

Dwelling in the House of Wisdom

Scriptures

Luke 2.41-52

Opening

Matthew is a winged man, Mark is a winged lion, Luke is a winged ox, and John is an eagle. These are ancient symbols from the earliest centuries of the Church that summarize the themes and styles of each Gospel writer. These figures help us see distinctions between the Gospels. Walk into a cathedral, such as Sacred Heart Cathedral, and you will see these four figures framing the four corners of the ceiling above the altar. These figures come to us from Scripture, the four figures appearing in Ezekiel's prophetic vision and again in John's vision of the apocalypse in Revelation.

This year we will read the Gospel of Matthew and we'll see more and more how a human face represents the first gospel in the New Testament. Matthew begins with a Jesus' genealogy and he continues to show through sermons, parables, and teachings that Jesus is the human face of God. But before we embark on a deeper journey into Matthew's Gospel, we read from Luke's Gospel a final time this Christmastide.

Luke's symbolic figure is a winged ox because an ox is a sacrifice offered in the Temple, bearing the burdens of the people's sins. So themes of sacrifice and events in and around the Temple shape much of Luke's story. His Gospel opens with Zechariah serving in the Temple, receiving a prophecy from Gabriel that he will have a son named John who will preach repentance. Jesus offers himself as a sacrifice for our sins on the cross. Luke's Gospel concludes with the ascension of the risen Jesus. Luke tells us in the final verse of his Gospel that the disciples returned to the Temple blessing God. When Luke writes the sequel to his Gospel in the Book of Acts, the disciples become the Temple themselves with the

indwelling Holy Spirit, preaching repentance of sins. So the figure of the Temple looms large throughout Luke's story.

We need that background to hear the Holy Spirit addressing us in this story from Jesus' childhood. We only have this story from Jesus' childhood once every three years in our lectionary. Return with me in your pew Bibles to page ### as we look more closely at this story. Here is a story not only significant in this Christmas season, but a story that gives direction at the beginning of this new calendar year.

Return to the Temple

The last time I spoke to you from Luke's Gospel it was Christmas Eve night and I had us envision Joseph and Mary journeying with the crowds from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Now we see them journeying with the crowds leaving the Temple in Jerusalem after the Feast of Passover. They have fulfilled their religious duty, an annual journey to Jerusalem. The feast ends and they begin packing up, returning to life as normal. Mary and Joseph expect Jesus is somewhere in this large caravan, so they head north to Nazareth. But after a day's journey they can't find him. No one has seen him, so they retrace their steps all the way back to Jerusalem, with no small degree of alarm.

Look closely and you'll find that the Nazareth caravan conducts a city-wide search in Jerusalem for *three* days. Three days for the panic to increase. Three days seemingly looking everywhere in the city *except* the Temple. When they finally search in the Temple courts, they find him, sitting in the *middle* of Jerusalem's teachers.

Jesus with the Rabbis

If you've studied or heard sermons on this story, you've probably heard this narrative presented as twelve year old Jesus teaching the teachers of Israel. That's partly right, but that's not entirely accurate. When you read verse 46 more closely you see Jesus with a

different posture. When they found Jesus, he was ‘sitting among the teachers, *listening to them and asking them questions*.

Here’s a scene lost on us, but very familiar for Luke’s first audience. When rabbis conducted services in the Temple, they would teach their disciples and after the service was ended, they would welcome anyone who wanted to have an extended discussion about Torah—the words of God. Think about a play where the cast or director invites the audience to a talkback session after the performance concludes. You can ask the director or cast members anything in the script that interested or prompted questions for you.

After the Temple service was over, anyone was allowed to ask any question about the Scriptures. Jesus has gathered around Jerusalem central casting to continue the conversation about the script. If Jesus were teaching from start to finish, he probably wouldn’t be sitting.

You may remember a later story in Luke about Mary of Bethany, when Mary sits at Jesus’ feet while Martha frets with household tasks. Mary takes the posture of a disciple, sitting at Jesus’ feet. So it seems that Jesus has the posture of a learner among Temple rabbis.

Jesus listens to the rabbis. He’s asking them questions about the words of God. This is a familiar custom with rabbis. You can ask any question on any matter of the Torah. But this wasn’t a kind of one-way Q&A exchange. This wasn’t a ‘stump the rabbi’ session. Students could ask rabbis any question from the Torah, but rabbis would continue the discussion and their teaching *by asking questions of their students*. This is how we make sense of Luke’s detail in verse 47 that “All who heard Jesus were amazed at his understanding *and his answers*.” When the rabbis *returned* a question to Jesus, they discovered a depth of understanding uncommon among 12 year old Jewish boys.

Hunger for the Word

So yes, we do have moments when the student instructs the teacher. But what we have missed is Jesus’ open ear, his questions about scripture.

Let's do the math, too. One travel day for his family plus three days searching Jerusalem and you have Jesus discussing the Scriptures for at least *four* days. Four days of listening, four days of questions.

