

Today is the first Sunday in Lent, and this year as we prepare for Easter we are going to look at Portraits of Jesus from the Gospel of Luke. For the next 4 weeks we will examine a different snapshot from the life of Jesus, from his childhood through the crucifixion.

First some background on Luke. It was written sometime during the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, and although it is called Luke, nowhere does Luke identify himself as such. It takes some detective work to find out who wrote this book, which is addressed to Theophilus. Now the book of Acts says, “Now I write my second volume, Theophilus, after writing my first volume about the life and teaching of Jesus. So we know for certain that the same person who wrote Luke wrote the book of Acts. This means that this particular author wrote more of the New Testament than any other author, even Paul. In Acts, the author is describing in great detail the missionary journeys of Paul, which suggests that whoever wrote Luke and Acts traveled with Paul on his missionary journeys.

When you look at who went with Paul on his travels, the name Luke comes up again and again. We learn in Colossians that Luke is considered “...our dear friend and beloved physician.” It makes sense, because Paul could have used a doctor to tend to his wounds as he traveled. One of the letters Paul wrote shortly before his beheading in 64 AD says, “All of my colleagues have left me, they have all fled except one.” That was Luke, who stayed until the bitter end. An entire group of Christians was put to death in 64 AD along with Paul and Peter, and it is very possible that Luke was among them. So Luke was tirelessly promoting this Gospel, considering it a truth for which he was willing to die.

In the prologue contained in the first 4 verses, Luke writes, “Many people have attempted to write accounts of this, so I decided to write an orderly account of the things that have taken place.” While Mark was the only Gospel that existed before Luke’s Gospel, it is evident that Luke was taking collections of other accounts in circulation about the life of Jesus and organizing them into one comprehensive account. It is a beautiful literary narrative, for Luke was a skilled writer who included stories we do not find anywhere else, such as the Good Samaritan and Prodigal Son. He paints a vivid and detailed portrait of Jesus. Our understanding of Jesus would be severely limited without Luke and Acts.

Now, while Luke offers more information about the childhood of Jesus than any other Gospel, there is still precious little information given to us about these “lost years” of Jesus’ life. What you just heard from Luke, chapter 2 is it. There is nothing else in the Bible about Jesus from his birth to age 30.

First of all, Luke tells us that at the appropriate time, Mary and Joseph bring their son to Jerusalem to be dedicated to God in the Temple. It was the custom that a child be dedicated and the parents offer a sacrifice. The sacrifice of Mary and Joseph was turtledoves and pigeons, known as the poor people's sacrifice. Simeon was one of the temple priests who offers the blessing of the child Jesus. Simeon was a very holy man, and the Holy Spirit revealed that he would see the Messiah before he died. So when he sees Jesus, Simeon immediately recognizes him, saying, "This child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel." Then he tells Mary "A sword will pierce through your soul." Mary would remember those words of Simeon 33 years later when her son was hanging on the cross. Then, a prophetess, a holy woman named Anna comes into the temple. Anna is very devout, she is 84 years old, and she too can tell that this child was the one to redeem Israel. So these wise elderly people, Simeon and Anna, confirm the divinity of this child.

There are several things to notice here. The sacrifice of turtle doves and pigeons was known as the paupers sacrifice. Jesus grew up in what some have called a paupers home. Mark's gospel tells us that Jesus had 6 siblings, so if that was indeed the case, there would have been 9 people in the household. Joseph was a craftsman, with 9 mouths to feed it could not have been a luxurious lifestyle. Nazareth at that time was where the poor lived, many living in caves dug into the ground. Clearly Jesus grew up in poverty. This gives extra meaning to his words: "Whatever you fail to do this to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you fail to do it to me." He knew what it was like to be hungry and have nothing to eat, to be thirsty and have nothing to drink, to be cold and naked and not have enough to wear. He grew up in poverty.

The second thing to notice is the confirmation Simeon and Anna brought to all of the preceding stories about the birth of Jesus. The earlier stories are so familiar to us that we know them all by heart—how the angel comes to Mary to tell her she will bear the son of God, how Joseph has a dream telling him to marry this woman, how Mary's cousin Elizabeth, tells her that this baby she is carrying is indeed the Messiah. Then we have Shepherds out in the field, the angels bringing them good news of great joy, the visit of the 3 Kings visit from the East. The story of Simeon and Anna in the temple is not nearly as well known, and yet it is equally important. These wise and holy people, whose lives have been devoted to God, instantly recognize that this baby is indeed the Messiah. They can now die in peace, for they have seen God in the flesh. It is a wonderful story.

