



Sermon Preached by Anne R. Ledbetter
Scripture – Luke: 2:41-52
“Increasing in Wisdom”
December 27, 2009

This Sunday after Christmas is often difficult for us because the gospel lesson from the lectionary does not let us keep Jesus in the manger. Year A of the lectionary has us read Herod’s slaughter of the innocents – definitely not a happy Christmas story. In Year B we turn to Luke for the story of Mary and Joseph taking baby Jesus to be dedicated in the temple. And today we hear the story for our current Year C – the only canonical or scriptural story of Jesus as a boy. How appropriate that on this **in-between** Sunday – that is, the Sunday between Christmas and New Year’s – we hear this **in between** story of Jesus – the single story between the birth narratives and his baptism by John.

My NRSV Bible entitles this section “The Boy Jesus in the Temple.” However, as a mother, I might title this passage “The Adolescent Jesus” or “Jesus the Upstart” or “The Time Jesus Scared His Parents to Death.”

Today’s passage presents Jesus as a youth on the cusp of adulthood for male Jews, about the age when he would have had his bar mitzvah. The family travels in caravan with others to Jerusalem for the festival of Passover, and on the way home, about a day’s journey out, Mary and Joseph realize Jesus is AWOL, not among his cousins and clan. They hoof it back to Jerusalem, and find Jesus in the temple, sitting among the teachers, immersed in rabbinical dialogue and teaching. Over the ages various artists have painted this Biblical scene over the ages, and often the boy Jesus appears as a little Buddha, sitting, surrounded by aged rabbis, who are all listening and asking questions. Note Luke’s comment, “And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers.”

Then comes Mary’s question, which I hear spoken in a seething tone with clenched teeth and a tight smile, “Child, why have you treated us this way? Don’t you realize your father and I have been searching for you everywhere?” One might imagine Jesus as the cheeky teen, “Why were you searching for me?” But I hear him as so totally engrossed in the temple milieu that he was oblivious to his parents’ worry. Maybe the last 72 hours have even begun to crystallize his understanding of God’s calling. He says, “Don’t you know that I must be in my Father’s house?”

Scholars point out that Luke has two major concerns in this passage: first, to point out that as a youth, at the age of identity exploration, Jesus was sensing his unique relationship with God and his divine calling; and second, to accentuate this stunning and holy attribute in Jesus – wisdom (*Hokhma* in Hebrew and *Sophia* in Greek). If you look up this passage in the Bible, you’ll see the preceding

story of Anna and Simeon praising God for this baby Messiah, when his parents bring him to the temple. Luke bridges that story with today's using these words: "The child grew and became strong, filled with *wisdom*; and the favor of God was upon him." Luke then concludes our boy Jesus story with this sentence, "And Jesus increased in *wisdom* and in years, and in divine and human favor." The picture Luke paints of Jesus does not tell us what color hair or eyes he had, what was his height or weight or skin tone, but rather that he was filled with wisdom.

What produces wisdom? We typically think a person becomes wise through education or years of life experience. Yet, Jesus presumably had the usual education of young Jewish boys – synagogue school from age 5 to 18, focusing on Torah, which contained Jewish history, ethics and religion.ⁱ Moreover, Jesus lived to be only 33 years old, when, in that time, a person living to be 30 would have had a life expectancy of 59 years of age.ⁱⁱ Certainly Jesus' wisdom was nurtured by his local rabbi, his parents, and his life experience, but Christian scholar Marcus Borg suggests Jesus' wisdom was staggeringly singular and mesmerizing in his day. Borg believes that the radically different perspective Jesus had on life resulted from his personal experience with the Spirit of God.

Borg describes the difference between conventional human wisdom and the alternative wisdom of Jesus. Conventional wisdom is essentially cultural wisdom and tells us how we should live. Conventional wisdom is based on rewards and punishments. Examples would be: "work hard and you'll succeed," or a more religious version "God will reward or punish you based on what you have done." Through family and peers and our social fabric, we are all schooled in cultural or conventional wisdom – a way of seeing the world.

Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen, (Co-Founder and Medical Director of the Commonweal Cancer Help Program) writes, "What if things were different (from) the way you have seen them in the past?"ⁱⁱⁱ What if? What if the eyes of our eyes were opened? Jesus beckons us with an alternative wisdom which views the world quite differently, and makes conventional wisdom seem false.

Consider the radically dissimilar views of conventional and Jesus' alternative wisdom:

Conventional wisdom sees God as a punitive lawgiver and judge;

whereas Jesus teaches that God is gracious and loving as a parent loves a child.

Conventional wisdom suggests that a person's worth is determined by their social standing;

yet Jesus teaches that all people have infinite worth as children of God.

Conventional wisdom warns that sinners and outcasts were to be avoided,

but Jesus teaches that everyone is welcome around the table of God.

Conventional wisdom believes identity arrives from social tradition,

but Jesus teaches that one's identity is centered in the sacred, in one's relationship with God.

Conventional wisdom calls us to strive to be first,

yet Jesus says the first will be last and those who exalt themselves will be emptied.

Conventional wisdom tells us to preserve our own life at all cost,

but Jesus urges us to die to ourselves and be reborn in God's Spirit and we will experience an abundant life.

Conventional wisdom teaches that our striving will lead to reward,

and Jesus teaches that centering our life in God will bear the fruit of compassion.^{iv}

Essentially Jesus' wisdom arose from his intimate life with God – from a life centered in God's Spirit. As a teacher, Jesus calls us to view the world differently, to walk a radically alternative / different path, and to be transformed and led by God's Spirit.

The question for us today, and everyday of our lives is "How can we be like Jesus – be his followers and increase in Godly wisdom?"

The life of Jesus guides us, and in this way saves us from living perfunctory, unconscious lives, and nurtures us in the abundant life God intends for each and every person. Jesus did not come to abolish the law, or Torah, but to fulfill, indeed embody, the law. In the life of Jesus we see a life centered in prayer – prayer not as daily requests to a short-order cook God, but as ongoing attentiveness to God's Spirit – a conscious stillness, awareness, and recognition of God's presence about us, within us, and within those we meet. We open ourselves to that awareness and we nurture that God consciousness in similar and in personally unique ways. As a body of faith we cultivate our spiritual lives by gathering regularly for corporate worship, studying the scriptures, serving those in need, caring for one another and sharing friendship in community. And various ones of us may also experience the fullness of God's Spirit by hiking in the woods, or sailing a boat on the bay, or journaling, nursing, painting, sculpting, composing, weaving, building, playing a musical instrument, caregiving, writing, dancing, running, meditating, cooking, singing, or practicing yoga. What nurtures your awareness of God, what aids you in listening for the inner voice of God? My most regular ritual of practicing the presence of God is yoga, I am most receptive and open as a vessel to God's Spirit as I am resting in savasana, or corpse pose.

Two weeks ago Bill Perkins, Founder and Director of Friendship House stood in this pulpit and reminded us of this inner wisdom – we will all die, we take nothing with us (we leave this world with nothing), we can discern Christ daily in others. I pray that we may experience daily awakenings to the immanent presence of God, and increase in Jesus wisdom and in favor with God and people. Then, as poet e.e. cummings described, "the ears of our ears may awaken and the eyes of our eyes be opened."^v

Let us embrace the perfect gift of Christmas – the gift of Jesus, God's Word and Wisdom incarnate, who leads us in the enlightened way, the eternal truth, and the abundant life.

ⁱ www.jesuscentral.com/ji/historical-jesus/jesus-firstcenturycontext.php

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

ⁱⁱⁱ www.rachelremen.com

^{iv} www.aportraitofjesus.org/wisdom2

^v e.e. cummings, "now the eyes of my eyes are opened"