

When I Grow Up

A Sermon on Luke 2:41-52

*Glenview Community Church
(United Church of Christ)
Glenview, Illinois*

Dr. Kent Ulery, Interim Senior Pastor
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The first, second, and third graders' music concert was entitled "When I Grow Up: A Kid's Eye View of the World of Work." Among the songs the students sang were such memorable hits as "It's a Great Thing to be a Plumber," "I Wanna be a Baker," and "A Sailor's Life for Me." It was great fun; and I am sure that, even if the audience had not consisted solely of teachers, proud parents, and assorted relatives, an extended standing ovation still would have occurred.

The program's insert fascinated me. Printed by every child's name was the vocation to which each one aspired -- what these lower elementary school students wanted to be when they grew up. As expected, tied for first were teacher and veterinarian. However, the expanded set of jobs within the educational and the animal care fields both fell behind professional athletes...who, in turn, were edged out by those wishing a career in the arts. Would-be scientists and engineers constituted the next group, including two who already had decided to specialize in marine biology. The number looking forward to entering the medical field, and those wanting to work in one of the trades, were about equal. Far fewer than I anticipated wanted to become police officers and fire fighters. Naturally, one student was determined to grow up and be elected President. Finally, there were three career choices that completely caught me off guard, namely: professional Lego builder, Tae Kwan Do master, and the next President of Texas!

Missing was anyone interested in religious service. No priests or nuns. No rabbis or imams. No pastors or missionaries. Oh, at the end of the concert, one student, who had stumbled earlier and did not make it to the microphone in time to sing his line, was called forward by the music teacher and given a second chance. To great applause, he smiled and sang about wanting to grow up to be a preacher. But it was only a punchline in a song, causing an outburst of laughter throughout the auditorium. None of these young students felt any call to grow up to be clergy. And there was no indication any of their parents wanted them to either.

Children do grow up quickly. Seems like only yesterday, or the night before, that Jesus was a newborn baby in Mary's arms. Here he is, in the scripture assigned for today, already a twelve-year-old, in the Temple, informing his parents that he "must be in his Father's house." Also translated: "must be about his Father's business."

Can such seeds really be planted at such an early age? Let me speak personally. While I cannot remember precisely when, it was around third grade, at church camp, that I met my first missionary, Dr. Joyce Baker, a physician serving in a poor Honduran mountain village. I remember thinking that would be a cool thing to do. It was around age twelve that my pastor appeared at my house, presented me with a hardbound book entitled something like *What Do Clergy Do?*, and invited me to spend the day with him making hospital, nursing home, and shut-in calls. And it was around my sophomore year in high school that my parents put me on an overnight train, by myself, to St. Louis, where relatives I had never seen before met me, put me up in their home, and drove me to visit Eden Theology Seminary.

My experience was not that of some seminary students and ordained ministers who share that, while still children, they lined up their teddy bears, dolls, and stuffed animals to listen to them pretend to deliver sermons. I was three-quarters of the way through college before I decided to answer the call to ministry. But the nudging began at a much earlier age.

At age twelve, Jesus accompanied his parents when they journeyed to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. Passover celebrates the Angel of Death passing over the quarters of the Hebrew slaves, thereby saving the lives of the Hebrew children on the night the Egyptian Pharaoh relented and let God's people go. As such, Passover is the equivalent of July 4th. Passover celebrates liberation, independence, freedom. Passover is one of the three pilgrim festivals prescribed in the Torah. Luke tells us it was the holy family's practice to celebrate the Passover, in Jerusalem, every year.

Joseph, Mary, and Jesus would not have been alone. According to the first century historian, Josephus, so many people flocked to the capital for the eight-day religious festival and national holiday that, throughout Israel, whole towns and villages were depopulated during Passover. Imagine Jerusalem's narrow streets teeming with crowds packed shoulder-to-shoulder. Imagine the sight, sound, and smells of thousands of animals sacrificed to God at the Temple. Imagine all those folks studying at the feet of the most learned Jewish scholars of the day, joyfully singing praises to God, giving alms for the poor.

Imagine all those families, each gathering around a table, likely with a few friends, seated from eldest to youngest, after sunset, in rooms dimly lit by small clay oil lamps. After washing one another's feet, after washing their own hands, imagine Joseph saying: "Blessed are you, O LORD our God, king of the universe, who has created the fruit of the vine... Blessed are you, O LORD our God, who has kept us alive, sustained us, and enabled us to enjoy this season." Then imagine the pouring of the first cup of wine with these words from Exodus 6: "I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians."

