

Growing in Wisdom and Stature

Yesterday was the day that the Church has designated as the birth day of our Lord. That it actually happened on this particular date of the month is probably unlikely...but in terms of the meaning of the event...the actual day's date is irrelevant. That God came to dwell among us is the crux of the matter no matter what particular day we choose to commemorate it...what is important is that we remember with awe, with wonder, with praise and thanksgiving how much God loves us despite our continual failure to completely trust that God's vision and ways are the best ones. Our gospel text from Luke this morning gives us one of the few accounts which tell us anything about the child that Jesus became after that amazing birth. In fact, Luke's account of the birth is the only actual birth narrative; Matthew has a few tidbits about events surrounding Jesus' birth...Matthew tells us more of Joseph and his reaction to the news Mary had to give him; his account includes other events surrounding the first years after Jesus' birth including the visit of Magi and a flight to Egypt. All of these are different from the story we have from Luke about what followed Jesus' birth. But we have not accounts of the daily life of this boy who grew up in a marginalized community. Each gospel account will at some point indicate that Jesus was raised in a family that observed Jewish law and tradition and that he continued these practices despite his criticism of the religious officials of his day. However are no stories of the young child from the age of two until this passage which records an event when Jesus went as was custom on the annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem in the gospel accounts in our New Testament. Just as there are no accounts of his daily life from this point in the Temple until he came to John to be baptized in the river Jordan. As part of our traditions we have certain statements about Jesus in our creeds...we state clearly that we believe Jesus was God's Son using words like begotten, not made. We narrate the history of what we believe happened when God became incarnate—took on our flesh. And in the Brief Statement of faith we affirm that "We trust in Jesus Christ, fully human, fully God." Late in the first century or as late as the second century after the events of his life, well after the four gospel accounts we have, there were other books about Jesus written which tried to fill in those gaps. The infancy gospel of Thomas is one of these. This text imagines Jesus' life as a village child who is capable of using miraculous things. When reading these stories the child you first meet seems to be rather an impulsive brat who uses his powers indiscriminately—as he grows older the narrative tells of his using them to help his parents—and in the last section, the young man uses his powers to aid those in the village outside his family circle. The text was rejected from the canon because of the very late date at which it was written, but it was very popular and many copies of the text have now been discovered. In that text the young toddler Jesus creates birds from clay, gives them life and sends them flying off. In one account he pushes a playmate off of a roof, killing him, but when questioned he affirms his innocence and resurrects the child to prove he did not push him. An older Jesus uses his power to lengthen a miss cut piece of lumber for his carpenter father. Whether any of the stories were derived from oral traditions in the region where he grew up is not verifiable but the popularity they held illustrates how curious believers were about Jesus as a human being. The preponderance of the gospel narratives that are in the canon seem to focus on the divinity of Jesus—not his humanity. Yet we affirm he was fully both, but rarely consider this in our understanding of the life he led. The

last statement from today's reading from Luke's narrative highlights the concept that Jesus grew—Verse 52 tells us he grew in wisdom and in years. It is obvious that he did not remain an infant, but the gospels rarely give us insights into how he grew in the knowledge of who he was and what that meant. In today's passage Luke presents the boy Jesus as a young scholar engaging in theological discussion with the teachers in the temple. He is twelve years old which while young is at the crucial age just before adulthood in that culture. At that age he is capable of impressing the temple teachers with his understanding of things theological. He is sitting among them not as a teacher but as a listener who asks questions. He is seeking to learn. It is not his knowledge that amazes them but his understanding and his ability to answer their questions. This passage is often used to highlight the orthodox nature of the family who trained him in the traditions of the faith. It is also used to demonstrate his obedience to his "parents." This passage is also used to distance Jesus' relationship with Joseph—Joseph is not the one who questions Jesus about his behavior in remaining behind; just as Jesus' response identifies God as his Father, not Joseph. These things are all present in the text, but it is also important to pick up on that little throw away comment about how Jesus grew—in wisdom as well as just growing into adulthood. Whatever his youth resembled in terms of use of his powers, it seems that he was not born knowing all that he needed to know in order to become the teacher and leader he became. The passage states that as he grew he also found favor with his human family as well as God. As we consider this passage, perhaps we can appreciate that Luke shows us more of the human side of our Lord. Perhaps when we read of the temptations he faced, we can then more fully appreciate they were truly temptations for the man within. Despite the temptations, Jesus remained obedient in all ways...even to the end of the journey at the cross. We tend to think more about the humanity of Jesus when we want his understanding of our experiences; often when we are in distress. That Jesus experienced joy and sadness; friendship and betrayal are aspects of his humanity with which we identify. The Epistle reading from Colossians lifts up Jesus as a role model, these believers are told to emulate the man Jesus. In the chapters before today's passage the letter expounds on what not to do—the rules for a follower of Christ are prohibited from selfishness and meanness; they are not to practice idolatry and enmity toward others. Today's passage marks a shift which tells them because they are chosen by God; loved by God, then their behavior should reflect these realities which now separate them from their previous life. The metaphor they are given is to clothe themselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. They are to forgive each other, because they have been forgiven. (Now where do we find that instruction?) They are encouraged to let the word of Christ dwell within them—to grow into being like the person who dwelled among them to show them the way. These are positive characteristics which they are to "put on" so that they live these qualities. These are not just traits they have but become actions they take because of what God has done—In other words, Christian life as described is because of the gospel. Colossians celebrates the gift of God through Jesus Christ to the community of faith. The gift is a new context—life in Christ—and a new power—love—given to them for living together—the capacity to bind all godliness together into a divine perfection as citizens in God's kingdom. This clothing ourselves is to be with the new, renewed self that comes with the indwelling of Christ. In Ephesians 6 Paul commands that we put on the whole armor of God, naming each piece's function which will aid us in our life's journey. Using

the imagery of putting Christ's traits as putting on clothing, we can assemble these positives of a Christian life to resemble getting dressed. The articles of clothing that will make us look like Christ are compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. So what would these look like as clothing? With what articles of clothing do we begin? When Paul mentions compassion and humility he is describing the foundation garments of life, because these two character traits are fundamental to human relationships. They summarize how we feel deep down inside about each other and about ourselves. Putting on compassion means that we feel with each other; understand and share feelings. Humility as a foundation is how we feel about ourselves—not negatively, but with the understanding that it's not all about us—humility takes away the focus on ourselves; it keeps us from insisting on our own way, our own rights and our own agenda. Without compassion and humility human relationships don't work. The basic work clothes of a Christian life are kindness and gentleness. Kindness means, at the least, to be courteous and considerate of other people. Simple human kindness can do more to illustrate the life changing work of Christ within than almost anything else. And putting on gentleness goes a long way in dealing with the violent world around us which makes us all feel so fragile. Putting on the shoes of patience can help deal with the problem filled world—patience can prevent problems from becoming splits, divisions, hostilities and warfare between groups. Putting on patience allows us to keep walking with each other, even when it feels like an endurance race. And because we human beings can so easily annoy each other, we need to carry a full wallet of forgiveness from which we can pull out a big wad which might be 70 x times 7 as Jesus recommended. The final article of clothing which he mentions would be the overcoat of love which Paul urges to be put on over all these virtues because it binds them all together in a perfect unity—a community living together and by their actions witnessing to Christ's presence with them. As the passage from Colossians closes, Paul urges whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus. These pieces of clothing are human traits, traits which Jesus modeled for us. If we begin our days with determination to don these traits, we too can grow in wisdom as well as years. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.