It's not entirely easy for us to think of Jesus *needing* to listen. It may be even a little troubling to consider Jesus asking questions about the Scriptures. Isn't Jesus the Word become flesh? Isn't Jesus fully God and fully human? To which we can unreservedly say "Yes and amen."

Among American Christians, we more readily affirm that Jesus is fully God, but it's his full humanity that is more difficult for us. How could Jesus be fully human unless he had questions, unless he grew in wisdom and stature? The Son of God, born of the Virgin Mary, experienced our full humanity, yet without the stain of sin.

He's not playing tricks with these rabbis. It's not a bait-and-switch scenario. "Let me ask some questions to which I already know the answers. And then I'll blow them away with my wisdom." No, he's not faking it when he's sitting among the teachers, listening to their teaching, asking them questions. He's growing in wisdom and he's showing us how a human being, fully alive, pursues the wisdom of God.

The Struggle for Wisdom

This whole story is a wisdom story, but it's about *growing in wisdom, increasing in wisdom*. Look how Luke frames this story from the beginning as a wisdom story in verse 40: "And the child (Jesus) grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him." He tells the Temple story and concludes with a similar, but different saying in verse 52: "And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man." The weight of this story is how Jesus shows us how to advance in wisdom. Look again at verse 52. Our translation of verse 52 isn't the best. That verb 'increased' in Greek is charged with meaning. It literally reads in the NASB, "And Jesus *kept* increasing in wisdom and stature..."

It's also interesting the ancient origin of this word 'increased.' The origin of this word comes from experiences at sea. It's a nautical word meaning 'to make headway in spite of blows.'¹ Think how a sailing vessel makes progress in a headwind. Sailors have to learn different maneuvers, how to position the sails so they progress toward their intended direction. They learn how to advance in the face of resistance. It won't be long before we revisit Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. Jesus advances in wisdom in spite of the buffeting blows of Satan's temptations. And how was Jesus ready for a moment such as this? He submitted himself to the Word of God, the wisdom of God, day in and day out.

Dwelling in the House of Wisdom

When Mary and Joseph discover their son Jesus in the Temple, they scold him a bit. And then he does what a rabbi-in-training has learned to do. He reveals his wisdom through his questions: 'Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?' Another translation reads, "Did you not know that I *had to be* in my Father's house?"

And there is everything you need to know about how to increase in wisdom: "I had to be in my Father's house." Isn't it sufficient that we made the 90 mile journey every year to the Passover? No, not if you want to grow in wisdom. If you desire wisdom, you must sit beneath his Word. You must come before the Word every day. "I *had to be* in my Father's house."

When you come into his presence you must listen. You must ask questions and then listen to the saints, sages who sing, pray, worship, and suffer for these holy words.

Jesus is hungry for the words and wisdom of God. That is all you need to know to advance in wisdom. More than any other human being, he was awake and responsive to that hunger within. Luke gives us this four-day glimpse into Jesus' childhood, but it's clear this story is emblematic of Jesus' entire life. He *had to be in his Father's house*.

¹ TDNT, προκόπτω

Advancing in Wisdom for the Year Ahead

This is the time of year when we review our habits. We think of vices we want to lose and goals we want to pursue. I clearly support this kind of pursuit because we offer a rule of life workshop to assist that personal growth. But this I believe about any intended pursuit or goal for the year ahead: unless the Word of God is *the* foundation of personal growth, we're just pursuing personal ambitions. Listen to the Word of God with the saints on Sunday morning. Listen to the Word of God every day. Ask questions and seek the wisdom of saints for matters that are unclear or confusing. We are Anglicans. This is what we do. We read Scripture and we allow Scripture to interpret Scripture. We read the Bible and we trust the Daily Office Lectionary to shape us every day, every week, every month in the wisdom of God.

I recognize that reading the Bible may seem like a chore or a dry discipline. Read it anyway. Some of the wisest advice I heard regarding prayer came from a mentor who told me to pray every morning even if I fell asleep. Just keep going, just keep coming into his presence. Even if you have no desire to read the Bible, ask the Lord to change your heart, change your desires. To increase in wisdom is to make headway in spite of blows. You are desperate for wisdom, not so you can show yourself wise, but so you can order your days to love God and love others.

As Christians living in America, we have an urgent need to grow in wisdom this year. My pastoral counsel as we enter a presidential election this year is to read and pray the Psalms. To pray the Psalms will keep you above the fray *and* give you wisdom and stability amid the acrimony of our political discourse. /

"I had to be in my Father's house." *"And Jesus kept increasing in wisdom..."* The two go together. Long before 30 year old Jesus said, "Seek first the Kingdom of God" he showed us the way of wisdom as a 12 year old boy listening to the Word of God in his Father's house. And he knew that in seeking the wisdom of God first, everything else will be added unto us, too. In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.