

## GROWING IN WISDOM

*Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." He said to them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" But they did not understand what he said to them. Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.*

(Luke 2:41-52, NRSV)

“Have you seen Jesus?” Such words, weighted with concern, surely passed through the crowd of Mary and Joseph's friends. They had all made the annual pilgrimage from Nazareth to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. After the festivities ended and their religious commitments had been kept, the crowd journeyed toward home. But their celebratory spirit turned to one of anxiety when they realized that they had left Jerusalem one short. The boy Jesus was nowhere to be found.

I've always wondered how it was that Mary and Joseph managed to lose Jesus. You'd think that if your child were the Son of God you'd really keep an eye on him. Historians reason that Mary and Joseph probably kept the custom of the day in which the women and children walked first with the men walking last. At age 12, Jesus could have fallen into either camp. Therefore each parent may have assumed that Jesus was with the other one. Likewise, the caravan of travelers included many friends and relatives from Nazareth. Jesus could have been with any number of friends or cousins. Upon realizing that Jesus was missing, Mary and Joseph frantically headed back to Jerusalem. They found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening and asking questions.

When Mary and Joseph found Jesus, they were probably relieved and angry at the same time. They told Jesus that they had been worried sick, searching for him for 3 days. “Son, why have you treated us so?” they implored. Jesus replied that they should have known his whereabouts all along: “Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?” This brief story is the only biblical narrative that relates anything about Jesus between his infancy and the onset of his ministry at age 30.

Several interpretations have been offered as to what Jesus was doing in that temple some 2,000 years ago. The Bible tells us that he was listening to the rabbis and asking questions. Verse 47 notes that the teachers were amazed at his understanding. Some people take this to mean that Jesus was actually teaching the teachers. But I believe this interpretation does an injustice to the humanity of Jesus. As a young man, Jesus was surely interested in his faith and thirsted to learn as much as he could about God. But just because he was God's Son didn't mean that he was born with any more knowledge or wisdom than the rest of us.

Jesus was fully human as well as fully divine. Being human meant that he had to learn to walk, talk, read, and reason just like we do. He had to learn wisdom too. He had undoubtedly learned much from the local rabbi in his hometown synagogue. But having the chance to listen and ask questions of the rabbis in Jerusalem must have seemed like a dream come true.

At the end of today's Gospel reading from Luke we are told that Jesus "increased in wisdom, in stature, and in favor with God and people" (2:52, JB). Knowledge is important, but it cannot replace wisdom. Knowledge is easy. It's ours for the taking. We live in an information age with the internet, cell phones, faxes, enormous bookstores, and a new cable channel a day. Information and knowledge abound, but it seems that wisdom is in short supply. Wisdom goes a step beyond knowledge. According to *Webster's Dictionary*, wisdom is "the intelligent application of learning." Synonyms of wisdom include "insight, good sense, and judgment." Today's Gospel lesson tells us that Jesus himself grew in wisdom. It seems that wisdom is crucial if we are to make progress as individuals and survive as a human family.

Where can we, living at the beginning of a new millennium, look for wisdom? As Christians, our starting point is the Bible. For centuries the Bible has been a source of wisdom and inspiration. In the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament, we are told that God is the source of wisdom. Several books in the Bible are known as wisdom literature including Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job, and certain Psalms. T.J. Kleinhans, a retired Lutheran chaplain, points out that, "The concept of wisdom in the Old Testament relates not just to knowledge and skill but most of all to spirituality, goodness, kindness and usefulness to society. Thus the coming Messiah is characterized in Isaiah 9:6 and 11:2 as a 'Wonderful Counselor' and the one on whom 'the Spirit of the Lord shall rest...the spirit of wisdom and understanding'" (*The Dictionary of Bible and Religion*, p. 1112).

No doubt such passages as these from Isaiah influenced Jesus in his formative years. We see evidence of this influence in the New Testament where the teachings of Jesus are considered the pinnacle of biblical wisdom. Like King Solomon, he spoke proverbs such as, "Physician heal thyself" (Luke 4:23). The apostle Paul referred to Jesus as "the wisdom of God," (I Corinthians 1:24, 30) further stating that in Christ all the treasures of wisdom are hidden (Colossians 2:3). The book of James, inspired by the teachings of Jesus, is an excellent example of wisdom literature as well. When we read the scriptures faithfully, we will grow in wisdom.

