with the glittering illusions and the stark realities of our human existence.

And, I wonder: May this not be the *final* piece of the Good News of the Incarnation? God doesn't create us Christians: No one—not even Christ Himself!—pops out of the womb all set and ready to take up the cross. Nor does God give us failing marks or call time's-up as we struggle, forward *and* backward, with our faith. No, we have a lifetime to grasp who—Whose—we are and who God wants us to be. God is only patient and persistent: reaching out to us ... finding us ... bringing us to our Father's house, when all the world tells us we should be somewhere else.

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I know I have moments when I lament, struggle and strain: If only I weren't saddled with this imperfect human body ... these dulled human senses ... this blinkered human reasoning: Oh, how much better a Christian I'd be ... how much more attuned to God and God's desires for me. But in today's lesson, and echoed in our collect, I discern the divine—and gracious—corrective to this lament: Just like the boyhood Jesus, we are *already blessed with* the perfect vehicles for us to know, love and serve God as God wants us to. We only need to come to our Father's house and dwell there, in order to learn this, over and over again.



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