

Pastor Peter Strommen

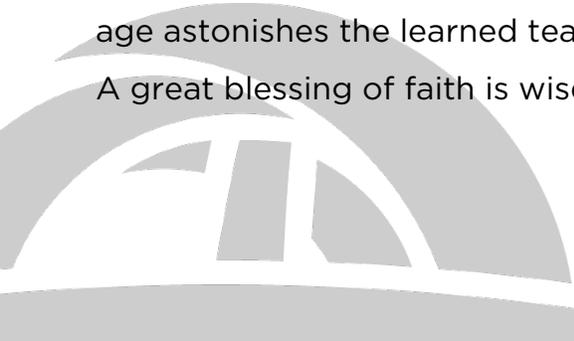
LUKE 2:41-52 NRSV

<sup>41</sup>Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. <sup>42</sup>And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. <sup>43</sup>When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. <sup>44</sup>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. <sup>45</sup>When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. <sup>46</sup>After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. <sup>47</sup>And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. <sup>48</sup>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." <sup>49</sup>He said to them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" <sup>50</sup>But they did not understand what he said to them. <sup>51</sup>Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart. <sup>52</sup>And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.

Our theme for this past Advent and Christmas Season has been "The Blessing of Faith." You've heard gifts like hope, love, joy, and the like lifted up. Today, what stands out to me is the gift of wisdom.

In all the sermons I've preached over my 46 years as a pastor, I don't think I've focused on wisdom before, and that is strange in a way. Wisdom is revered in scripture and traditionally regarded as a central virtue for mature faith. Luke's summing up of Jesus' growth as a young man highlights his wisdom. And certainly his activity in the Temple - - the center of Luke's story for today - - describes a hungry learner who by twelve years of age astonishes the learned teachers of the Temple.

A great blessing of faith is wisdom and a defining characteristic of Jesus.





## BUT BEFORE THE STORY, A WORD ABOUT CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE...

After extensive debate over just how to say it, the early church settled on describing Jesus' nature as both human and divine. That is, of course, a paradox, and paradoxes can't be explained. But we put it this way, because we can't explain Jesus without both. Take away either divine or human and you don't have the Jesus of the scriptures or the faith passed down by the early church.

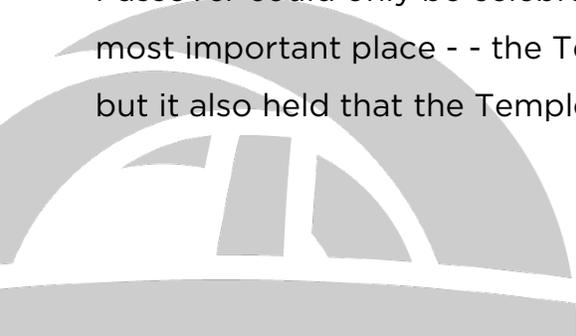
Here is why I'm mentioning this. Many Christians - - we Lutherans among them - - want to revere Jesus, and therefore, find it more difficult to affirm his humanity, emphasizing instead his divinity. And we lose something in that. Part of being human is to grow up, to learn, to experience life with its wonder, its hardships, its pain, and joys. The incarnation's wonder comes in seeing God in our humanity, putting a face on God that communicates to us.

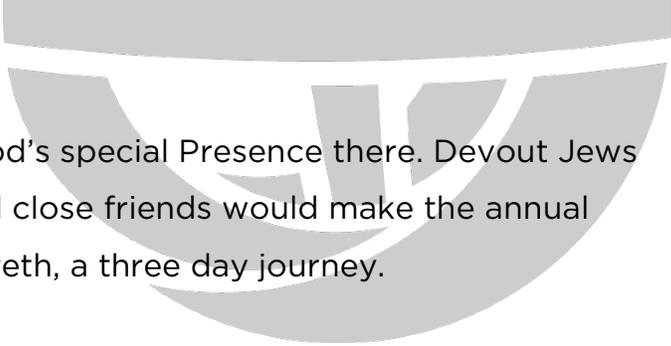
Luke's account of Jesus in the Temple at age 12 is the only reliable story of Jesus in his growing up years (between around his birth and his public ministry at about 30 years of age). It's full of what 12 years of age is all about as boys grow up. It's also full of what parents go through being parents.

## THE STORY

The setting centers on the Temple in Jerusalem, but the occasion is the annual pilgrimage of Jesus' family and friends to and from the Passover Festival there. It's helpful to understand that the Passover Festival is commanded in Exodus, and celebrates the essence of what it means to be a Jew: God's deliverance from slavery and creation of a people of promise.

Passover could only be celebrated in Jerusalem in Jesus' day and that came down to its most important place - - the Temple. Jewish teaching certainly saw God as everywhere, but it also held that the Temple was God's unique dwelling place among humanity. As





God's Chosen People, Israel had the honor of God's special Presence there. Devout Jews like Mary and Joseph, their extended family, and close friends would make the annual journey there, on foot no doubt, and from Nazareth, a three day journey.

We can imagine Jesus as a growing boy playing with his brothers and sisters and cousins as their group makes its way to Jerusalem. To be in a group would be more fun, and it would be safer. Everyone knows each other, and like a moving neighborhood, parents looked out for everyone's children. Mary and Joseph think nothing of not seeing Jesus on the first leg of their journey back home. They assume he is with his other relatives.

