

This morning we return more intentionally to the Year of the Bible. During the fall, for close to three and a half months, we journeyed our way through the Old Testament and Intertestamental times that led up to the birth of Jesus.

Then, during four weeks of the Christmas and Epiphany seasons, we looked at the birth of Jesus. Next Sunday we will celebrate communion together as we begin five Sundays in which we look at the ministry of Jesus, his baptism and temptations, his mission, the way that he taught, the way he experienced resistance. Then, during Lent, we will walk with Jesus throughout Holy Week, as we experience the events that led directly to Jesus' death and resurrection. Most of this exploration will come from the book of Luke.

So, to summarize – four weeks on the birth of Jesus, 12 weeks on the final three years of his human life on earth. Today, then, we will spend one day trying to capture the remaining 29-plus years of Jesus' life as Luke summarizes them.

Sounds like a daunting task, but maybe it's not that hard. You see, we know very little about the childhood of Jesus. The books of Mark and John have no real birth narratives.

Matthew has a birth narrative, but it tends to focus on those around him. There's genealogy and the birth, told largely from the perspective of Joseph. There's the Magi, the escape into Egypt, the slaughter of the innocents, and the return from Egypt. Though Jesus is present in these stories, he's in some sense almost an afterthought – he's the subject of this political intrigue that Mike explored last week. Then in chapter 3, we pick up with John the Baptist and Jesus' ministry begins.

Now, it's fair to point out that there *are* other stories about Jesus' childhood. The "Infancy Gospel of Thomas," for example, is solely made up of stories from Jesus' first 12 years. Jesus makes sparrows out of clay and brings them to life. He heals the injured, raises the dead, and curses his enemies so that they die. He shows up his teachers with his intelligence. I haven't read the book, but I sense that it portrays Jesus as this smart-aleck kid that probably most of us would quite frankly get annoyed by.

Perhaps that's one of the many stories that Luke talks about in the first verses of chapter 1, when he talks about his purpose for writing, when he tells Theophilus that he has done the research and is writing down the truth about what Theophilus has heard.

So in the first two chapters of Luke we have these birth and childhood narratives, told in a much more complex way than in Matthew. There's more narrative. There's more significant characters. There's

more of the human drama that captures the joys and anxieties of childrearing. Some have described Luke's infancy narratives as being the feminine counterpart to Matthew's. Not surprising, perhaps -- a third of the material that is unique to Luke focuses on women. So for example, it's Elizabeth and Mary, not Zechariah and Joseph, who first hear of the births of John the Baptist and Jesus.

This morning, as we think about the 32 verses in Luke 2 that describe the infancy and childhood of Jesus, the only 32 verses like that in the whole scripture, let's think of them as a drama in three acts. Let's listen to Act 1:

(Reading of Luke 2:21-40)

Wonderful story. One of my very favorites, actually. If you'd like to hear a particularly poignant telling of the story, Google singer Michael Card's "Now that I've held him in my arms." I posted it to our church Facebook group, and I'll include a link on our Web site.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dI5iaFQaTZg>.

But it's also a very familiar story, and one of the dangers of a story being too familiar is that we can blip past the details and not catch some of the very significant teaching that is present. In this story, Luke starts to set up his picture of who Jesus is. For example:

- Verse 22 speaks of "*their* purification" – the entire family's. This journey of Mary and Joseph to the temple fits three separate ceremonies as they are recorded in the Old Testament:
 - There's a purification of a woman after childbirth (as instructed in Leviticus 12).
 - There's the presentation of the firstborn to God (as in Exodus 13).
 - And there's the dedication of the firstborn into the Lord's service, as Hannah did with baby Samuel (in 1 Samuel 2).
 - **Jesus came from a family that sought to honor God and to follow God's laws.**
- In verse 24, Mary presents two turtledoves. According to Leviticus (12:8), that's an acceptable sacrifice for those who are poor.
 - **Jesus came from a family that was not particularly well off.** Perhaps it's no wonder, then, that he will show an affinity for the poor throughout his ministry.
- In verses 25 and 36, we are introduced to Simeon and Anna, two senior adults who are at the temple that day.
 - Simeon, not a priest, but still a devout man. Simeon, who has been waiting, and praying, for the consolation, for the salvation of God's people. Simeon, a name which means "God has heard" or even "God has heard that I was unloved."
 - It's a separate sermon, but I've had to wonder – did Simeon get up that morning and hear a message that said, "Today, Simeon. Today is the day that you will see the Messiah." Or did he wake up that morning, like he did every morning, and say to

himself, “I must go to the temple today, because this might be the day when I see God, and I don’t want to take the chance of missing it.” I think both of those are powerful metaphors for our longing and seeking after God.

