

**Our Heavenly Father's Work**  
**By Reverend Litton Logan**  
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**Scriptures:**

Luke 2:21-52 (NRSV)

<sup>21</sup> After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

**Jesus Is Presented in the Temple**

<sup>22</sup> When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord <sup>23</sup>(as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord"), <sup>24</sup> and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons."

<sup>25</sup> Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. <sup>26</sup>It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. <sup>27</sup> Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, <sup>28</sup> Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

<sup>29</sup>"Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word;

<sup>30</sup>for my eyes have seen your salvation,

<sup>31</sup>which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,

<sup>32</sup>a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."

<sup>33</sup> And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. <sup>34</sup> Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed <sup>35</sup> so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too."

<sup>36</sup> There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, <sup>37</sup> then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. <sup>38</sup> At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

**The Return to Nazareth**

<sup>39</sup> When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. <sup>40</sup> The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

**The Boy Jesus in the Temple**

<sup>41</sup> Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. <sup>42</sup> And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. <sup>43</sup> When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. <sup>44</sup> 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. <sup>45</sup> When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. <sup>46</sup> After three days they found him in the temple,

sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. <sup>47</sup> And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. <sup>48</sup> 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." <sup>49</sup> He said to them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" <sup>50</sup> But they did not understand what he said to them. <sup>51</sup> Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart. <sup>52</sup> And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.

## Sermon:

These rather lengthy passages Vicki read this morning are transition passages in Luke's Gospel that take us from Jesus' birth to the beginning of his earthly ministry. Sadly, these scriptures are often skimmed over as the reader hurries from Jesus' birth story to get on to the other good parts of Jesus' life and ministry, like his wondrous deeds, his confrontations with the establishment, and his life-giving teachings. To assume that these passages aren't extremely important for us, let me tell you a supposedly true story that comes out of Texas about making erroneous assumptions.

A drunken cowboy lay sprawled across three entire seats in a posh Amarillo Theater. When the usher came by and noticed this, he whispered to the cowboy, "Sorry, sir, but you're only allowed one seat." The cowboy groaned but didn't budge. The usher became more impatient: "Sir, if you don't get up from there I'm going to have to call the manager." Once again, the cowboy just groaned.

The usher marched briskly back up the aisle, and in a moment, he returned with the manager. Together the two of them tried repeatedly to move the cowboy, but with no success. Finally, they summoned the police. The Texas Ranger surveyed the situation briefly then asked, "All right buddy what's your name?" "Fred," the cowboy moaned. "Well, where ya from, Fred?" asked the Ranger. With terrible pain in his voice, and without moving a muscle, Fred replied, "...the balcony..."

A turning point in this morning's scriptures is found in verse forty-nine, when Jesus responds to his mother's demanding and irritated question, "Child, why have you treated us like this?" Jesus' response are his first words in Luke's Gospel, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" Another equally good translation would be "I must be about my Father's business." If I had talked to my mother like this and my dad had been standing nearby as Joseph was, he would have said, "Boy, don't you talk to your momma like that", just before he knocked me into next week.

As usual, there is more going on here than meets the eye. As the sociologists Malina and Rohrbaugh tell us, "In the agrarian societies of antiquity, a male's early years were spent almost exclusively in the women's world. The bond between mother and son remained the strongest emotional tie throughout life. This meant that the transition for young boys into the male, public world was often painful, difficult, and lengthy. Jesus is seen here as having successfully made the transition, able to function effectively in the public world of the male, thus, his rather curt and dismissive remark to his mother is culturally appropriate. Later Jesus will even go further in distancing himself from his mother's cultural claims on him. Also, let us note that Joseph's silence actually affirms Jesus in his new distinctive, male social role.

Jesus' life from before his birth until his death and beyond are to be seen as a part of God's plan to redeem and bless the Jews first and foremost and concomitantly through them

those benevolent and supportive non-Jews - the others, the Gentiles. To this point, we see a more open and less rigid Hellenistic Judaism in Luke's Gospel as Jesus' relates to sinners, Samaritans, tax collectors, women, and outcasts.

Again, the way some people become so overly focused on the birth narrative and the beginning of Jesus' ministry with his baptism by John the Baptist at the expense of our texts reminds me of another supposedly true story about a woman and her husband from Canton, MS, who went to pick up their new Chevrolet from the dealer. The woman said:

When my husband and I arrived at the dealership to pick up our car, we were told the keys had been locked in it. We went to the service department and found a mechanic working feverishly to unlock the driver's side door. As I watched from the passenger side, I instinctively tried the door handle and discovered that it was unlocked. "Hey," I announced to the technician, "it's open!" His reply, "I know - I already got that side."

