

“Increasing Wisdom, Stature and Favor”

Date: December 30, 2018

Place: Lakewood UMC

Text: Luke 2:41-52; Colossians 3:12-17 Theme: Spiritual growth, formation

Occasion: Christmas 1, Year C

After the great build-up to Christmas, it seems anti-climactic afterwards, doesn't it? As it is in our own lives, so it seems even in Scripture. After the glory of the angelic chorus announcing the birth of Jesus, and the shepherds who came to admire the new-born king, we now move to the more *ordinary* events of Jesus' life.

Luke began his gospel by telling us Jesus was born of a virgin, conceived by the Holy Spirit. His birth was announced by the angels themselves. But then, Luke quickly establishes Jesus' life in the ordinary lifestyle of a Jewish family, reminding us Jesus is both divine and human.

Luke tells us in today's reading that Mary and Joseph regularly went to Jerusalem for the Passover, and Jesus went along. All of which is to make the point, Jesus is like us. He grew up in a family. He learned things about God from his parents who were obedient to their faith. It is in the family and in the community of faith that faith is nurtured and grows.

We need to remember that, because if it was true for Jesus, how much more so, it is true for us. Faith is nurtured in the family and in the community of faith. It's important to remember that Jesus was *human* too. Even though he was divine, he was also one of us.

He didn't spring forth from his mother's womb completely aware that he was the Son of God. He had to grow in knowledge and in wisdom. It didn't "just happen" for Jesus. And it won't "just happen" for us either. Faith is to be nurtured if it is to grow. We don't have a lot of information about the childhood of Jesus, but what we do know tells us enough.

Jesus is still a child, here in this story at the Temple. He is gifted,

but not all-knowing. He amazes those who listen to his responses, but he is also listening to the learned men who are there. And he is asking questions.

Jesus is a bright, articulate student and the elders were impressed with his wisdom. But not so much that they called him a genius or anything like that. Jesus is still a child here. And he is growing. The final verse of today's lesson says, "Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man."

Wisdom is more than just knowledge. Wisdom implies a deep knowing and understanding of how things work. Jesus' wisdom was spiritual wisdom; he learned and grew in his understanding of who God is, and who we are in relationship to God.

Stature refers to his size. Jesus grew up. He didn't stay an infant in the manger forever. He was a toddler; he was a little boy and now he was entering adolescence. He was getting taller and larger as a man. In one simple word Luke tells us that Jesus grew in physical size.

Favor refers to his relationships with others – both God and people. Jesus grew in his loveableness with God and with other people. Jesus grew not just in holiness but also in graciousness, tact, charm and attractiveness. People liked him. And God loved him.

We're coming to the end of one year and the beginning of a new one. It's a good time to take a little assessment of where we are in our spiritual growth. Take our spiritual temperature; measure our growth in faith, determine our spiritual health, and see if we've made any progress since last year. Perhaps we may want to set some spiritual goals for the coming year. And so I offer a few questions to guide our look back and our view forward.

Nobody is grading you, not even God. This little exercise is not meant to make anyone feel guilty or overly proud. We're not engaging in one-up-manship so that we can look at others and declare how much holier we are than they. If we do, it only shows how much farther we have to grow. But from time to time, it helps to look at ourselves to see where we are.

So, let's get started. In a prayerful attitude, ask yourself, "**Am I more open to being directed by the Holy Spirit?**" Am I open to all of the channels by which God might want to speak to me? Prayer; other people; nature; scripture; worship; the sacraments? Am I purposely listening for that still small voice on a regular basis?

In a prayerful attitude, ask yourself, "**Am I intentionally making an effort to develop my faith?**" What spiritual books did you read last year, any? Are you spending any time outside of worship reading the Bible? If you're looking for a good place to begin, let me suggest one of the Gospels, perhaps Matthew, and just read a page or so a day, listening for what it might say to you – not for information, but for transformation.

In a prayerful attitude, ask yourself, "**Am I participating in any small groups at church that would help me to grow in wisdom and in grace with God?**" Perhaps a Bible study, a Sunday School class, a sharing group, a prayer group? Have you found another Christian with whom you can talk about spiritual things? Remember, there are no *Lone Ranger*-Christians. We need each other.

In a prayerful attitude, ask yourself, "**Am I becoming more generous with my time, my talent and my treasure?**" How is God asking you to grow in using your time for Kingdom work? How are you using your spiritual gifts and talents to make the world a better place? How are you using your money to assist God in the work of the Kingdom?

In a prayerful attitude, ask yourself, **“Is the fruit of the Spirit showing evidence of my spiritual growth?”** In other words, are you becoming more loving? Is there joy in your life? Are you becoming more patient? Are you becoming more kind in your thoughts, words and actions? Are you practicing doing good for other people, taking the actions of love? Are you faithful in your relationship with God and Jesus? Would you describe your interactions with others as gentle? Are you experiencing an increase in self-control, particularly with that annoying habit you’ve been trying to address for years?

In the book of Colossians, Paul describes a similar list of Christian qualities that mature Christians will demonstrate in their daily lives. Do any of these resonate in your own life? Compassion? Kindness? Humility? Gentleness? Patience? Forebearance, or trying to understand the other person’s point of view? Forgiveness? Love?

My friends in Christ, I listen to these questions and I could become discouraged at how far I still have to go. I might say to myself, “Look at your age, are you really going to change now?” But friends, none of us can quit the journey, no matter our age.

It is always tempting to think the younger people need to go to Bible study and learn things; we’re too old. But I’ve got news for you, our learning and growing doesn’t stop at Heaven’s Gate; we have an eternity to continue to grow in our relationship with God. We never graduate; there is always more to learn.

And please know this: it is the Holy Spirit who gives the growth. Our job is simply to cooperate with the Spirit. And so I invite you and I challenge you, in the coming year, to offer yourself as a living sacrifice to God, that God may continue to complete the work that was begun in you. Amen?