

FIRST THINGS FIRST

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Why are you here today?

That question came up during our discussions at last Saturday's session retreat. I asked the elders, "If we took a survey one Sunday morning and asked the folks in the congregation one question — 'Why are you here today?' — what answers do you think we would get?"

Here are some of the suggested answers:

* It's Sunday.

* Force of habit

* I always come to church on Sunday.

* I like the fellowship and being with the people.

* So I won't feel guilty.

* To get recharged/to get my tank filled up for another week

* Because I had to . . . [this might apply more to children and teenagers, but what about you adults?] Maybe you've heard the story about the mother who woke her son up on Sunday morning and told him he needed to get ready to go to church. The son replied that he didn't want to go to church this morning. She told him, "Nonsense! You have to get up and go to church." "But, mom!" he said, "everybody hates me, the sermons are boring, and none of my friends ever come." His mother replied, "Now, son! First, everybody doesn't hate you, only a couple of bullies and you just have to stand up to them. Second, the sermons mean a lot to many people. If you listened to them, you'd be surprised at how good they are in helping people. Third, you have lots of friends at church. They're always having you over to their house. And, finally, you have to go — you're the pastor!"

But there's another way to understand the reason, "Because I had to!" When the 12-year-old Jesus asked his mother, "Why were you searching for me?" he also asked, "Didn't you know that I must be in my Father's house?" *The Message* version of Luke 2:49 puts it very well: "Why were you looking for me? Didn't you know that ***I had to be here***, dealing with the things of my Father?" In other words, it was necessary for Jesus to be where he was. That word for "had to be/must/it is necessary" has been called a "Jesus word." Later in the gospel, Jesus tells his disciples about how he must/has to/it is necessary for him to go up to Jerusalem, be handed over to the authorities, and be killed. It's not that Jesus didn't have a choice, either as a 12 year old boy in the temple or as a 33 year old man on the cross. Quite the opposite is true — he made the choice to "deal with the things of his Father," to put first things first in his life in accord with the ultimate will of God.

This sense of “must/has to/it is necessary” in Jesus’ life is grounded in his faithful Jewish roots. Last week we heard about Joseph and Mary being obedient to God’s law by presenting the eight-day old Jesus for circumcision and the six-week old Jesus for dedication to God. Today we hear about their regular habit of going up to Jerusalem for the annual Passover Feast. We can safely assume Jesus regularly went with them on these pilgrimages. Now, at 12 years old, he is on the threshold of becoming a *bar mitzvah*, a “son of the commandment,” when he will take on the responsibilities of God’s law.

If you look ahead to chapter 4 in Luke’s gospel, you read that “when he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom.” (4:16) Jesus’ family life was grounded in the worship and service of God. But, even more than that, Jesus’ growing understanding of his vocation as Messiah was grounded in the same faithful worship and service of God. “Didn’t you know that I must be in my Father’s house, dealing with the things of my Father?” These are Jesus’ first words in Luke’s gospel. To this point, everything we know about Jesus we have heard from Luke himself, from the angels, from the shepherds, from Simeon and Anna. Now, Jesus gives us an important hint about who he is and what his life will be like.

Last Sunday, I said that we have only five stories about Jesus as a baby or a young boy: the two Christmas stories in Matthew and Luke; the two stories about his circumcision and his dedication in the temple; and this story about Jesus in the temple with the teachers. Actually, I need to qualify that earlier statement — we have only five stories about Jesus’ childhood in the *canonical* scriptures, what we call “the Bible.” But there are other writings that date from the late 1st century, early 2nd century A.D. and beyond, some of which are called “gospels.”

For instance, there is a writing called “The Infancy Gospel of Thomas,” that has been dated from the first half of the 2nd century A.D., about 100 years after Jesus. One commentator has noted, “Early Christians were naturally curious to learn the details of Jesus’ life. . . Other stories of Jesus as a youth were soon in circulation. Behind many of the legends lay a fundamental question: if Jesus was a miracle-working Son of God as an adult, what was he like as a child?”¹

“The Infancy Gospel of Thomas” has some entertaining stories about the young Jesus — such as the time he made some sparrows out of clay on the riverbank on the Sabbath, then clapped his hands and they flew away. There are also stories about Jesus going to school. Joseph wanted Jesus to learn to read, so he sent him to a teacher. The teacher’s plan was to teach Jesus to read Greek, then Hebrew. He wrote out the Greek alphabet for Jesus and recited it to him many times, but Jesus didn’t say anything. Finally Jesus looked at the teacher and said, “If you are really a teacher and know the letters well, tell me the power of the Alpha, and I will tell you the power of the Beta.” That teacher didn’t teach Jesus for long.

So Joseph sent Jesus to another teacher, who was Joseph’s good friend and had asked to teach the child. Joseph said, “If you’re that courageous, brother, take him along with you.” When they entered the classroom, Jesus saw a book lying on the desk.