- And Anna, a prophetess, one of only five women in the Bible introduced this way. Waiting, with fasting and prayer, each day and each night. Her piety is emphasized by her constant presence in the temple. And though her words are not recorded like Simeon’s, her testimony makes everyone aware that God is doing something special in this child.
- **Simeon and Anna – two examples of those who have been longing, like the people of Israel, to see God.**
- To see God. The language of “seeing” and “sight” is prominent in these verses:
 - In verse 26, it is “revealed” to Simeon that he will not “see” death.
 - In verses 30-32, Simeon says, “My eyes have ‘seen’ your salvation.” It is a “light” for “revelation,” not just for Israel, but also for the Gentiles, for all people. That’s a hint of universal perspective that will be part of the author’s perspective in Luke and Acts.
 - In 34 and 35, it is a “sign” that will be “revealed.”
 - We think of John as the “gospel of light,” but that metaphor is present in Luke as well. Remember a day 33 years later, in the last chapter of Luke, when two disciples walked from Jerusalem to their home in Emmaus. In spiritual darkness, despondent about the death of the one they had come to know and love. And a stranger came along. The stranger explained how these events must come to pass. Then the stranger broke bread, and their eyes were opened. **Like Simeon and Anna, Cleopas and his friend were able to see their salvation.**
- But there will also be trouble.
 - “This child is destined for the rise and fall of Israel,” says Zechariah in verse 34, using imagery from the book of Isaiah. Jesus will split the nation in two.
 - And this division will be particularly difficult for Mary. In verse 35, Simeon prophesies that a sword will pierce her heart. It’s a contrast to three stories in Luke where there is division between Jesus and his family.
 - In Luke 8:21, Jesus says, “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.”
 - In 11:27-28, a woman says, “Blessed is the womb that bore you.” And Jesus responds, “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it!”
 - And in 12:51-53, Jesus says, “Do you think that I have come to bring peace to this earth? From now on a household will be divided, father against son, son against father, mother against daughter, daughter against mother.”
 - **The Messiah is here, Simeon says, but the way will not be easy. Not for Jesus, and not for Mary.**

And then Mary and Joseph returned home to Nazareth. With their baby. Who grew.

Let's listen, now, to Act 2.

(Drama from Luke 2:41-51)

In a sense, the pain that Zechariah spoke about to Mary begins in this very next story. Joseph and Mary take their boy to Jerusalem for the Passover. There are three festivals which drew the Jews to Jerusalem – the Passover, the Feast of Tabernacles, and Pentecost. But most poorer families like this one would only make one trip a year, and the Passover was likely the priority. The Passover, symbol of Israelite redemption from Egypt.

Only men were required to attend the festival, so the fact that Mary went as well, and that they went “as usual,” gives a hint of the family’s piety and devotion to the faith that I described a few minutes ago. Now a 12-year-old *girl* would have been seen as a young woman. The only other 12-year-old I could find in the Bible is Jairus’ daughter, whom Jesus raises from the dead in Luke 8:42. But the word for “daughter” there is the one that is used when Jesus talks to adult women, such as when he says to the bleeding woman, “daughter, your faith has saved you.”

Jesus, by contrast, is a boy, 12 years old and a year away from the *bar mitzvah*. When the festival ended, Joseph and Mary began the return trip home. The text says that Jesus *stayed behind*. This isn’t the movie “Home Alone,” where the parents forget their child before heading on vacation. And it’s not Huck Finn, where Huck runs away from home. Rather, Jesus “stays.” An intentional act, like Moses “stayed” on Mount Horeb. The Greek word is usually translated as “endured.” This seems to be an active choice on Jesus’ part.

