

“In Favor With God and Men”

What was it like to watch Jesus grow up? We just celebrated Christmas this week, and we heard about all sorts of incredible things that happened in connection with the birth of Jesus. His virgin mother gave birth to him and laid him in a manger. The angels told the shepherds about him, and they lit up the sky with the glory of God as they sang praises. Some time later, a miraculous star led the Magi to visit him and worship him. A furious and jealous king tried to kill him. We know quite a bit about the time surrounding Jesus’ birth, and we know a lot about his ministry as an adult. In between, we have very little information.

One event from the life of young Jesus is before us as our sermon text this morning. In this account we hear about our Savior. We are reminded that he is both fully human and fully divine, that is, he is both God and man. This event is one brief snapshot from the life of Jesus as he grew in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and men. Throughout his childhood and throughout his life, Jesus lived as an obedient earthly son. And he lived as an obedient Son of God.

You heard the account read earlier from the lectern. Many of our children have learned the story, perhaps several times. Jesus is now twelve years old. Mom and Dad, Mary and Joseph prepare to leave Galilee for a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Every year they make this trip. They go for the Passover. It was required of every male Israelite to celebrate the Passover there and had been for hundreds of years. But not everyone did. Joseph did, and his faithful wife, faithful both to him and to God, came along with him, every year.

In fact, there were many who travelled from Galilee to Jerusalem. Mary and Joseph had a large group of friends and family with whom they walked, and this year would be no exception. Jesus is also getting to the age where he also can take a more active role in the worship life of the temple.

In Jerusalem, Mary, Joseph, and Jesus celebrate the feast. They sacrifice a Passover lamb and eat it, recalling the great deliverance that God had once provided when he rescued his people from their slavery in Egypt.

When the holiday is over, Mary and Joseph join the group of pilgrims now ready to return to Galilee. After walking for the day, it is now time to find Jesus and to settle in for the night. There’s a spot right there among the group that looks inviting as a resting place, but where is Jesus? Have you seen him? Has anyone seen him? The friends, the relatives, the neighbors, are all asked, but no one remembers even seeing twelve year old Jesus that day. Hearts race as one person after another tells Mary, “I haven’t seen that boy.” And the reality slowly sets in. If he isn’t here, he must be back there.

Mary and Joseph head the other direction. Galilee will have to wait. But Jesus is not at the inn. He’s not at the house where they ate the Passover. He’s not in the garden among the olive trees. He’s nowhere to be found, until they trace their steps back to the temple. There he sits. Men gather all around him. They talk, and he asks questions. They ask questions, and he answers them. These men seem surprised and even amazed by what they hear.

But Mary only notices one thing: Jesus. “What have you been doing? Where have you been? Why weren’t you with us? Your father and I have been worried sick about you!” I know those weren’t Mary’s exact words, but don’t you hear in her question the same question that so many mothers have asked when their children finally show up? Our heart goes out to Mary. Jesus should have listened. He should have been in the Galilee caravan, and he shouldn’t have cost his parents three days of travel.

But wait. Hear Jesus speak, “**Why were you searching for me?**” he asks. “**Didn’t you know I had to be about my Father’s business?**” I know I didn’t quote Jesus accurately from the NIV, but the King James translation of that passage really reflects the Greek much better. Jesus is not defiant. And Jesus didn’t do anything wrong.

We really do need to take a step back to understand that. As parents, we're usually convinced, and oftentimes rightly so, that when things don't work out the way they are supposed to, the kids are at fault. When the kids are not where they are supposed to be, and they know that they are supposed to be there, that is a kid problem. But this was not a Jesus problem. Jesus was obedient to his parents. It was true before and during and after this event. Jesus did what he was supposed to do. He was an obedient earthly Son, carefully following the directions of his earthly parents who exercised their God-given authority over him.

Someone has commented in reaction to this story that Jesus is like every other boy and that at the same time, Jesus is like no other boys. He is like every other boy and every other child in this way: he was born (we just celebrated that), he grew bigger and stronger, and he learned more and more about the world around him. But he was at the same time totally different from any other child that lived. How was he different? He did it right. He didn't carry with him a sinful nature like the one we have, that part of us that even when we know something is wrong tells us to go ahead and do it anyway. He didn't have a natural inclination to disobey his parents the way I do and you do. He was able to perfectly obey God and people.

Samuel, we were told in the Old Testament reading, grew up and was favored by God and men. He was a good kid. I know a lot of good kids, and perhaps you do also. But Jesus was different. He was more than just a good kid. He was a perfect kid. Everything that God expected of him he did, and that included doing everything that Mary and Joseph rightly expected of him. Their expectations were not always right. They were not perfect parents anymore than anyone here is a perfect parent. But they raised a perfect child. We admire their example of devotion to God, but they raised a perfect child not because of what they did or how they handled him. They raised a perfect child because this obedient son of theirs was also the Son of God.

Jesus reminded Mary and Joseph of this fact with his words, "Didn't you know I had to be about my Father's business?" Yes, he was obedient to Mary his mother, and to Joseph his earthly father. But first and foremost Jesus was obedient to his heavenly Father.

In the temple he was learning and studying God's Word. That was his Father's business. Years later, Jesus would announce to Martha that her sister Mary, by sitting at Jesus' feet to listen to him speak, had chosen "the one thing needful." Jesus had chosen the same one thing needful in Jerusalem that Passover.

We struggle to find words to explain this situation. God himself reads and studies God's Word. The Son of God meets with people and asks them questions. The omniscient (or all-knowing) Lord of the Universe learns. He grows in wisdom, and he grows in understanding. As he is without sin, he does not lack true faith in God or true fear of God. We lack these things until God reveals them to us and gives them to us. As Jesus is without sin, he hears the Word of his Father and understands his place in it. We struggle to apply even the simplest commands of God to our own lives. Jesus is completely committed to doing the will of his Father. We are all too often interested only in ourselves and in our own pleasure.

That is why this very account of the young life of Jesus is so precious to us. From the moment of his conception and birth, through his younger years, and into adulthood, Jesus obeyed God. He did it for you. He did it for me. He set aside the full use of his power and glory, his wisdom and strength, to be born and to grow up. He worked through the challenges of our lives so he knows them. He worked through the challenges of our lives so that he could defeat them. He lived a life of perfect obedience so that he could give his life to us as a precious gift. We didn't ask for it, we didn't want it, we didn't even know we needed it. He took us by the hand and led us through the waters of baptism to cleanse our souls from sin. He holds before us the words of Scripture which point us to his cross. He shows us the marks in his human hands and feet to give us just a glimpse of what he suffered because of our sins because that was the only way to take them away forever. He feeds us with his body and blood in the sacrament of Holy Communion. By his gift to us, we now stand in favor with God.

This morning, the example of Mary is before you. She treasured in her heart the things she had heard and seen. She did not let go of the Christmas message. Won't you treasure Jesus the same way? Listen to his word. Receive his sacraments. Trust what he accomplished for you.