

Luke 2: 41.52 Growing in Stature

Christmas was just two days ago. We celebrated the birth of the infant Jesus, and this morning we are looking at a passage about the young boy Jesus, almost a teenager. Each gospel account of the good news brought by Jesus is told in a slightly different manner according to the community which preserved the stories. There are many stories about Jesus as a young child which are not included in our cannon. There are good reasons for this omission, but since Luke does include this one story about Jesus before he began his life's work as an adult, I want to linger a little while in this aspect of Christ's life which we don't often consider. Most of the gospel accounts are concerned with the ministry which Jesus did in the area of Galilee and with his passion story. At Christmas we visit the nativity scene and gaze upon a baby in a manger. But after looking with amazement with the shepherds and singing with joy along with the heavenly host, we often don't think about what that truly means. We often talk of how God became flesh, how God descended from heaven to dwell among us—but what we don't talk about it that in doing this God chose to come as an infant—a vulnerable, helpless baby whose life was in the hands of folks like us. We speak of Jesus as fully human as well as fully divine, but in truth, that God chose to come to us in the same way we come into the world is a dimension we overlook when we choose to fast forward to Jesus' adult ministry—that God dwelled first among us as an infant; as one who could not speak; one who was totally dependent upon the care given to him by his human parents and community. He was once a toddler learning to walk and speak. That the creator of the universe chose to descend, dwindle, become small, become helpless, become dependent upon the human beings he created is the radical, transformative, and frankly the shocking, central idea of Christianity. At this time in his life on earth he was most like us. As I have mentioned before, I am not a great movie watcher. But sometimes there are portions or clips of movies that are so memorable that they show up in other places. The Will Farrell movie, *Talladega Nights* is like that. I have never seen the whole movie. I have been told that it is not a great movie, but that there is this one scene that I just had to see...and so Tony showed it to me. This scene is where Will Farrell's character, Ricky Bobby, says grace before the family meal. Ricky addresses his prayer specifically to the "8 lb. 6 oz. baby Jesus, in his Golden Fleece diapers with his little books about shapes and colors," and keeps on going. His father-in-law interrupts and objects to Ricky's preference for the "baby God" and shouts out "He was a man, he had a beard!" Ricky's answer to this is "But I like the baby Jesus best!" This scene as you watch it is hilarious, but within it both characters are making a serious theological point. Jesus was the adult man who died on the cross for us, but he was also first a baby. And since the very earliest years of our faith, we have insisted on the unlikely formulation that Jesus was both fully God and fully human. Every time we affirm our faith with the Nicene Creed, we affirm this truth. That means we have to come to some understanding of what that means about God's nature—that baby Jesus is God made weak, helpless, fragile and dependent upon us. We often like to enjoy the nativity and its innocence. Artists and musicians have created beautiful representations for us to contemplate—few showing any of the reality of life as a poor peasant family living in Palestine and the dangers of that life. If we pause awhile with this idea of Jesus as a baby—an essential element of our theology—what does it tell us about God. If we consider the reality of Jesus as an infant—we

then must come to understand that God must indeed love human beings very much. A baby or young child does not judge or condemn. A baby just loves. Babies don't care about status or wealth or class. As an adult, Jesus loved this same way. The idea of God reaching out to us to be picked up and carried or bounced on our knees or falling asleep on our laps adds a dimension to our understanding of how God loves. Jerry used the music from a song entitled "Mary did you know" during the offertory last week. The lyrics are a series of questions directed to Mary, many of which begin "Mary did you know that your baby boy and goes on to list the miracles of Jesus' ministry. But some of the most vivid images for me are these: that when Mary is kissing her little baby she has kissed the face of God; or that the sleeping child she holds is the great "I Am" or even more importantly, that the child she had delivered, would soon by his life and death provide deliverance for her—and us. Another hymn, Once in Royal David's City," which is #49 in the Presbyterian hymnal takes us through Jesus' appearance in the manger but then adds these words: Jesus is our childhood pattern, day by day like us he grew; he was little, weak and helpless, tears and smiles like us he knew. Thus he feels for all our sadness, and he shares in all our gladness." This is not one of the favorite carols we sing each Christmas, but it has much to say about the enormity of this descent which God made to live among us. In large part, the gospels are silent on these years. Luke's passage which I read just a short time ago is the exception to this. This is the only account of an incident about the life of Jesus between infancy and the beginning of his ministry. This story about the young boy Jesus is one that strikes a sympathetic chord in every parent when Mary asks the young Jesus, "Child why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." This story like the information Luke gives us about Jesus' circumcision at eight days and his dedication at the Temple tells us that Jesus was raised in a devout, practicing Jewish family. We are told that every year the family went to Jerusalem for the Passover festival, but this particular passage occurs when Jesus is twelve. The trip from Nazareth would have been made as a community with most of the village journeying together. The trip would not have been short or easy as the distance was about 90 miles and the mode of transportation was walking. Imagine travelling across country with extended family and a band of your neighbors. There would be blending and mixing of people within the group as you walk along with children darting here and there. It's perfectly understandable that parents wouldn't know exactly where their child was as watching over them would be a community or village task. So this year, as usual after the Passover visit to Jerusalem has ended and the group begins to journey home, it is only after a day has passed that Mary and Joseph notice that they have not seen Jesus for awhile. They first look among their relatives and friends. Not finding him they return to Jerusalem looking for him. And when they find him, Jesus is scolded for the fear and anxiety his parents felt because in their eyes he had been lost. It is noteworthy that Jesus did not consider himself lost. Instead he responds to their question with one of his own, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" This is often pointed out as confirmation of Jesus' divine parentage. But in some ways it is also illustrative of his humanness. Jesus is a twelve year old boy who has become absorbed in his experience at the Temple. Jesus has spent three days there in the Temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. Jesus is sitting there listening and asking questions—not interrogating them to see if they got it right, but asking, learning, growing. He's

a twelve year old boy who is seeking to learn about the scriptures and their interpretation. Jesus has stayed behind in Jerusalem to learn about his Father. The teachers on their part are amazed by his understanding. He listened and comprehended so that his answers to their questions showed he was open to knowledge. We are told that Mary and Joseph did not understand Jesus' response to their fears. Jesus felt the need to seek more knowledge about God, his Father. This scene portrays Jesus as perhaps precocious, not omniscient. Jesus was growing up and seeking the tools which he would need as an adult when he began his ministry. When Mary and Joseph returned for him, Jesus did not argue but returned with them to Nazareth. The text continues that Jesus was obedient to them as he continued to grow. It also says that Jesus increased in wisdom and age and in divine and human favor. A literal translation phrases this as Jesus grew in wisdom and stature. Jesus the infant grew into a boy and then matured into an adult. As he grew he gained wisdom. This description of Jesus' humanity is one we need to also apply to our own lives—we need to not only increase in age, but in wisdom. And by Jesus' example we can do that by studying Scripture and learning more about the God who chose to become like us. The mystery of the dual nature of Jesus is one beyond our understanding. The miracles Jesus performed as an adult by healing the sick, feeding the thousands or walking on water showed his authority over all things. We focus on the demonstrations of power because we need to feel that God is in control. But perhaps thinking about the life of that child as infant and growing boy will help make the incarnation more real to us—and it is central to our belief that God so loves us that he comes to us wherever we are—that God chose to live as we do—to experience all that we do—is shown clearly when we think of the life Jesus lived before his ministry and the journey to the cross began. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.