

**The Awkward Teenage Years**  
**A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church**  
**Luke 2:42-51**  
**12-27-2015**

As a teenager, the gymnasium at First Baptist Church in Winston-Salem was a safe harbor. My brothers and other friends and I would spend hours playing pick-up basketball. We played after youth group on Sunday evenings, and too often, five o'clock became six o'clock, and six, seven, and seven, eight and so on. "Just one more game," we'd say, "And then we'll go home," every boy oblivious to time.

One Sunday night, my brother Harry and I pushed the limits of time, arriving home closer to ten o'clock. We strolled into the kitchen, and no doubt deposited sweaty sneakers and gym bags on the kitchen table, emptied the contents of the refrigerator, and made ourselves at home.

My father popped his head into the kitchen to greet us. "Hey boys, how was church? Did you have fun? Did you get a good workout in?"

"Oh, yes," we said, "It was great! Everyone was there!"

"Well good," Dad said. "I am so glad. Hey listen, guys, I just had a quick question before you go to bed. DO YOU KNOW WHAT A TELEPHONE IS?!?"

Except he didn't ask about just any kind of telephone, it was a four-letter brand of telephone, and I am not really sure I should repeat it here!

Not realizing this was a rhetorical question, we responded, "Yeah, we know what a telephone is."

“And was there a reason you decided not use the telephone to call and tell me you’d be late?” he asked.

Our response: “Umm, we were at church. We don’t have to call when you are at church, right? Church? God? Jesus? Right?”

Now, I’m gonna stop the story right here. For all of our youth out there, Harry and I did not give the proper response. YES. Yes, you do have to call your parents when you are late, even when you are at church, and no matter if you are able to work Jesus and God into your reply. So if you didn’t know that, consider yourself warned. And another heads up, watch out for rhetorical questions. Those are generally not a good sign. But anyway, back to the text...

Jesus shared in a universal human experience: he was a pre-teen, and later a teenager.

And just like children in Winston-Salem and Charlotte and around the globe, the twelve-year old, Jesus could be inconsistent in offering parental courtesies. There were no doubt many days when Jesus wasn’t fully attuned to the anxieties his parents felt in raising him: Is he safe? Is he well-fed? Is he where he needs to be? He’s so smart and so bright, but he’s also so green and so naïve and so pure. The world can be a rough place.

In today’s lection, Jesus the pre-teen puts a scare into his parents. They’ve travelled in a caravan to Jerusalem for Passover. At the conclusion of the festivities, the family packs their belongings to travel home. Rather than joining the caravan, Jesus, who is twelve, decides to stay behind in the temple.

He is enthralled by this place. He's had so many questions about Torah, and finally, he's in a place where there are trained priests to answer these questions, and to offer new interpretations of the law. He asks one question, and then another, and another. The priests are impressed. It's not often they encounter a twelve-year-old with such a mature grasp of theology. Before long, twenty minutes becomes an entire afternoon.

Meanwhile, Mary and Joseph and the rest of the family are hiking home. At some point in the day, they realize Jesus is missing. Annoyance turns to anger. Anger turns to fear. Where is our child???

The family backtracks to Jerusalem, and spends three days searching for Jesus. Can you imagine how Mary must have felt?

Has my son eaten? Where did he sleep? Is he cold? Does he have on clean underwear? Is he scared? Is he injured? Is he angry with me for not noticing he's gone? Oh God, just please tell me my son is okay!!!

After three long days, Mary, Joseph and Jesus are reunited in the Temple. They find Jesus safe. He's more than safe. He's sitting with all the elders asking questions, and answering them – he's one of the gang, like he's lived there his whole life.

Can you imagine Mary now? At first she is relieved. "My son is okay!!!" And then she's a little angry. "What were you thinking? We were so worried that you were lost or hurt or worse?" "Answer me," she says.

And Jesus replies, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's House?"

Wow. What tension!

Even, when you are the Son of God, hormones are hard to control. His response seems snarky at best. Even if he's in the right, Jesus is still rude to his mother.

Luke doesn't record it, but surely, Mary's answer must have sounded something like this:

No. No, Jesus. I didn't think to look for you in the Temple, because you are twelve years old. I looked where most little boys are supposed to be, which is in the company of their parents. And I've just spent three days trying to find you, and not once did it occur to you to wonder where your mother was. If you want me to treat you like a grown-up, you had better act like one!

But it couldn't have been easy for Jesus either. How could you not come off as snarky, when at twelve years old you have such an advanced knowledge of Torah? And every time you come into the Temple, people recognize your ability, and encourage your ability. Even at eight days old, Anna and Simeon proclaimed Jesus as Messiah. Each year Jesus grew and matured, and every time he went to the temple more and more people were amazed with his ability. In Mary and Joseph's house, Jesus was recognized as gifted, but he was still the subordinate in this relationship. He was the child, and they the parents. But in the Temple, his Father's House, he was something extraordinary. He was a promise fulfilled.

Luke's little anecdote gives us a small glimpse into the growing pains of Jesus' ministry. Like every human being, Jesus had a coming of age – he had to learn how to be in relationship with others. He had to learn how to empathize with his parents and siblings and neighbors as they sought to make sense of who was in their presence. A few accepted his calling. Most resisted it. How does someone live into their calling when those

who know and love them best can't fully comprehend such a calling, can't believe that person is equipped to handle such a calling?

And what of Mary? She's called to be a mother. Every natural instinct tells her to protect her son, to nurture him, to empower him. But what is a mother to do when her son's vocation is so intense, so deep, that it makes him vulnerable to all the cruelties of the world? How does she let her child live into such a calling?

More than anything, I think today's story highlights the enormity of Christmas, and of Jesus himself. Even twelve years after giving birth to her son, Mary still wrestles with just who it is she's brought into this world.

Too often, we assume that Mary simply digests the events of Bethlehem, and goes about her business as usual. Even with angels and shepherds and comforting cousins and wise men yet to come, Mary still doesn't have a full grasp of what is really happening in her life, or just who her son is. God is just that big.

And even with his miraculous birth, and his astute knowledge of Torah, and the bravado of all his twelve years, I don't think Jesus is quite yet ready to comprehend what God has in store for him. Even Messiahs need mama eagles to help them spread their wings and learn to fly.

It's the awkward teenage years. As Betty mentioned on Thursday night, God came into a messy world with messy families. But God did good work in all that messiness. The precocious twelve-year-old who lectured his parents grew into a confident prophet. And among his kin and friends in Nazareth he would proclaim: I have come to give good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed. And when his work was done, his energy spent, his

last words spoken, his life poured out...there at his side was his Mother, Mary, still hoping, still believing in all that God can do.

Sardis Baptist Church, we are living in the excitement of Christmas – bright lights and angels with good tidings and baby boys and promises made real. As December turns to January and January to February, the peaceful baby sleeping in a manger will wake up. And he may call us to things less placid: new friends to welcome, new justice to pursue, new conversations to engage, new communities to create. And perhaps there will be days, when like a precocious teenager we jump headfirst into these pursuits. And perhaps there will be days, when like a cautious parent, we think, “How safe is this?” And as our eagerness and caution collide, we may even feel a little tension.

Fear not, Sardis Baptist Church. Emanuel has come. God will mother us through both the neatness AND the messiness of our journey together.

Thanks be to God!!!