

What's Your Identity?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

December 27, 2009

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Psalm 148 (NRSV)

- ¹ Praise the LORD!
Praise the LORD from the heavens;
praise him in the heights!
- ² Praise him, all his angels;
praise him, all his host!
- ³ Praise him, sun and moon;
praise him, all you shining stars!
- ⁴ Praise him, you highest heavens,
and you waters above the heavens!
- ⁵ Let them praise the name of the LORD,
for he commanded and they were
created.
- ⁶ He established them forever and ever;
he fixed their bounds, which
cannot be passed.
- ⁷ Praise the LORD from the earth,
you sea monsters and all deeps,
⁸ fire and hail, snow and frost,
stormy wind fulfilling his
command!
- ⁹ Mountains and all hills,
fruit trees and all cedars!
- ¹⁰ Wild animals and all cattle,
creeping things and flying birds!
- ¹¹ Kings of the earth and all peoples,
princes and all rulers of the earth!
- ¹² Young men and women alike,
old and young together!
- ¹³ Let them praise the name of the LORD,
for his name alone is exalted;
his glory is above earth and heaven.
- ¹⁴ He has raised up a horn for his people,
praise for all his faithful,
for the people of Israel who are
close to him.
Praise the LORD!

Luke 2:41-52 (NRSV)

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

⁵² And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.

Do you really know who you are? Most of us spend many years coming to grips with this question. By the age of twelve Jesus had found his identity, in his Father.

Jesus, young and free(!)

In the first few centuries after Jesus' resurrection, many stories and legends circulated about him. In these fanciful stories, the youthful Jesus amazes his friends, helps his parents, punishes his neighbors, and even turns a wooden toy into a living bird!¹ But the New Testament Gospels avoid all that. As noted in the accompanying text box, the Gospel writers tell us almost nothing about the young Jesus. Only Luke gives us

¹There are many purported "gospels" about Jesus. We have portions of nearly 20 and know of about another dozen. But most of them were written in the 3rd century or later. A few were written in the late 2nd century. None were written in the first century. Such writings are often called something like the "Lost Books of the Bible." Hogwash. They weren't lost, just never accepted by the Christian community and were then set aside. Only the four New Testament gospels were written in the first century.

anything and his story is remarkable for its lack of miracles, angels, or other special revelations. Indeed, the circumstances and his parents' reactions seem quite ordinary.

At that time, it was customary for Jewish men to go to Jerusalem at least three times a year for religious festivals. Entire families would accompany the men at least once a year for the Festival of Passover in the spring. In today's passage from Luke, Joseph, Mary, and their children are part of a large group of Galileans making their way to Jerusalem. Assuming they could cover fifteen miles a day on foot, the journey would

What Happened to Jesus' Childhood and Youth?

One question often asked in my classes is "Why don't the Gospel writers tell us more about Jesus' childhood and youth?" This is an understandable question. Luke and Matthew tell us about Jesus' birth and the immediate aftermath. Luke gives us one story about Jesus when he was twelve (today's passage.) But that is it. The next time we meet Jesus in the Gospels, he is at least thirty!

Though modern biographies usually spend considerable time on the upbringing and development of their subject, ancient "biographies" did not. In the ancient world, the closest things to modern biographies were writings they called "lives," such as those written by Plutarch and Suetonius. The purpose of these writings was to present an unveiling of the subject's public life and show why their character should be emulated. The ancient writers couldn't make things up, but they could move events around and even embellish them in order to make their point. Sometimes these "biographies" were structured chronologically, but some were also structured around themes in the subject's life. Childhood experiences mattered little, as did anything that happened prior to the subject's maturity and entry onto the public stage. The ancients had no illusions about understanding psychological motivations. Even physical appearances didn't matter to them; thus, we have little idea what Jesus looked like. We should not approach the Gospels as we would a biography from our day.

One caution – though Matthew and Mark are closest to an ancient Greek or Roman "Life," none of the Gospels can be easily categorized. These are Jewish writings and are deeply influenced by the books of the Old Testament.

have taken them four or five days. After the festival was over, everyone headed back north to Galilee. You can picture a large group making their way up the dusty road, with packs of children and teenagers doing their own thing while the adults tend to the work of the journey. It is certainly no surprise that Mary and Joseph expected Jesus to be running around with cousins and friends. But, actually, Jesus took it upon himself to stay behind in Jerusalem!

Having raised several sons myself, I'd bet Mary and Joseph headed back to Jerusalem both anxious and angry. Sure enough, when they find Jesus, who is only twelve, at the temple, Mary angrily asks Jesus how it is that he could treat his parents in such a manner. I'm sure she didn't know whether to be angry with him or to hug him . . . probably both. After all, it has been several days! Whether you've had a teenager or simply been one, most of us can identify with the parents in this story. But with whom does Jesus identify?