Instead of reading the book, Jesus began to speak in the Holy Spirit and teach all of the adults there about the Law. When he heard what had happened, Joseph ran to the school to get Jesus, and his friend said, “You should know, brother, that I took the child as a pupil; but he is filled with great grace and wisdom. Now, I ask you brother, take him home.”

The final story in The Infancy Gospel of Thomas is very similar to today’s gospel lesson. Mary and Joseph find Jesus in the temple, where he was amazing people because “he questioned the elders and teachers of the people, sharply explaining the chief points of the Law and the parables of the prophets.” Jesus’ answer to his mother is a bit different: “Don’t you know that I must be with those who are my Father’s?” The main difference is what the scribes and Pharisees say to Mary (not found in Luke’s story): “Are you the mother of this child? You are most fortunate among women, for God has blessed the fruit of your womb. For we have never seen or heard of such glory, such virtue and wisdom.”²

We are like those early Christians. We are naturally curious about the details of Jesus’ early life. But it’s real easy to get off track and run down rabbit holes trying to chase down those details, when Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John don’t provide us with that information. Some of the legends about Jesus as a child are very entertaining, but they miss the point of Luke’s story about the boy Jesus in the temple.

Some people have said Jesus sounds kind of “sassy” in this story when he talks back to his mother. But Luke makes sure we know that “he came to Nazareth, and was obedient to [his parents].” (2:51) Luke’s Jesus isn’t nearly as sassy as the boy in The Infancy Gospel of Thomas. In fact, Luke’s Jesus is much more subdued. He actually is doing what was expected of any faithful 12-year-old Jewish boy who was preparing to become a *bar mitzvah* — listening to and asking questions of the teachers in the temple. Granted, they were amazed at his understanding and his answers. Still, Luke paints a picture of Jesus beginning to come to an awareness of who he is and (more importantly) what kind of life he was going to lead. In other words, the story about the boy Jesus in the temple is about life priorities, about putting “first things first.”

God’s Word always calls us to put “first things first.”

* Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone. (Deuteronomy 6:4)

* You shall have no other gods before me. (Exodus 20:3)

* You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. (Mark 12:30)

* I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. (Romans 12:1)

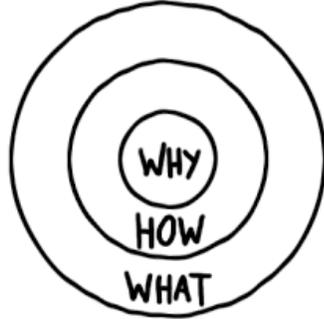
* I beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called. (Ephesians 4:1)

* But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. (Matthew 6:33)

* Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s. (Mark 12:17)

* I want nothing more than to live close to you. (Psalm 84:2, variation)

In the upper left hand corner on the front of the bulletin, you will see what looks like a target with the words “Why. How. What.”



Below the announcements, you will see this graphic:

You must define your **why** before you can begin with the **what** and the **how**.

On our retreat, our elders and I talked about “The Golden Circle” and about defining our “why” as the Wallace Presbyterian Church before beginning with the “what” and the “how.” Stephen Covey, the businessman and keynote speaker, said, “The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing.” Our Lord Jesus said, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these.” Our session is committed to helping all of us “keep the main thing the main thing” and put “first things first.” That’s what Luke’s story of the 12-year-old boy Jesus in the temple teaches us.

As I thought about today’s sermon, I wanted to steer away from the sentimentality so often associated with the few stories we have about the baby and boy Jesus. I also wanted us parents to avoid any common commiseration we might have with an aggravated Mary and Joseph, as tempting as it is to focus on that part of the story of Jesus in the temple.

It’s easy and tempting to try to keep the baby Jesus wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in the manger, or cradled in old man Simeon’s arms, or even as an adolescent obedient to his parents in Nazareth. It’s tempting, because we know, in our heart of hearts, that this baby and young boy grows up — “in wisdom and in stature and in

years” — and we know what happens to him in the end, precisely because Jesus always put “first things first” in his life and in his relationship with God.

In a few short weeks, we will enter the season of Lent. We will reflect on Jesus’ life of putting “first things first” and what that means for our lives as his followers. As we leave the Christmas season behind and think about what Jesus calls us to do, we would do well to consider seriously the question, “What is our why?” In other words, will we be dealing with the things of our Father God? Will we put “first things first” when it comes to God?

Let us pray: It is good to be here in your presence, Lord. Here we are at home with each other and with you. Here we discover the joy of life and the strength to live each day with praise to you in our hearts. You alone are God! You alone can show us the way to the life that lasts forever. We love you, Lord, and we lift this prayer in adoration of your holy name. Amen.

NOTES

¹Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures: Books that Did Not Make It into the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 57.

²Ibid., pp. 61-62.