

## **Growing Up With Jesus – Jesus in the Temple**

**A Sermon preached by Zac Klassen, January 9<sup>th</sup>, 2022 at Bloomingdale Mennonite Church**

Good morning. Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany are just behind us, but their impact continues and the call to dare to imagine God's goodness, God's embrace, God's song, God's face, God's robe, and God's dance is a call that continues to reverberate in our ears. During the rest of January, BMC is invited to a process of growing into that imagination by entering stories from the Gospel of Luke that follow Jesus as he "grows up" into the divine mission that God has sent him on. I think that the theme of imagination is a really good theme to carry forward in this series because it nicely captures a key dynamic of what is at stake in Jesus' journey from an infant to an adolescent, and then to an adult. What were the sources of Jesus' imagination as a child that would inspire him to follow God? How did Jesus foster that imagination as he grew up and what role did it play in his divine mission as Messiah and servant of God?

Children, as we all can attest, have great imaginations largely, I think, because these imaginations are still open to radical new possibilities—children are, after all, naturally curious! Sometimes us adults struggle with imagination and curiosity because we have become too consumed with seeing the world narrowly through closed systems and patterns that seem to make the world predictable and so (we wrongly think) more safe and secure. But with these closed systems often comes a cost, namely, that us adults sometimes begin to lose our youthful openness to the world around us and, perhaps we could even say, we begin to lose our youthful openness to a Gospel-shaped imagination, to the imagination of a world where good news really can be preached to the poor, where release really can be proclaimed to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, where the oppressed can go free, and where social and economic wrongs

can be set right (this gospel imagination will be discussed later in our series when we look at Luke 4:18-19).

The impact of a limited imagination can be seen in all kinds of areas of our life, including in our church life. The church, we can all attest, has often let its imagination be hijacked by any manner of alternative imaginations: the imaginations of endless resources, endless growth, and endless capital, or the imaginations of social and racial hierarchies. The prevalence of these damaging ways of imagining the world is what makes it so important to view scripture as inviting us into an alternative imagination, or as someone once put it, a “strange new world.”<sup>1</sup> Too often we read the bible as if we can find in it the answers we *want* instead of a world that will put questions to us, challenging us to re-think what we believe to be true and real about God and the world. Today, as we dig into the story of Luke 2 and consider the sources of Jesus’ imagination, I want us to be thinking a bit about the role imagination plays in our discipleship. How have our imaginations been shaped throughout our lives? In our childhood? By the church? And how does that help or hinder our own discipleship today?

Let’s turn to Luke 2 first for a bit as we consider the sources of Jesus’ own imagination! Our scripture reading for today began at Luke 2:41 and it gives us a window into an adolescent Jesus whose imagination was shaped by his own Jewish upbringing. Before we jump into Luke 2:41, however, I would be remiss if I did not spend at least a moment recalling the episode that Luke recounts in the 19 verses that precede our story for today, for they too in their own way would have shaped Jesus’ imagination. In Luke 2:21-52, Luke tells a story of *the first time* that Jesus was brought to Jerusalem by Mary and Joseph. In this first instance, Jesus was only eight

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<sup>1</sup> In his essay, “The Strange New World of the Bible,” Karl Barth gave voice to a vision of the Bible that has made an indelible impression on my own understanding of the Bible. See the essay here: <https://jochenteuffel.files.wordpress.com/2016/12/barth-the-strange-new-world-within-the-bible.pdf>

days old and was brought to the temple to be circumcised in accordance with the Law of Moses in Leviticus (see Lev. 12:3). Of the many scriptural attestations of Jesus' rootedness within Judaism, this is indeed an important one. Jesus' family, and later Jesus himself, were law-observant Jews. And this did not change at any point in Jesus' later ministry either, something that Jesus himself attested when he said, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill." (Matthew 5:17) Contrary to tendencies throughout church history to pose Jesus in opposition to Judaism, Jesus' imagination about God and the world was in fact shaped through and through by his Jewish upbringing even if as Christians we must confess that Jesus brought something new and decisive to that upbringing.

Jesus was shaped, for example, by the religious rituals of Judaism. At a young age, before he had a choice in the matter, he was initiated into the covenant people through the ritual of circumcision that would forever mark his body. Our passage for today also helps us see that throughout Jesus' life, his family observed the sacred holidays and festivals of first century Jews. Luke 2:41-52 tells us that his family took the trip to Jerusalem to observe Passover when he was 12 years old. If we wonder what sources shaped Jesus' imagination, it would be hard to avoid the conclusion that Jesus' adolescent experiences of Jewish festivals would have profoundly shaped his imagination. Listen to one archaeologist and historians' description of what the Passover festival would have been like in Jesus' day:

Thousands of pilgrims, tens of thousands of sacrifices, hundreds of priests and Levites praying and singing and playing music. All this accompanied by shouts of exultation, more singing, and sounds of cooking, feasting, and laughing all with a view to remembering God's mercy for the Israelites in Egypt.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> From "Jesus's Passover" by James F. Strange, [asor.org/onetoday/2018/04/Jesus-Passover](http://asor.org/onetoday/2018/04/Jesus-Passover)

Psalm 118, which was played as our hymn of preparation, would likely have been one of those songs heard throughout the festivities. And so, here let's take time to picture 12-year-old Jesus, walking through busy Jerusalem, perhaps towards the temple, trying to process all of this rich imagery and praise as he overhears the songs:

O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever!...Out of my distress I called on the LORD; the LORD answered me and set me in a broad place. With the LORD on my side I do not fear....It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to put confidence in mortals...The LORD is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation... Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the LORD. This is the gate of the LORD; the righteous shall enter through it. I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation. This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. Save us, we beseech you, O LORD! O LORD, we beseech you, give us success! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD...The LORD is God, and he has given us light. Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar...O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever. (excerpts from Psalm 118:1-29)

What words for young Jesus to hear! And then, the sacrifices! So strange for us to think about in our own era but in Jesus' day so very important and rich in spiritual imagery and significance! God's mercy for the Israelites in Egypt displayed in graphic performance as the paschal lamb was sacrificed in remembrance of when God passed over the homes of the Israelites in Egypt (cf. Exodus 12:21ff). Of course, we cannot get into the psyche of little 12-year-old Jesus, but it doesn't take much to imagine that seeing all of this would have had a profound effect on him. In fact, it seemed to have had such a profound effect on him that when the time came for him to return home, he chose to stay behind to dig deeper.

As they prepared to go home from the festival, Mary and Joseph would likely have done what any parent would have done in this situation. Checking in with Jesus, I can imagine them saying, "Jesus! We are leaving now. It's fine if you want to travel with your cousins and friends but just stick with the group. It can sometimes be a dangerous journey home, so we all need to stick together, OK?" Jesus agrees and the big caravan of Jesus' family, extended family, and

friends from Nazareth are on their way. Despite this initial agreement, Jesus did *not* stick with the group but hung back. What drew him to rebel against his parents in this instance and risk being on his own in Jerusalem? I imagine Jesus was about to leave but was suddenly drawn, pulled by an irresistible desire—perhaps we can say God called his name—and when he heard that call, he followed it to the temple to learn more from the teachers. Already, I imagine, Jesus was starting to sense that he was being called to a life and a mission that was greater than what he could imagine or even understand at that age, a mission that was greater than the expectations that his family had of him. And so, he stayed – *for more than three days!* Can you imagine? For more than three days, this twelve-year-old Jesus hung around the temple, eager to learn more. Luke tells us that he sat among the teachers of the temple. Luke does not specify what kind of teachers. We don't know if they were Pharisees or the teachers of the law or some other group of Jewish teachers?<sup>3</sup> What we do know is that Jesus sat in their midst, listened closely to them and asked questions. Imagination grows in the rich soil of curiosity and questioning and Jesus, it would appear, liked to dig deeply in the dirt.

I would love to know what kinds of questions Jesus asked the teachers. Did he inquire about the meanings of the festivals? “Teachers, tell me more about Passover!” Did he inquire about fine points of Jewish law? “Teachers, what is lawful to do on the Sabbath?” Did he ask the teachers to tell him about more stories from the Torah, the five books of Moses? “Tell me about when Moses went up on the mountain!” Or maybe another famous story from Israel’s history? “Tell me about young King David and Goliath!” Or maybe he wanted to know about the prophets? “Who is the servant of Israel that Isaiah talked about!?” or “When will Elijah return as Malachi predicted?” While we do not actually know the specific questions Jesus asked the

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<sup>3</sup> Luke refers elsewhere to “Pharisees and teachers of the law” as two separate groups. See Luke 5:17.

teachers, Luke does let us know that the questions were not only directed from Jesus to the teachers but from the teachers to Jesus too. Jesus' questions led to the teachers asking him what he thought, and they were very impressed by his understanding and of his answers. What I find particularly striking about this episode is that it is one of the few that display Jesus in a process of interaction with Jewish teachers that is not directly combative or oppositional.<sup>4</sup> There appears to be a give and take going on and even though the teachers are amazed at Jesus' youthful wisdom, there is no indication at this point of what will later be more direct confrontations between the Pharisees, the Scribes, the teachers of the law, and Jesus. In fact, I think an episode like this is helpful for getting us to see that those later episodes of conflict between Jesus and other Jewish teachers are indicative much more of an argument within a family—painful though those arguments can be—rather than an argument between a 'legalistic' Judaism and a new religion begun by Jesus. Jesus loved the law of God and at a young age joined in the long Jewish tradition, that continues to this day, of arguing about the interpretation of the law. All indications are that at this young age, Jesus loved his people and his people's traditions.

