

First Sunday after Christmas, C
1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26
Colossians 3:12-17
Luke 2:41-52

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First Immanuel Lutheran Church
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Far and away my favorite comic strip is the one called "Zits." The comic is created by Jerry Scott and Jim Borgman, and I don't know how they do it, but somehow they perfectly capture what it's like to live with a teenage son.

Jeremy is the high school sophomore, tall and lanky but always hunched over, shaggy blond hair in his eyes. Connie and Walt are his parents, the mom always looking for significantly more sincere conversation than her teenage guy is willing to give, the dad gamely trying to connect but clueless about key realities like electronics. Jeremy's room is so messy his mom has to dig a tunnel to find him. He's always surrounded by pizza boxes and can inhale the contents of a refrigerator in one breath. And he makes some pretty questionable decisions, as many teens do.

One strip I saved (among many) shows Jeremy and his friend Pierce standing between two huge signs that have arrows pointing in opposite directions. One sign says "SAFETY" and the other says "CATASTROPHE." They have to choose. Jeremy is starting off toward "SAFETY" but his friend Pierce lags behind, stroking his chin thoughtfully: "Hold on a sec, I'm trying to decide." Yikes.

The genius of "Zits" is that it's wickedly accurate, yet it always communicates immense good spirit. There's always a smile behind the keen observation. Enough so that my sons and Aaron and I can often get a laugh from the same comic -- it can bring us together and kind of normalize our experience. I've often been grateful for that. Adolescence is notoriously full of angst, both for young people and for parents, but it's oh so good, so healing, to be able to laugh at yourself along the way.

As a mother of two young men, I have to admit I did get a little laugh out of today's scripture from Luke. This is the only Bible passage that describes Jesus as an adolescent. And it's all right there: The quest for independence. The tug of separation. Parental anxiety. Even a hint of adolescent nonchalance.

Mary accuses, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been worried sick!"

Her son raises his eyes calmly: “Why did you have to go looking for me? Didn’t you know where I’d be?”

The friction is real – obviously this is no longer the tiny baby in the manger. Jesus is growing up.

And it is symbolically significant that Jesus is now twelve years old. He’s no longer a little child, even though Mary might address him that way. At twelve years, Jesus was mature enough to begin studying the Torah with the men, debating Bible passages, putting his own keen mind to work to tease out scripture’s meaning. I’ve often admired how the Jewish tradition values this process of tussling with scripture, posing questions, forging interpretations. This time-honored form of study is exactly what Jesus was doing in the temple, with the grown-ups, just as an adolescent boy-man is meant to.

And Jesus did it with real skill. It was evident to everyone that here was a young prophet, a leader in the making. Jesus had been well schooled in Judaism, and now he was beginning to make the faith his own. His wisdom was growing, his calling as a leader was beginning to emerge.

Mary and Joseph could feel the sea-change this event signaled, but they didn’t fully understand it. Sometimes it takes a while for parents to realize the rules are changing as their children grow up. So Mary simply held onto this event, pondered its meaning, treasured her son, and asked God’s guidance to be the best mother she could to this unpredictable and infinitely cherished young man.

It might not seem like a very Christmas-y scripture, but this passage holds real treasure for us when we let it speak to spiritual themes of this Christmas season.

During Christmas we ponder what it means for Jesus to be born as a human being and live our human life. Our spiritual reflection doesn’t stop at the manger. We go on to consider what it meant for Jesus to grow up as one of us, to get to know our experience firsthand, and to bless us with God’s love at every step of the way.

In fact this is exactly the way an early Christian teacher named Irenaeus understood the saving work of Jesus – that Jesus came to earth to bless each stage of our human journey of growth.

Irenaeus was born about a hundred years after Christ in the region of Turkey. He served as a missionary in France and was basically a parish pastor in the small but growing Christian movement. His major interest was to help new Christians experience the love

of God. When the local bishop was killed in a persecution, Irenaeus became bishop of the French city of Lyon. (*A People's History of Christianity*, Diana Butler Bass, pp. 36-40)

In his writings, Irenaeus focused on the Christmas miracle of Jesus being both fully God and fully our human brother, experiencing what we experience and growing up just like we do.

He also taught that as Jesus grew up through all the stages of human life, Christ's divine power made each stage of human life holy. Born as a baby, Jesus brought saving love to all infants. Living as a child, Jesus blessed all children. Navigating the turbulent rapids of adolescence, Jesus paved the way for all people to grow to maturity and find their calling. As Jesus took on the responsibilities of adulthood, Jesus paved the way for all people to learn to act responsibly and ethically and morally in the roles we all live out. In this way of understanding, every stage of life is blessed, because Jesus lived it with us. We can grow both spiritually and ethically through every stage of life, because Christ is right beside us.

Irenaeus taught that human beings are not created perfect. He said we are incomplete, an unfinished creation. But because God has made a relationship with us, we are able to grow and mature with God's help. The whole point of being in relationship with God is so we can keep on growing to become more and more like God – keep on becoming a person who reflects God's character and God's highest values as well as possible. It's a beautiful way to understand growing up as people, and growing up as God's people too.

This ancient Christian leader helps us treasure the rare glimpse today's scripture gives us into how Jesus grew up. We can appreciate our Lord's own holy journey of navigating all the changes of human life – and we can draw hope from knowing that Jesus Christ is with us, alongside us, guiding us through every stage of our own development.

I do marvel at the ways God's life kept on maturing year by year in Jesus himself – and I know that just as surely, God's life is maturing year by year in every one of us. I pray that God will help each of us to keep growing in Christlike ways. I ask God to give each of us what we need at this point in time to grow just a bit closer to God, to become a little more like the Savior we love.

I marvel at how God keeps us in relationship with our Lord, through God's Holy Spirit. May God's Spirit surround us this morning and go with us into the new year ahead.

In Jesus' name, Amen.