Next we have just two verses in Luke covering the years from when Jesus was

dedicated in the temple until the age of 12. No wonder they are the “lost years.” Luke says: “And when they had performed everything according to the law, they returned into Galilee, to Nazareth. And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.” That’s all we’ve got.

So we will never know if Jesus was a compliant child or defiant child. Was he all boy with his pockets full of rocks and frogs, or was he introspective and shy? Did he have many friends? Did he have fun? Did he have birthday parties and play dates? There isn’t much to go on. Yet it is possible to assume some things, since we now know about life in first-century towns like Nazareth. With a little effort, we can get a very general portrait of the childhood of Jesus.

Nazareth was a tiny village, probably home to less than 1,000 people in those days. It was 70 miles north of Jerusalem, located at 1200 feet above sea level in the hills of southern Galilee. It was about 15 miles east of the Mediterranean Sea and 15 miles west of the Sea of Galilee. Recent archeological digs have uncovered caves for storing grain, reservoirs for storing water and wine, in addition to wine and olive presses. So Nazareth was a small agricultural town.

Jesus would have gone to school from the ages of 6 until the age of 12. While schooling was unusual in the ancient world, Jewish families placed great value upon education and made it available even to poor families. Of course, this did not include girls, for girls were expected to work at home. Educating them would be a waste of time. Schools for Jewish boys met in the local synagogue, where the teacher was a rabbi or scribe. The curriculum centered around the Torah, and memorizing the Jewish law, prayers, and history. Jesus would have spent a great deal of time in the local synagogue, being deeply steeped in the spiritual wisdom of his people and observing their customs, including Sabbath prayers.

Additionally, as the son of a craftsman, Jesus would be expected to learn his father’s trade at an early age. We assume that Joseph was a carpenter, and Jesus would be expected to learn that skill and to help his father when he was not in school. His days were undoubtedly filled with school, family, friends, and helping his father at home. I think it is safe to assume that his was a happy, average childhood for a first century Jewish boy. Undoubtedly those early years in Nazareth gave him a secure foundation, which would serve him well in the years to come. They also gave him a deep identification with the poor.

The next specific event we know about comes when Jesus was 12 years old and the family went up to Jerusalem for the Passover. Luke tells us that they went there as was their custom, and as they were about to return home, Mary and Joseph were unable to find Jesus. And not just for an hour or two, but for three days. Can you imagine what that was like? I mean they are the earthly parents of God in

the flesh, and they have misplaced him. Have any of you momentarily lost your child—at the mall, amusement park, at a store? It is a horrible feeling.

When they finally find Jesus, he is in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening and asking questions. Mary is overwhelmed with relief and astonishment and says, “Child, why have you treated us like this? We have been looking for you everywhere.” To which Jesus says, “Why? You know that I must be about the business of God.” He then obediently returned with his parents to Nazareth. Luke concludes this account of these early years by saying, “And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature and favor with God.” We have nothing else about the early years of Jesus—nothing about his teenage or young adult years. The next chapter of Luke is an account of his baptism in the Jordan River at age of 30.

So what can we learn from this very limited information about the early years of Jesus Christ? Undoubtedly his childhood shaped him in profound and lasting ways, just as childhood shapes all of us. The lessons learned during those years gave him the character, strength and faith to meet the unbearable challenges ahead. Jesus never made reference to the things he learned growing up in Nazareth. You do not read of Jesus saying “Now back in the day when I was a boy...” Or “Here is how we did it back in Nazareth.” But it was there that he received a foundation in the Jewish Scriptures and customs which would later confound the religious authorities. It was there he spent time with his parents and siblings, learning a trade and observing nature. The wonders of nature would be a continuing theme in his stories about the lilies of the field, birds of the air, foxes in holes, and so on. It was there that he learned the unique challenges and joys of living closely with others. The lessons learned from family are in some ways the most lasting of all. What stands out most vividly, from the little information we have, is that these early years of Jesus Christ were so common and ordinary. They unfolded in an insignificant and mostly unknown village within a poor, working family.

This is of course, the point. This upbringing is what made Jesus so accessible to all people in every age, particularly the common and ordinary people of this world. People who work and worry, struggle and plan for the future. People with hopes and dreams, who love their families and want a better life for their children and grandchildren. People who do the best they can with what they have. People just like us.