Jerusalem is a three days’ walk from Nazareth, so at the end of the first day, when Joseph and Mary settle in for the evening, they can’t find Jesus. Perhaps some of us have had that kind of experience. We may have gotten separated from our children in a shopping mall or some other large place, and panic sets in. Jesus was a 12-year-old, but I imagine the panic was similar for Mary and Joseph.

So *three days later*, they finally find him. Why did it take so long? If you left your child here at Waterford, you could probably find him or her in 15 minutes. But the temple is a big place, recently filled for the Passover. Think of trying to find your child in a crowded football stadium, or after a big concert in a huge venue.

They found him in the temple. The temple, where Luke will record many more instances where the teachers of the law will encounter Jesus. And Jesus is sitting *among* the teachers. Not at their feet, where you would expect a boy of 12, learning from the teachers, but *among* them.

And despite how everyone is amazed at Jesus and his way of asking and responding to questions, Mary responds like perhaps any parent would. If Jesus had a middle name, this is probably where we would hear it! Something like, “Lyle Gene Miller, where have you been? Your dad and I have been scared

spitless about you! We have been so worried!” The word that’s translated in the NRSV as “anxious” shows up elsewhere as “agony” or “grieving.”

And Jesus responds with what might be a typical 12-year-old’s response, “What’s the big deal, Mom? I must be in my Father’s house!” Or in some ancient manuscripts, “I must be about my Father’s business.” Not surprising that in verse 50 they don’t understand what’s going on!”

But like a good boy, Jesus went home with his parents. And like the devout Jewish boy that he was, he followed the commandment to obey his father and mother.

And like she did on that night 12 years ago when the shepherds came to town, like she did back in verse 19, Mary “treasured” all of these things in her heart. To “treasure” is an idiom – to “keep in view,” to “place it in the heart,” “to store it in the mind as valuable.” All the kinds of things that a mother might be expected to do.

Let’s listen to Act 3:

(Luke 2:52)

“And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and humankind.”

So let’s look briefly at this verse. There’s an interesting progression that happens throughout the first chapters of Luke. Back in Luke 1:80, we read that John the Baptist “grew and became strong in spirit.” In chapter 2, verse 40, we read that Jesus “grew and became strong, filled with wisdom,” that “the favor of God was upon him.” In this verse, we have the addition of the “favor of humankind.”

And I’ve heard this verse described as a summary of the Bible’s children’s or youth ministry program. It sounds, quite frankly, like Education 101 in one of our church colleges. There is full integration of all the parts of our life.

Jesus grew...

- in wisdom, the academic dimension
- in stature, the physical dimension
- in favor with God, the spiritual dimension
- and in favor with humankind, the social dimension

With some creativity, these line up with the Jesus’ later command to love the Lord with...

- all our heart
- all our soul
- all our strength
- and all our mind

That integrated approach to learning is why I have such a passion for faith formation and, quite frankly, why I have such a passion for the mission of church camps and Mennonite schools at all levels.

So what did this kind of integrated faith formation look like for Mary and Joseph? Well, as I think about the way they followed the scriptures in so many other areas of their life, I have to assume that Joseph and Mary followed the scriptures in their faith formation activities with their son. I have to assume that they followed Deuteronomy 6:

⁴ Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. ⁵ You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. ⁶ Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. ⁷ Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. ⁸ Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, ⁹ and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

I have to assume that Mary and Joseph followed the instructions of Psalm 78:4:

“We will tell to the coming generations the glorious deeds of the Lord and his might and the wonders that he has done.”

Those are the same kinds of integrated faith formation we seek to do as a congregation today. In your mailbox last week was an invitation to affirm Ron and Vicki Weirich as lay ministry partners for a newly formed Family Life Ministry Team. That same memo highlighted some particular focus points for the ministry team. One of them in particular lines up closely with the story of Jesus in the temple. It's our emphasis on being an intergenerational congregation.