Well, while "Bubba" is working on unlocking the other side let us look at some of the things that I think reinforces Jesus' life within the context of Judaism, its laws, statutes, and practices.

In verse 21, we read that on the eighth day, Jesus is accepted into the covenant community and given a name in accordance with Gen. 17:9-14. Mary's infant child is given the name the angel Gabriel had decreed - Joshua - meaning "Yehova saves", or its Greek translation "Jesus". Giving a child a name with such significance was not only a dedication of the child to God but often a declaration of the child's heritage, character, and destiny.

In verse 22-24, Luke conflates two requirements of the Mosaic Law - the purification of the mother after childbirth and the dedication or redemption of the firstborn son. We unexpectedly see Joseph's participating in Mary's purification rite. This was not required, but permitted.<sup>1</sup>

According to Levitical Law, the physical condition of a post-partum woman was deemed incompatible with the holiness of God, and she was not allowed to enter the Temple or touch anything considered holy and was considered ceremonially unclean for seven days after childbirth. In addition, the woman had to undergo 33 days of purification for a male child and 66 days for a female child.

During this time, it doesn't mean that these women weren't touched or did not touch others, it just meant they and anyone who touched them or they touched were considered ceremonially impure and required a ritual bath and other requirements before going to the Temple, or fulfilling other religious obligations, etc. Such prohibitions are now recognized by many scholars as ancient, hygienic practices as well as allowing time for women to physically recover from childbirth before renewing normal conjugal activities.

Therefore, Mary, per Lev. 12:1-5, comes to the Temple for the ceremony of ritual purification some 40 days after the birth of Jesus (7+33).

At the time of Jesus' birth, as is the case for some modern Jewish woman, if their first-born child is delivered by natural child birth and is a male, that child by decree belongs to God and must be redeemed from a life dedicated to the service of God in accordance with Numbers 18:15-16. This redemption must take place before a known Cohen - a priest, who is a direct descendent of Aaron, Moses' brother. This must be done on the 31<sup>st</sup> day of the child's life. Close attention to our scriptures, wherein they say that Joseph and Mary fulfilled all the requirements of the law, will show that Joseph, as the recognized head of the household, did

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<sup>1</sup> Stern, David H. Jewish New Testament Commentary (Kindle Locations 3400-3408). Jewish New Testament Publications, Inc. Kindle Edition.

not redeem Jesus from this obligation. Furthermore, Jesus as an adult did not redeem himself of this obligation, which he could have done. Thus, Jesus by law at birth and later by choice remained dedicated to serve God according to Jewish law.

While in the Temple, Mary and Joseph are approached by two very devout people of God. One is an aged man named Simeon, who under the influence of the Holy Spirit, sees in the infant Jesus the object of his long hoped for consolation of Israel. Also, they are met by an aged widow and prophetess named Anna. Anna lived and worked in the Temple and the fact that Anna is called a prophetess is in and of itself a very interesting point. Anna praises God because in the child she sees God's redemption of Jerusalem, a euphemism for God's people. Although Mary and Joseph knew of the divine aspects to Jesus, we see here they are amazed to have it affirmed by others, who under divine inspiration also know about the baby and his mission in life.

As scripture says, "<sup>39</sup> When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. <sup>40</sup> The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him."

It is this verse 40 and its insights, which are reiterated in verse 52 with the addition that Jesus grew in human favor as well as divine favor are some of those insights often over looked in our reading and understandings of these scriptures. Let's look deeper into this one verse.

Jesus grew or increased in physical stature and years, but he also grew in wisdom and the favor of God was upon him. Given that the universal education for Jewish boys was not established until around 63 C.E. by Joshua ben Ga[i]mla, Jesus' early education would most likely have been under the direction of Joseph and the men of his village.<sup>2</sup> As we see from his later years, especially in his dealings with the Scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees, his knowledge of scripture and Judaism were excellent.

Be this as it may, let me ask an obvious question. What does it mean to grow in wisdom? Wisdom is one of those nebulous concepts like love. We cannot really define it but we know it when we see it. I've known many smart and knowledgeable people (I live among some of the world's smartest), who were definitely not wise. When Jesus begins his ministry, we see him possessing not only scriptural knowledge and understandings, but he seems to have an acute power of discernment with a mystical dimension that constitutes what we would call a wise person.

Which prompts another question. What does it mean to grow in or be under the favor or grace of God? The word from Greek that is used in our text today is "car' in" or "charis," which means "gift." It is from the word "charis" that we get the word charisma, meaning divine favor. Charisma is that rare quality found in some, which often characterizes them as being extremely charming and having a magnetic quality to their personality or appearance. The ancient Greeks said that charisma was a divine "gift or favor" or "gift of grace". Charismatic people can be very compelling and having the ability to persuade others.<sup>3</sup> When I say divine, it does not necessarily mean the gift is for the good. Charisma can be the gift of a god for evil also.

