



*'Tween Jesus: Shaping our Lives*

January 2, 2022: Holy Eucharist Rite II for Second Sunday after Christmas Day

The Reverend Nick Morris-Kliment

Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA

*Oh Lord: Take our minds and think through them; take our mouths and speak through them; take our hearts and set them on fire. Amen.*

Happy New Year and Merry Christmas on this seventh day of Christmas! On this day, according to the Christmas Carol, “The 12 Days of Christmas,” we are giving our beloved ones seven swans a swimming!

We are engaged in a bit of time warp during the Christmas season. On Christmas Eve, we heard the story of Jesus’ birth according to the Gospel of Luke. That’s the version that is full of animals, a manger, an angel, shepherds, Joseph and Mary, and of course the baby Jesus, wrapped in swaddling clothes. On Christmas Day and the next day, the first Sunday after Christmas, we heard that birth story courtesy of the Gospel of John, whose version is full of Greek philosophy in the form of poetry: The Word was God; the Word became flesh and lived among, us full of grace and truth.

If we were a church emphasizing formal ritual and traditional ceremony, yesterday, January 1, we would have celebrated the Feast of the Holy Name of Jesus, which commemorates the occasion of Jesus’ naming. Eight days after his birth, Mary and Joseph took him to the Temple in Jerusalem to do that. A good Jewish family always named a boy child on the 8<sup>th</sup> day after his birth. So that makes sense.

But here it is today, 9 days after Jesus’ birth according to today’s Gospel lesson, and he’s already twelve. There’s a saying among parents that the days last forever, but the years fly by. But really.

This is the only passage from the Four Gospels describing part of his life between the time he is an infant, and the time when he begins his public ministry around the age of thirty. (One of the stained-glass windows in our Chapel depicts this scene.) Why only one story about Jesus as a ‘tween or early teenager? It was a pivotal time in the life of a Jewish boy. I can’t speak for the ancients, but many moderns look at the period of adolescence as one to be tolerated, endured and then forgotten. We might think it would be hard to find uplifting stories about ‘twens and teens, even one who was on his way to being the Savior of the World.

I know that my life as a twelve-year-old was not one I care too much to remember. For example, when I was a new seventh grader at a school that started in kindergarten, I was teased mercilessly by the alpha male in the seventh grade David Smith (not his real name) and the other cool boys who had been at that school since they were six. My math teacher picked me up one day and put me headfirst into a trash can. I guess I had been a little bit fresh.

So, I find it hard to identify with 12-year-old Jesus. He clearly gets along with his teachers. Partly this is Luke drawing a parallel with lore about Caesar Augustus, the Roman emperor when Jesus was born. Augustus, too, was remembered as a precocious boy, full of preternatural wisdom and destined to be the emperor. When he was twelve years old, Augustus gave the funeral oration for his grandmother, Julia Caesaris, the sister of Julius Caesar. Luke is interested in showing Jesus as superior to the emperor,



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appointed not by the Roman Senate, but by God. Luke wants his Gentile audience to see that Jesus is the true Son of God, not the Roman emperor.

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revision-common-lectionary/first-sunday-of-christmas-3/commentary-on-luke-241-52-4>

On the other hand, Jesus is also shown to have a mind of his own, willing to individuate, to use a modern term, to assert a growing independence from his mother and father. In the culture of first century Mediterranean society, this push toward independence constituted a serious breach of social etiquette and would have been a cause for much shame for his parents. Couldn't they control their boy?

According to the text, Mary was appropriately direct with Jesus, and open about the trouble he had caused them. Certainly, in addition to the shame of a disobedient child, they were worried about his safety, and now about *their* safety, as they would be traveling home without the security of a family group.

Yet we have too often accepted the modern line that adolescents have nothing to teach us. That it's about adults controlling them. For sure, we need to provide structure, limits, and love. And Mary and Joseph seem to be doing this. For example, they provide a strong faith framework. The text tells us that they went up to the festival of Passover every year. According to Jewish tradition, a boy could start learning the Torah no later than puberty, which is about age twelve.<sup>3</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revision-common-lectionary/first-sunday-of-christmas-3/commentary-on-luke-241-52-4> Clearly Joseph had begun this teaching, because the boy Jesus was well equipped to listen and to ask questions of the teachers in the Temple.

Yet just as Mary was open to the way that Jesus showed her how he was growing into the *son* that *he* was called to be, so was she also able to grow into the *mother* that God was calling *her* to be. Rather than tightening up, Mary treasured these things in her heart. Mary, the mother of the 'tween Jesus, models how to let ourselves be shaped by the gift of our 'tweens and teens. Rather than resist and repress, she treasures and ponders, as Jesus grows in wisdom and years, in divine and human favor.

When we meet next Sunday, we will have begun the season of Epiphany. During Epiphany, our calling is to celebrate the manifestation of the identity of Jesus as Son of God to the whole world. Our spiritual purpose is to allow Jesus to have an ever-stronger presence in our lives. Our invitation is to allow Jesus to be who he was sent to be.

Hear what preacher Alyce McKenzie says about our Gospel text this morning. It resonates with me: "[Mary and Joseph] find out that the boy Jesus, in growing and becoming strong, is not under their control and will not always be found at their side. When they finally track him down in the Temple, his mother's question is focused on the anxiety and perhaps inconvenience he has caused his family: "Child, why have you treated us like this?" But Epiphany is not about our peace of mind and convenience. It's about assuming our role of allowing Jesus to grow and become strong in our lives and in this world."



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“Keep your eye on that child this Epiphany and see how he grows and where he goes. Keep your eye on that child this Epiphany, and see where he takes you and how he shapes you.”

<https://www.patheos.com/progressive-christian/child-grew-alyce-mckenzie-12-24-2012>

**Amen.**