After the eating of bitter herbs, imagine the pouring of the second cup of wine; and Jesus, as a boy, asking, as the youngest child in Jewish homes still asks before the pouring of the second cup: "Why is this night different from all other nights? On all other nights we eat leavened or unleavened bread, but this night only unleavened bread. On all other nights we eat all kinds of

herbs, but this night only bitter herbs. Why do we dip the herbs twice? On all other nights we eat meat roasted, stewed, or boiled, but on this night why only roasted meat?"

Then imagine Joseph retelling the history of the Hebrews from Abraham through Moses, meat and vegetables brought to the table, everyone singing Psalms 113 and 114, and Joseph praying over the second cup: "Blessed are you, O LORD our God, king of the universe, who has created the fruit of the vine," and reciting, again from Ex. 6: "I will deliver you from their bondage."

Imagine hands washed again and the meal consumed. A cup of wine is poured a third time; the unleavened bread is blessed and broken. Imagine everyone offering a post-meal grace. Imagine Joseph praying over the third cup: "Blessed are you, O LORD our God, king of the universe, who has created the fruit of the vine," and reciting a third time from Ex. 6: "I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments."

Then imagine everyone blessing the fourth cup of wine in unison: "Blessed are you, O LORD our God, king of the universe, who has created the fruit of the vine." Joseph recites a fourth time from Exodus 6: "Then I will take you as my people, and I will be your God and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians." The fourth cup is drunk, and the Passover meal ends with all singing Psalms 115-118.

In this, the only story we have from Jesus' youth, Luke wants us to know that Jesus was raised by parents devoted to the practice of their faith, in a community with deep theological roots and rich religious traditions. Luke wants us to know that what the angel Gabriel told Mary about who the baby was within her womb, what Zechariah and Elizabeth and Simeon and Anna said about what that baby would grow up to do, what all Mary's ponderings in her heart had resulted in was Jesus being nurtured throughout his childhood in the will and ways of God.

Luke continues that following the Passover festival, as the family was making its way back to Nazareth, when they were a full day away from Jerusalem, they discovered Jesus missing. With our modern concern for child safety, it is hard to imagine how that long a time could pass without anyone noticing. But remember, whole villages traveled together to Jerusalem for the Passover, caravans of folk who had known each other all their lives, friends and neighbors and relatives who were always watching out for everyone's kids. They mingled as they walked, chatted, changing clusters of children played around them. No need to charge Mary and Joseph with negligence for assuming, as they must have, that Jesus was somewhere in their travel group, kidding around with his friends, perhaps playing tag with the other twelve-year-olds.

But when Jesus did not show up for supper, imagine the panic that set in. Had he lagged behind as they descended the dangerous mountain road and been abducted? As they neared Jericho, with the sun descending, had he wandered off into the discombobulating shadows of the wilderness and become disoriented? Surely, he would not have stayed in or returned to Jerusalem, disappearing into the capitol city? Where was he?

I have a clear remembrance from junior high of a Boy Scout becoming separated from our troop as we left Comiskey Park after watching a White Sox game. He missed the train back to our parked school bus. All our leaders knew was that he was somewhere on the south side of Chicago. Several hours later, we finally found him, just as he was about to board a Greyhound bus for home According to the FBI's National Crime Information Center, in 2020, there were 365,348 missing children reported in this country.ⁱ We need to pay attention to Amber Alerts.

Luke tells us Mary and Joseph searched for three long days. They found him, of all places, in the Temple, conversing with the rabbis, listening to them, asking them questions, learning from them...and everyone watching was absolutely amazed at all he knew at age twelve, the maturity of his questions, the insight of his answers to the rabbis' questions.

Mary was not impressed. "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." I suspect Luke understates Jesus' mom. At least, if that had been one of our boys...

But Jesus responds with his own questions: "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be about my Father's business?" Jesus already knew his calling by the age of twelve. He was not lost. He was right where he was supposed to be.

Ministry, finally, is neither a vocation nor a profession, neither a career nor a job. The ministry is a calling, in which one serves as "an interpreter of the word of God, a teller of stories, a rebuker of the political and religious establishment, a caregiver of souls, a healer of diseases, a leader of people, one who stands and delivers a word for our time, who calls us all to abandon lives of selfish gain, who issues to us a challenge to take up our cross and follow Jesus."ⁱⁱ

When the search committee eventually gets to interviews, they will discover some candidates have known since childhood they were called into the ministry when they grew up. Others will not have received their call until fully grown. But two things must become clear: both the final candidate and the congregation must perceive: that God has called one particular candidate to be "about his Father's business;" and that God is calling that person specifically to be at home in God's house serving here at the Glenview Community Church.

ⁱ <https://www.missingkids.org/content/ncmec/en/ourwork/impact.html>. Downloaded December 22, 2021.

ⁱⁱ Moody, Dwight A. "Where is Jesus?" https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2003378/where_is_jesus. December 30, 2012