However, for our purposes, we may say that today we see Jesus maturing into his charisma as he matured physically and intellectually. Jesus' charisma will attract people to him, people will listen to him, people will believe his words, people will follow him, and people's lives will be changed by his message of God's love and salvation.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/joshua-ben-gamla>. Accessed 12/28/2018

<sup>3</sup> "Charisma," Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org>, December 29, 2006.

While most pictures of Jesus in the Temple at age twelve depict him as standing center stage in a pose of teaching or lecturing, scripture does not really support this idea. What I believe happened was Jesus sat amid a group of men in the Temple discussing Torah listening, learning, and asking keen and discerning questions beyond his years. However, what the writer wants to convey is Jesus' sensitivity to his divine calling as a part of his physical and intellectual maturation.

As the story goes, a very devout Joseph and Mary on their return trip home from their annual Passover pilgrimage to Jerusalem didn't miss Jesus until the evening of the first day. They assumed he had been traveling with the kids of friends. However, when evening comes and they can't find him they began to search for him. They eventually have to retrace their steps and locate Jesus in the Temple, having insinuated himself into a group of learned men of Israel.

Jesus' naming and dedication and his response to his mother's question fixes his awareness of his life's work squarely within Judaism. To be precise, within the Temple, within the Mosaic Law, and within the heritage and traditions of Judaism. Another interesting thing is that after this incident we read, "<sup>51</sup> Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them." That is to say, Jesus honored his father and mother, which is not to say that his being in the Temple dishonored his mother and Joseph. Although it would have reflected poorly on Joseph's honor and his ability to safeguard and control his household in favor of Jesus' heavenly father's ability to keep him safe and for Jesus to show honor to him. As a young man, such freedoms and latitudes that we see in our text were within Jesus' male rights, and his mother, seemingly a typical Jewish mother, needed to realize this and get on board. Yet, Mary had ample right to be concerned. Kidnapping and trafficking in children is a very, very old enterprise.

Again, what we see in verse 40 and 52 is Jesus listening, learning, and growing in divine knowledge and understanding. I believe these Scriptures tell us clearly that when Jesus' humanly acquired knowledge became tempered within the charisma of God it produced the wisdom that would characterize his life and fueled his teachings across the ages.

Thus, we can safely say that Jesus had no supernatural help in learning his Scriptures. Jesus, the boy, learned scripture and the nuances of God's will in scripture just like any other person. This is not unlike the passages in 2 Timothy 3:15 where we hear that Timothy had known the Hebrew Scriptures from his childhood and they were able to make him wise for salvation (2 Timothy 3:15 NSRV).

A point I wish to make is that if Jesus had to apply himself to learn scriptures and struggled to understand scripture to be true to God's claim on his life, why should we be any different? Isn't it in reading, studying, and discussing scriptures that the true seeker acquires the wisdom and power unto salvation that Jesus encountered in his Hebrew Scriptures? A person may not be as gifted as Jesus or have the same intensity in their life calling as he did, but that doesn't mean the power of scripture will not bless and inform in the ways of God.

I have often been amazed at people trying to defend their faith or to tell others why they are Christians, when it is obvious they haven't read or understand their primary textbook. It is like another supposedly true story I recently read. The storyteller says:

The spotlight on the corner buzzes when it's safe to cross the street as I was crossing with a somewhat intellectually challenged coworker of mine. She asked if I knew what the buzzer was for. I explained that it signals people, who are blind when the light is red. Appalled, she responded, "What on earth are blind people doing driving?"

If we don't have biblical knowledge and understanding, it is hard to tap into the power and wisdom of God in scripture. Not having sound biblical knowledge makes us reluctant to

engage the world with the Good News of God in Jesus Christ. In the words of 2 Timothy 2; 15 (NRSV), I paraphrase, We must <sup>15</sup> "Do your [*our*] best to present yourself [*ourselves*] to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth."

What is at issue for us here is not our salvation but how effective we are as Christians. Our effectiveness as Christians is directly related to our knowledge of scripture and our willingness to study and internalize God's wisdom as the guiding aspect of our lives. Therefore, as Christians we must study God's word, and we must struggle to understand it within its original context while looking to the context of our modern life. We must learn to listen to Scripture - hear with the intent of discerning and internalizing the moral, ethical, and spiritual truths of scriptures. In so doing, we too will grow in the wisdom and favor of God and will be able to communicate the Christian Gospel more clearly and effectively as well as acquire the power of discernment in the face of temptation. This is a life-long endeavor that goes on under the tutelage of God's Spirit. Therefore, don't you know, as Jesus said, we must be about our Heavenly Father's work.