

**The Reverend Jon Hauerwas - December 29, 2019**  
**Subversive Faith**  
**Colossians 3:12-17 and Luke 2:41-52**

“For whatever reasons, neither Luke nor Matthew carried the implications of the virgin birth into the remainder of their Gospels, nor did the early church include those stories in the preaching of the gospel.”<sup>1</sup> Rather, Luke’s narrative unfolds normally, free of miracles, fulfilled prophecies, and special revelations.”<sup>2</sup> And yet, the stories of Jesus’ conception, birth, and presentation in the temple all still function to affirm that God’s hand was on him from the beginning.

Luke’s aim is clear: as “the only Gospel to include a story from Jesus’ childhood,” he hopes to affirm Jesus’ Jewish credentials.<sup>3</sup> It’s as if Luke is anticipating future criticisms of Jesus’ ministry and his message. Knowing that some will surely refer to Jesus’ teachings as “heretical,” “unfaithful,” or molded by “misguided” influences, he wishes to leave no doubt that Jesus was formed by “home, temple, and synagogue.”<sup>4</sup> That “at every significant period of his life he was

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<sup>1</sup> Fred B. Craddock, *Luke, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, ed. James Luther Mays. (Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 41.

<sup>2</sup> Craddock, 41.

<sup>3</sup> Alan Culpepper, *Luke, The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary Volume IX*, ed. Leander Keck (Abingdon Press, 1996), 76.

<sup>4</sup> Craddock, 41.

in continuity with Judaism.”<sup>5</sup> And in this case, that meant “bar mitzvah at age twelve.”<sup>6</sup>

“According to Jewish custom, a male child became a man and embraced the traditions of his ancestors at the age of thirteen. At twelve, therefore, Jesus was still a child.”<sup>7</sup> His parents, both faithful Jews, made “a pilgrimage to the Passover festival in Jerusalem.”<sup>8</sup> “Moving at a pace of fifteen miles a day, their journey to Jerusalem would have taken four or five days.”<sup>9</sup> Then, when the seven-day festival ended, the pilgrims from Galilee would return home.<sup>10</sup>

Here we find hints of Jesus becoming his own person. Now in his last year of childhood, he exercises his own initiative and “stays behind to engage the teachers in the temple.”<sup>11</sup> For centuries, “the church has sought to recognize this moment in the lives of young people in the rite of confirmation.”<sup>12</sup> And here is Jesus, sitting “in the temple among the teachers as a child,” serving as our template.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Craddock, 41.

<sup>6</sup> Craddock, 41.

<sup>7</sup> Culpepper, 76-77.

<sup>8</sup> Ronald J. Allen, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year C, Volume 1*, ed. Joel B. Green (Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 123-124.

<sup>9</sup> Culpepper, 76.

<sup>10</sup> Craddock, 41.

<sup>11</sup> Allen, 124.

<sup>12</sup> Craddock, 42.

<sup>13</sup> Craddock, 42.

At this early stage of Jesus' life, "there were in him the vague stirrings of his own identity. The circle of his awareness and the sense of a larger duty begin to widen and deepen beyond the home in Nazareth,"<sup>14</sup> foreshadowing his relationship to his divine Father, the teachers of Israel, and the Temple.<sup>15</sup>

To us, it's curious that Jesus' parents traveled a full day without noticing his absence. But this wasn't a single family, *Home Alone* kind of moment. In fact, "in such a caravan it is not surprising that a boy among relatives and friends would not be missed for a day."<sup>16</sup> And yet, by staying behind, Jesus' decision was certainly provocative. He caused his parents great anxiety, and he disrupted and interrupted their schedule.<sup>17</sup>

As is often the case, Mary serves as the parental mouthpiece. You may recall that she is the one who later encourages Jesus to do something at the wedding in Cana when all of the wine runs out. And she is the one at the foot of the cross, with her son even in death. Here, she asks Jesus, her oldest son, why he has treated she

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<sup>14</sup> Craddock, 43.

<sup>15</sup> Culpepper, 76.

<sup>16</sup> Craddock, 41.

<sup>17</sup> Allen, 124.

and Joseph in this way. And with Jesus' response, he utters his first words in the Gospel of Luke.<sup>18</sup>

Michael Lindvall reminds us that “the child Jesus is like us in two ways that are both jarring and important to our understanding of him.” First, he finds himself, as do we all, “in a tension between competing loyalties: his loyalty to his parents and his loyalty to his heavenly father. Second, the story affirms that Jesus' humanity means that he, like us, grew and developed. Jesus matured. He was like us in that he *learned* things he once did not know.”<sup>19</sup>

When Jesus said that he must be in his Father's house, he reminded us of how we are to position ourselves to grow in God's grace.<sup>20</sup> I leave you this morning with the story of Eric Liddell. For few people have personified the hard choices that God's grace may demand as well as him. Liddell was a celebrated “Scottish runner and devout Christian who refused to run on the Sabbath in the 1924 Olympics, forgoing an almost certain gold medal in the 100-yard dash.”<sup>21</sup> Liddell was a hero in his day,

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<sup>18</sup> Culpepper, 76.

<sup>19</sup> Michael L. Lindvall, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year C, Volume 1*, ed. Joel B. Green (Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 125.

<sup>20</sup> Allen, 124.

<sup>21</sup> Lindvall, 125.

winning gold in the 440. He “became a hero once again when his story was retold in the 1981 blockbuster *Chariots of Fire*.”<sup>22</sup>

Throughout, “Liddell was always clear about two things: that his athleticism was a gift from God to be used for the glory of God, and that sport came in third, behind family and God’s call to serve as a missionary in China during the tumultuous years before and during World War II. Liddell became a beacon of hope and exemplar of compassion and humility in China, first as a teacher and pastor, and later as a prisoner in a Japanese internment camp where he died in 1945.”<sup>23</sup>

We may wonder if it is our thoughts or our actions that make us better Christians. The answer, of course, will always be both. In the presence of family and the church, we step forward in faith. And we hold our competing loyalties in tension. May it be so and all thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>22</sup> Lindvall, 125.

<sup>23</sup> Lindvall, 125.