

Christmas 2 2020

Jeremiah 31:7-14

Psalm 84

Ephesians 1:3-6, 15-19a

Luke 2:41-52

It's not easy to grow up, is it?

It's not easy to grow up as a nerd,
I can tell you that.

It's not easy,
As so many of you have told me,
Over so many years,
To grow up
Lesbian, gay,
Bisexual. Queer.

It's not easy,
Some of you have told me more recently,
To grow up knowing your body
Does not fit your identity,
And to transition
To the person you know you are.

It's not easy to grow up poor,
Or rich,
An ugly duckling
Or beautiful as an angel.

Branded as naughty
Or overpraised as nice.

It's harder for some
Than it is for others,
But it's not that easy for anyone to grow up.

As we grow up,
We share, they tell us,
The same fundamental questions.
First, and most important:
Who am I?

Who am I ?
Where am I going?

So – what was it like to grow up as Jesus?
How did he answer those basic questions of identity?
If he was, as we claim,
Just like us, one of us,
And God –
Then what was it like for him to wonder?
Who am I?

Did he say to himself,
As we read at Christmas,
In the beginning was the Word,
And that's me?

Though I doubt it,
I could easily be wrong.

But I do know this:
Our wondering about his wondering
Will not yield to rational inquiry.
We are never going to know
What he was thinking,
Deep inside in the silent place
Where the record of scripture
And mystical insight
Cannot take us.

Prayerful listening and sacred conversation
In community,
The wonderings of children
As they hear the stories for the first
And second and third time,
Can open precious windows for us.
And the gifts of scholarship can give us insight:
What did the first followers of Jesus,
And the communities that gathered
In the first years after his death and resurrection,
What did they want to convey
About their friend and companion,
Who taught and healed
And offered new life?

What did they want to show and share
In this little story
Of the boy Jesus in the temple?

This is the only story we have in the canonical gospels

Of the boyhood of Jesus.
We see him,
Newborn baby in the manger in Bethlehem,
Refugee infant brought home from Egypt,
And then we jump thirty years or so,
And see him again,
Grown man coming down to the River Jordan.

In all the years between
We have only this glimpse,
this brief story,
The adolescent boy
In the Jerusalem temple.

Such a brief story,
And yet we have made so much of it.
We want this story to instruct children,
To comfort parents.
We want this story to help us understand Jesus
As someone who really is like us,
who was, at least once,
a bad boy rather than a perfect son.

But is he bad, or good,
In this story?
Is he very human,
Or is the divine shining through?

What did they want us to discern,
The early Christian community
That gave us this story?
And is there a meaning beyond what they intended?
Can we find our way through deeper and deeper levels of truth,
If we, like Mary,
Treasure these words in our hearts?

This is a story about losing and finding,
about obedience,
about learning.
It is a story that is both simple and sincere,
And rich with irony.

The man Jesus, the storyteller and healer,
Knew all about losing and finding.
He distilled the essence of his message
Into a story of losing and finding:

The parable of the man with two sons,
The prodigal and the dutiful.
This gospel story tells us
That losing and finding were part of his own experience.
But they were not what they seemed.
His parents thought he was lost,
But in fact he had found his way
To the place where he belonged.
They lost him when he found himself.
In some of the earliest depictions of this scene,
From the first centuries of Christian art,
This is the moment when a sword pierces Mary's heart.

Yes, it's a story of losing and finding,
But it's not as simple or as joyful
As it became when he, and the experience,
Became a parable.
He is the paradoxical revealer of lost and found.

This is a story, too, about obedience.

We may now dislike the word
And the virtue it tries to describe,
We may enjoy rolling our eyes,
When, on Christmas Eve,
We sing,
Christian children all must be,
Mild, obedient, good as he.
But obedience is part of the witness of Jesus.
Obedience to the law of his people,
Which required that he honor his father and mother.

Is this a story,
As so many have hoped,
About Jesus the good boy,
Who sets an example for other good boys and girls?
Perhaps, in part.
But it is certainly this:
A story that shows Jesus,
Not simply obeying the law,
But embodying it.

He is the law.

This is, too, a story about learning.
At least in my Sunday school,

It was a favorite.
It had place of pride in the curriculum
And teachers made much of it.
The message I received was this:
God loved Jesus because Jesus was very good at Sunday school.
Not just well-behaved,
But he learned his lessons.
He memorized all the lists,
And all the dates.
He knew all the stories by heart.
He could recite all the psalms.
He knew the prayers.

All this may in fact be true.
But does Jesus amaze his hearers because he is a dutiful student,
An active listener,
With a ready response to hard questions?
Is he precocious?
The crowning glory of a people who live by knowledge?

Or is it this:
The boy Jesus is the embodiment
Of the creating power of the holy one,
Known by the name of wisdom?
He can offer wisdom
Because it comes from the depths of his being.
He is wisdom.

All these things are true.

He is wisdom.
He is the law.
He is a parable.

And, I wonder,
Is it possible this story shows us even more?

Jesus finds himself in the temple
Because it is his natural home.
The temple was more than what we now call a house of worship.
The temple
Was the home of God,
The place where the glory of God
Came to dwell among the people.

Just so in Jesus,

All the glory of God came to live among us.
This story reminds us,
He is in the temple –
He is the temple.

In him all the fullness of God
Is pleased to dwell,
Then, now, forever.

So who is this Jesus for us,
Here and now?

If he is the parable of lost and found,
If he is the law,
If he is wisdom,
If he is the place and person
Who can contain all the glory of God,
How will he come to us now,
In this time of great need?

He will not tell us,
I suspect,
Exactly how to meet the challenges
That face us every day and hour.
Like it or not,
He seldom responds to our questions
With simple answers.

But he will stay with us
While we ask the questions.
Especially those fundamental questions
We all ask:
Who am I?
Where am I going?
Who's going with me?

Who's going with us,
Into the unknown future?
At Christmas,
We sing,
Come to us, abide with us,
Our Lord Emmanuel, God with us.

He is the parable of losing and finding.
If you are lost now,
Can you find him in your heart?

He is the law.
Can he show you a way
Back into right relationship with God and neighbor,
Which is what the law is meant to do?

His is wisdom.
Can he help you make friends with God,
Which is the gift of wisdom?

He is the dwelling place of God.
Can he welcome you to the place where God lives,
Where everyone is at home?