Think with me -- why did it take Mary and Joseph a full day to realize that Jesus was missing? Were they delinquent parents? From the things that we know about them, it's hard to think that. Instead, I'm going to assume that they thought Jesus was with other pilgrims on the journey back home from Jerusalem. I suspect they probably thought he was traveling with the group, perhaps listening to the stories of a mentor figure from their community. They probably thought he was part of an intergenerational team of faith formers that was literally accompanying him on the journey.

That's what we want to do. For many years, we've worked hard to ensure that we have a 1:5 ratio between adults and children or youth in our programming activities. We want to have at least one adult present for each five children or youth at Venture Club or youth group, for example. We will continue to do that.

But in a book called *The Sticky Faith Guide for Your Family*, Dr. Kara Powell suggests that a 5:1 ratio is just as important. Her colleague, one of the best known writers in youth ministry, says we should have five adults for each child or youth.

We're not talking about having 150 MYF sponsors for our 30 youth. Nor are we talking about five adults to whom parents can "outsource the spiritual, emotional, social, and intellectual development" of their children. Rather, they say, we're talking about five adults "who know our kids' names. Who pray for

them. Who show up occasionally at our kids [extracurricular events]. Five adults who are safe and caring people who can form a web of support to catch our kids when they stumble and fall.”¹

Waterford has a lot of those people. I hear the stories. A few years ago, one of our high school students was taking part in an evening of visiting senior adults in the congregation. The senior adult couple told him how, unknown to him, they had been specifically been praying for him after randomly picking him from the group when the MYF and senior adults had spent an evening together in our fellowship. That experience made a tremendous impact on the youth.

Or what another adult does. Our family has a standing joke that the ballgames at a local high school cannot officially begin until a particular individual from our congregation has arrived. He’s such a regular presence there, and on many Sundays, I’ve seen him talking with the youth about their games from the past week.

But I wonder what else we might do. Powell offers some other ideas we might consider. What if, during the month that a student turns a certain age, say 13, the student identifies five persons in the congregation that he or she respects? And what if, sometime during that birthday month, each of those five adults is invited to take the student out to lunch, or to go on a walk, or to spend some time together in the kitchen. And what if, during the time together, the adult is encouraged to pass along a piece of spiritual advice or to describe the significance of a particular Bible verse to them.

Powell’s book actually identifies another one of our family ministry priorities as also being significant in making faith stick – that of serving others. In fact, when the researchers asked 500 youth group “graduates” which of 13 different activities they wish they had more of in high school, mission and service opportunities ranked second and third, behind only “time for deep conversation.” By contrast games, what many of us have assumed are important for children and youth in developing relationships, ranked 13th out of 13.

I actually think these two things -- intergenerational opportunities and service -- dovetail very nicely. So when the Venture Club goes to The Depot later this winter, we hope to invite an adult Sunday school class to join us. If your class would like to do that, let me know! We will have a great time. And we’ll have snacks!

The other way in which service particularly helps faith stick is when it’s done as a family. The trips that some of us have taken to Mashulaville, Mississippi, are great examples. What if we made it a priority as a congregation to help each family spend at least one school break or vacation opportunity in Mashulaville, or with DOOR in Chicago, or SWAP in Kentucky? What if each family spent five consecutive days volunteering for different agencies in our community? Somehow, when I think of how much Jesus talked about serving others, I have to wonder if perhaps he learned that by serving at the Nazareth soup kitchen!

¹ Kara E. Powell, *The Sticky Faith Guide for Your Family: 100 Practical and Tested Ideas to Build Lasting Faith in Kids*, Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2014, p. 98.

At the end of a very prominent chapter, 1 Corinthians 13, Paul makes a statement that I think has too often unintentionally belittled children. "When I became an adult," Paul says, "I put away childish things."

By contrast, Jesus tells us that we must be more like a child. When he said that, I have to wonder if perhaps he was remembering the stories that his mother told him -- stories that she treasured in her heart, stories when she gently told him about the old man and the old woman who blessed him in the temple so many years earlier, stories when they were finally able to laugh about how Jesus had been left behind in the temple. May we, too, encourage and support our children as they grow in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and humankind.