Finding our identity

During the days away from his parents, Jesus amazed all the adults (Pharisees, scribes, and priests) in the temple with his understanding and his answers to their questions. But Jesus' responses to his mother's questions are the center of this story.

Jesus wonders how she couldn't know that he "must be in my Father's house" (v. 49). *Must!* What an interesting choice of words. Not "ought to be" or "want to be" . . . but "must be." Even at this young age, Jesus knew that his life would be driven by the divine imperative. He would do what he did because that would be the vocation laid out for him by God. His life would not be controlled by fate. He was not working

toward some impersonal destiny. No one would coerce him into anything. He would simply do as he must, regardless of the consequences. God was revealing the boy's vocation to him and Jesus would be 100% faithful to that vocation, even if it took him to death on a cross.

But what must this young boy, soon to be man, do? Jesus is actually very ambiguous about this. The NRSV translates Luke's Greek as "I must be in my Father's house." However, "house" is not in the Greek; in fact, there is no word there at all! Hence, the KJV translates the phrase as "I must be about my Father's business." In the NRSV footnote, there is yet another rendering, "I must be about my Father's interests." Regardless of exactly what Jesus meant, in these few words he claims for himself a special relationship with God. God would shape his life.

Many of us spend decades trying to find our identity, to come to know who we are and to find purpose in our life. Surely, in this story, Luke wants us to understand that by the age of twelve Jesus had found his identity, affirming it in his unique relationship with YHWH, the God of Israel. While still a boy, Jesus understood that he was called to obedience. He will *do* as he *must*. Jesus had grown up fast. He had come to the insight that obedience and commitment to God are expressed by participating in God's work, not adhering to an arbitrary list of do's and don'ts. The boy Jesus understood that "*there are some things we do just because of who we are: 'I must be about my Father's business.'*"²

A Psalm of Praise

Psalm 148 is a lectionary reading for the 1st Sunday of Christmas. It is the third in the collection of praise psalms that close the Psalter. It is pretty typical of such psalms, but the invitation to praise is much elaborated, focusing on the universality of the praise offered to God. No part of God's cosmos is left out. The angels, the sun, the moon, the stars, the waters of the earth, the mountains and animals, even the sea monsters (!) are invited to join kings and princes, men and women, young and old in praising the LORD God Almighty. In this way, the psalm is closely linked to the creation account of Genesis 1.

This psalm reminds us that all creation has a stake in the Christmas story. The incarnation isn't merely about reconciling humankind to God but also about the restoration of all creation.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Nearly every parent I've known bemoans their belief that "kids grow up too fast." I'm sure that Mary must have uttered a sentiment much like that while searching for her son. You might consider three main characters in this drama: Mary, Jesus, and the on-lookers in the temple. How might each of them have understood the scene where Mary confronts Jesus? . . . *First*, what does this scene reveal to us about Mary? What have we learned new about her character or her role as Jesus' mother? . . . *Second*, what does it reveal to us about Jesus? How might he have behaved differently from or similarly to other twelve year-olds? What do your answers reveal about your own understanding of the incarnation (the Christian proclamation that Jesus was "God-made-flesh," fully God and fully human)? . . . *Third*, imagine that you are one of the on-lookers in the temple when Mary comes storming (that is how I picture her!). Imagine that you've spent much of three days being amazed by Jesus' understanding of the Law, the Writings, and the Prophets. When you got home, what would you have told your family?
2. Even those who are not Christian will probably concede that Jesus is the most important person who ever lived. Yet, we know so little about him. We don't even know what he looked like! We have no idea what he did for most of his life. Make a list of the Top Ten things you'd like to know about Jesus. (And then ask yourself . . . why those ten?)

²from Alan Culpepper's commentary on Luke in the *New Interpreter's Bible*, Abingdon, 1995.

Encounter

a time for fellowship, worship, and learning
every Wednesday evening at 6:45 in Wesley Hall

Christmas According to the Bible

This Wednesday (Dec 29): Luke 2:21-38

As obedient keepers of God's law, Mary and Joseph bring their newborn to the temple for his dedication. But already, a deepening shadow falls over the very young mother and her baby.

Coming to Encounter in January:

Song of Solomon: The truth about love, marriage, and sex
begins Wednesday, January 13

Coming to Scott's 11:00 Sunday class in January

The Seven Faith Tribes: Religion in America, 2010
Who They Are, What They Believe, and Why They Matter
begins Sunday, January 10

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Monday, Luke 2:21-40 The presentation of Jesus in the temple	Tuesday, Samuel 2 Compare the story of Samuel in the temple with the Luke's story of Jesus.
Wednesday, Luke 4:16-30 Jesus rises to read from Isaiah in the synagogue of Nazareth	Thursday, Hebrews 8 Jesus as high priest; Christ's covenant
Friday, Matthew 1 Jesus as Messianic King; Son of David (from the genealogy) and Son of God (from the story of Joseph's obedience)	Weekly Prayer Concerns