This scene of Jesus with the teachers brings us to a climactic and revealing point in Luke's narrative, namely, the moment that Mary and Joseph, realizing that Jesus had not come along with them, search for him and find him in the temple with the teachers. They are understandably upset and wondering why Jesus would put his parents through the agony of trying to figure out what happened to him. Did he get snagged by bandits on the road? Did he get lost? Was he sold into slavery? "How could you do this to your father and I?" Mary says. Jesus' response doesn't really help, and I can imagine myself in the parental role here not being too

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<sup>4</sup> Here it is important to point out that even when Jesus is later combative and oppositional with the Pharisees, teachers of the law, and Scribes, he is not so because he has abandoned Judaism but because he is close to them, like family, and is thus that much more invested in convincing them of the right way. I get at this in the next couple of sentences above.

enthused about his answer: “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?” (Luke 2:49) If I imagine myself in Joseph’s shoes, I imagine myself saying: “No, I did not know you would be here in the temple and by the way your father’s house is in Nazareth, not Jerusalem! Now stand up and let’s go. I’ve got a number of woodworking projects to get to and you’ve already made us late by days.”

Jesus’ answer, though, indicates something of the greater calling that Jesus is beginning to discern and live into here in this episode. From the very get go, Jesus’ earthly father Joseph had to come to terms with the fact that he could not think of his son in the same way that other father’s thought of their sons. Despite Luke saying that neither Mary nor Joseph understood Jesus’ response to their question, I imagine Mary and Joseph coming to terms with it slowly on their walk home with Jesus to Nazareth. “His Father’s house” was not in Nazareth, and his vocation would not be to carry on in his earthly Father’s vocation. Rather, he would be called away from family and any secure sense of “home” to a vocation that God had prepared for him. Even Mary, who carried him for nine months and birthed him from her own body, even she knew early on that she would need to release control over her child to allow him to grow into the divine mission that God had in store for him. Mary and Joseph had to let their imaginations be stretched and re-shaped by the divine calling placed upon Jesus at such an early age.

As Luke tells us, Jesus does eventually go with Mary and Joseph and “was obedient to them” (2:51). Here again is another image for how to think of Jesus’ relationship with his Jewish upbringing. Luke tells us that Jesus obeyed his parents, thereby honouring them as the law of Moses required (cf. Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 5:16). Again, Luke portrays Jesus as a fully observant Jew. But being a good Jew, Jesus also loved the LORD his God with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his might (Deuteronomy 6:5) and this meant that he had to navigate

the complexities of obeying both God and his parents at the same time.<sup>5</sup> I can imagine Jesus saying something like this to Mary and Joseph on the way home:

I want to honour you, Father and Mother, but God called me into the temple, and I must also love the Lord my God with all my heart, soul, and might. Does that make sense to you?

I imagine Jesus, in other words, was beginning to understand as a young age that the law of God itself requires the prioritization of obedience to God before all others, even parents and family. Indeed, later in his ministry some of Jesus' hardest sayings about leaving family to follow him are best understood as examples of this prioritization of obedience to God over everyone else (cf. Luke 14:26). Interestingly, Luke tells us that, as she had done earlier (2:19), Mary treasured this whole episode in her heart (2:51). I suspect that even in their frustration with twelve year old Jesus, they were seeing more and more the divine favour poured out upon their child and recognizing that he truly was God's agent to "scatter the proud in the thoughts of their hearts, to bring down the powerful from their thrones, to lift up the lowly; to fill the hungry with good things, and to send the rich away empty, to help God's servant Israel." (Luke 1:51-54)

I have spent considerable time in this reflection on Jesus' time in the temple thinking about the relationship between Jesus and his Jewish upbringing. Jesus' Jewish imagination played a crucial role in his own discipleship. A part of that imagination was the Jewish emphasis on loving God with all his heart, soul, and might. Does this imagination shape our lives too? Are there times when God's call on our lives will summon us to prioritize God over family or societal expectations? What *are* the sources of our imaginations, and how might they help or hinder our own discipleship today as God calls us to grow up into Christ who is our head (Eph.

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<sup>5</sup> As an aside, I should also mention that this kind of "navigating" was not at all foreign to Jewish life. Jews constantly debated how to follow the law and often pointed to conflicts between the law as the impetus for discerning which law might take priority in a given context.



4:15)? These are just some of the questions that this story poses for us today and they are worthy of significant reflection. Perhaps we can do that during second hour today. As we seek to “grow up” with Jesus into the mission that God calls us to as disciples, may we have our imaginations shaped by Jesus’ story of devotion to his heavenly Father and may we be willing to follow the God who calls us by name. AMEN.