In addition to scripture, how else can we grow in wisdom? Today's story provides several insights. We know from the story that the first way that young Jesus was nurtured in wisdom was through his family's faith. Certainly the circumstances of Jesus' birth illustrate Mary and Joseph's faith, and the fact that they traveled to Jerusalem for Passover shows their continuing commitment to God. In practicing their faith, they not only grew in wisdom themselves, they nurtured wisdom in their son.

Today's story offers us another clue in our search for wisdom. When Mary and Joseph finally tracked young Jesus down, he was sitting amongst the teachers in the temple. Like Jesus, we all need mentors and teachers of wisdom. These may be family members, friends, coaches, or my personal favorite: ministers. Whoever they are, we all need people who are wise to lead us in the paths of wisdom. Not only is wisdom taught, it is absorbed. When we spend time around people of understanding we soak it up ourselves.

My grandmother was always a source of wisdom for me. I can remember so many times when I would be at her house on a Saturday afternoon, especially when I was home from college. We'd sit around her kitchen table, she would drink a cup of coffee and I would eat whatever dessert she had baked, usually my favorite cherry pie. We would talk about the world's problems, and the problems of people we knew. We would talk about the goings on in our family, and whatever dilemmas I currently faced.

Granny was a good listener with a kind heart. Above all she was a very spiritual person who had studied the Bible her whole life and taught the women's Sunday School class at the First Baptist Church of Collierville, Tennessee, for more years than anyone could remember. She counseled the women in her class through divorce and death, unemployment and problem children. When I needed to think through an important issue, I came to Granny's kitchen table. She was my sounding board. Surrounding ourselves with good teachers, mentors, and friends puts us on the path to wisdom.

Not only was Jesus sitting among the teachers listening, but he was wise enough to ask questions. The teachers were astonished at the questions that young 12-year-old Jesus was asking. Was Jesus asking theologically complex questions in order to impress or overshadow the teachers? I doubt it. Jesus had been taught by his family to take his faith seriously. Here in the temple, we find Jesus learning all he could about the ways of God. There are people who accept whatever they are taught without ever examining or questioning it. But to truly make our faith our very own, we must be willing to wrestle with it and ask the tough questions. We will only find wisdom if we seek it with our whole hearts.

Are there other ways to grow in wisdom? Certainly honest introspection, experience, and life itself can all serve to make us wiser. But there are no shortcuts. If Jesus himself needed to grow in wisdom, we too must grow little by little. Wisdom is not in-born, it must be learned and nurtured.

We have all needed wisdom lately, to navigate ourselves and our families through uncharted waters. We have had to make wise choices about what to tell our children, knowing that we cannot protect them from what they hear at school. We have had to figure out whether or not we wanted to continue working in the city or even living near it. We have had to make decisions about travel and seriously weigh all our options. And we have needed wisdom to keep our anxiety in check as we wonder what could happen next. There is a certain amount of knowledge we need to make informed decisions. But on a deeper level, we need God's wisdom to help us find the right path for us. And the path that is right for one person is not necessarily right for another.

Both knowledge and wisdom are important. We need each. Knowledge allows us to construct complex theologies; wisdom teaches us the value of a childlike faith. Knowledge helps us earn a living; wisdom teaches us that "it is better to give than to receive." Knowledge contributes to effective leadership; wisdom helps us follow God. Knowledge teaches us that death touches all; wisdom urges faith in the Christ who conquered death.

Growing in wisdom is not easy, but the good news is that we have access to the same God who helped Jesus grow in wisdom. May God's Spirit guide, deepen, and nurture us in such wisdom today, and throughout the coming year. AMEN.

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## PASTORAL PRAYER

The holiday rush still swirls in our heads, O God, as we pause to worship you. Focus our minds, still our hearts, slow us down that we might hear the still small voice of your Spirit. God of all wisdom, we ask that your wisdom and truth be made known to us. Information abounds, but sometimes wisdom is hard to find. Give wisdom to our nation's leaders and to the leaders of all of earth's nations; give wisdom to our church and the church universal; give us wisdom as we make choices day by day, which have the potential to lead us into closer fellowship with you.

And now, O God, we thank you for your nearness and your never ending love, through Jesus we pray. AMEN.