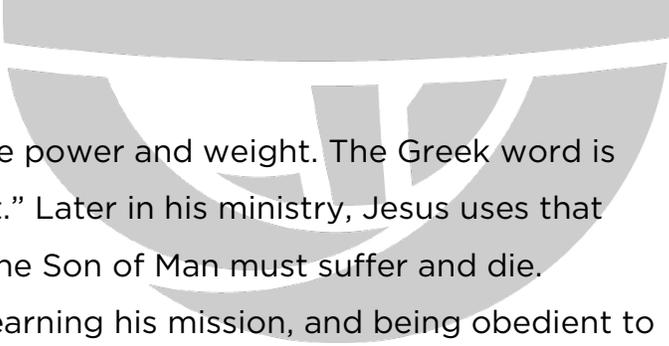
The drama starts for them that night. Jesus is not there! They hurry back to Jerusalem, and desperately search for their son amongst its large population of citizens and pilgrims. We parents can easily relate to their growing fear as their search stretches into several days. On the third day the lost boy is found, and Luke gives us but a brief summation of their reunion, but his few words convey much.

There is young Jesus, sitting at the feet of Jewish biblical scholars, listening and asking questions in some corner or room of that magnificent building. We can surmise three lasting reactions of Mary and Joseph upon seeing him - - relief, for one! Perhaps later on, great pride and amazement - -.as Luke says that these learned scholars were amazed by his questions and insight. And third, Mary is clearly angry.

Her words lead with "Child! Why have you treated us this way? Why we were searching for you with great anxiety." The word "child" reflects Mary's motherly instincts, but there is irony in her word. By Jewish custom, Jesus is no longer a child, but a man. He is twelve years old. And his answer is not that of a child, as in "sorry, mommy," but that of a man who stands in his identity and purpose. We see it in his answer.

"Why were you searching for me?" he replies, "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?"





“Must” is how we translate a Greek word of more power and weight. The Greek word is “dei,” and it means a strong, “it is necessary that.” Later in his ministry, Jesus uses that same word when he tells his shocked disciples the Son of Man must suffer and die. Jesus in the Temple has everything to do with learning his mission, and being obedient to his heavenly Father. It is necessary.

There is in this event a kind of collision between the most understandable reactions of his parents, and Jesus’ emerging recognition of his relationship with God.

Our story ends with two sentences of summation, one for Mary, and one for Jesus. Mary does not understand, but she treasures these things in her heart. Jesus increases in, “wisdom and years, and in divine and human favor.”

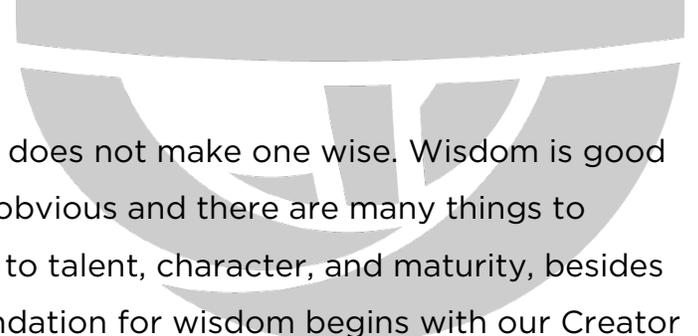
Wisdom being formed and required seems an important theme in this account, which Luke tells as a defining event in Jesus’ growing up. That he “must” be consumed in the learning of scripture and its teachings has everything to do with the remarkable wisdom Jesus continues to grow in and evidences profoundly in his ministry. The tie here with his Father’s will and purpose is striking.

And again, Mary is willing to take in what she cannot yet understand about this child. She ponders and treasures these things in her heart. This too is part of the process and makeup of wisdom - - the openness to learning even when you don’t understand at the time - - the humility that makes way for future insight.

#### A COUPLE REFLECTIONS

Wisdom is high on the list of every major religion, including Judaism and Christianity. John’s gospel even links “logos” (a term rooted in wisdom) with Jesus, the Word. As I reflect on why this is, a brief look at wisdom’s components point in a clear direction. Wisdom matters to life, because the decisions and courses we take, whether in relationships, personal journeys, in communities and families, or as nations, profoundly affect our future, for good or ill.





Wisdom involves learning, yet learning by itself does not make one wise. Wisdom is good judgment, especially when the choices are not obvious and there are many things to consider. Wisdom requires humility, in addition to talent, character, and maturity, besides expertise. Jews and Christians see that the foundation for wisdom begins with our Creator and the wisdom of creation. So, “the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom,” Proverbs 1:7.

While wisdom has traditionally been regarded as a foundational virtue, there is something disturbing about our world’s last couple hundred years. We can boast of an explosion of discovery, skill, and learning that is mind-boggling. Our world has been brilliant. But are we wise? How often do we even ask that question in our society?

In preparation for his mission, Jesus sat at the feet of God’s Word and would go off and pray in a lonely place, sometimes all night. Besides his astute attention to the world around him he also attended to the things we know are important for our souls. Does the frenetic place of our society, and its priority on a certain kind of learning and success crowd out time for what makes one wise? Certainly, we are seeing this nationally regarding spiritual practices.

Perhaps for the sake of our nation, and the witness of our faith to a secularized world, more attention needs to be given to the practices and priority of what develops the spirit. We know from experience that congregations that have a significant core of wise leaders handle well the challenges that can fracture congregations who do not. We even have a name for it in church conflict management - - “wise blood.”

One of the great blessings that come from faith is wisdom. Wisdom is contained in the very commands of God and profoundly in the Gospel. Wisdom comes through attentiveness to God’s Spirit and leading, engaging God’s Word, and keeping faith as a life priority. It is a blessing of faith.

