

December 30, 2018

"Unexpected: Unheard of Wisdom"

Luke 2:21-52

We have been reading through the first two chapters of Luke over these weeks leading up to Christmas – thinking about all of the Unexpected, Unbelievable, and Unconventional acts of God through all sorts of Unlikely people and circumstances; and all of this to bring us an Unheard of Gospel/Good News. This morning we'll focus on the last passage about Jesus in the Temple (Luke 2:41-52) and His Unheard of wisdom.

Why is this story in our Bibles? Why do you think Luke put this in his Gospel account?

Nobody else mentions this episode out of Jesus' life. In fact, other than Matthew's attention to the birth of Jesus and His family's escape to Egypt to avoid King Herod's wrath (which we'll look at next week on Epiphany Sunday), there is no information about Jesus before His public ministry begins in the Jordan River with John the Baptist. Nothing is found except here in Luke. Why is that and what is Luke up to?

The only verses in Luke 1-2 we didn't look at were 1:1-4. *"Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught."* Luke has chosen to make his account "orderly" – which includes the Book of Acts. He has decided to look at the many accounts told and written thus far, and put certain, specific ones together for a man named Theophilus – who could be a high-ranking official OR a name Luke used (which means "lover of God") to refer to all those who follow Jesus.

Whoever Theophilus is in Luke's mind, our author is very careful about recording those things he's been "watching (and listening to) very closely." So why this story?

Here are a few possibilities

1. Luke is giving us an account between Jesus' birth and public ministry.

The most natural questions for a person to ask (after hearing about the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus) are: "Where did He come from?" (conception and birth stories) and "What about life before His public ministry began?"

The 4-5 pivotal moments in a Jewish man's life included circumcision, consecration/dedication, bar mitzvah (the time when a child becomes a "son or daughter of the Law" – probably around age 12 or 13), and the adult life. You can see how Luke is covering all these for Jesus in these first two chapters. But all we get from Luke about Jesus' "in between years" is this story and verse 2:52 – "And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and people." (Also see Luke 2:40) Luke decides this will have to be enough.

2. Another reason this seems to be included is so that we can hear from Jesus Himself about His relationship to God.

So far we have received hints about Jesus' identity from the angel Gabriel, Elizabeth, the shepherds who report to Mary and Joseph, Simeon and Anna. But we have not heard from Jesus yet, and what He thinks about Himself. Jesus says, "Didn't you know I would be in My Father's house (or about My Father's business)?" Maybe the end of Luke 2 is one of Jesus' early public professions of faith.

3. Another good reason for Luke to include this story seems to be it's clarity in connecting Jesus to His Jewish faith.

It is essential for Jesus' ties to the people of Israel to be established immediately/early on. Where is Jesus at each of the pivotal moments mentioned in Luke 1-2? He's in the temple. He and His parents are doing everything they can to be obedient to God – to place themselves, as a family, in the presence and will of God.

It seems to me that Luke, more than any other Gospel writer, understands how crucial Jesus' background is to His message. Luke is also the most susceptible to Jewish criticism because his story of Jesus is the most Gentile (outward/non-Jewish) focused. If Jesus had not been faithful and well-versed, the Good News He proclaimed would have mostly fallen on deaf, Jewish ears. Luke is helping Jewish men and women who hear the story of Jesus to realize this man Jesus is connected to the promises made long ago by God; and that He's not some fly-by-night prophet without any roots. His thoughts and teachings were grounded in history and precedent.

4. I also think this passage helps to emphasize the humanity of Jesus.

For centuries – especially the first few – the Church struggled with how Jesus could be both human and divine. There have been hearings, court cases, creeds, letters, councils, and decrees about these two truths of Jesus' identity. And always, the center of the Church has held that He was 100% divine AND human. Every time a group or individual leaned too heavily on His divinity or humanity – and minimized the other – it was deemed a heresy. You can see how many today disagree that Jesus was God, but some people in the Church also have a real problem

with Jesus' humanity. We don't say this out loud, but we squirm with the full implications of this doctrine.

Here in Luke 2, we see that Jesus was a real kid. Jesus was also a teenager. He travels with His family and observes certain religious holidays. He has to ask questions to learn. He has parents to whom He must answer. Luke doesn't spell it out but Jesus went through adolescence and puberty. He had rules around the home. He had to eat His vegetables –whether He liked them or not – and probably got sick more than once or twice in His childhood. He was tempted to join in with others when they made fun of little Ishmael and probably entertained the thought of disobeying His parents once or twice. In the temple He had to declare His identity as the Father's Son, without being disrespectful to His mom.

It's a pretty risky thing for a group of people to profess – that their God was a real human being. In the world of the early Christian Church, it was laughable to claim that one's deity was "fully human and fully divine." But the Church, with some help from Luke and the writer of Hebrews, has always stressed that Jesus was both. From the scriptures, Christians have argued that it was necessary for Jesus to be a real person, just like us. *"Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil— and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham's descendants. For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted."* (Hebrews 2:14-18) Because our God came down in the flesh, we now have a "High Priest" who understands and identifies with us 100%.

5. Finally, I need to point out that this story alludes to something we rarely talk about: that Jesus' faith was shaped by faithful parents and a larger faith community.

Jesus didn't know the scriptures inside and out because He had them embedded with a hard drive at conception. He learned them (and apparently did more than just memorize them) because everyone in His life talked about, sang about, and asked about these sacred words – and what they meant for life and faith. There was a consistency in His life – a surround sound of the Words of Life – that we cannot even imagine today. I'm not saying everyone around Jesus was perfect. In fact, nobody thought they were perfect; that's why they celebrated Passover!

The amazing thing is not just that Jesus had memorized most of the Old Testament – almost all boys His age had. What everyone in the Temple was amazed at was His understanding. He had digested and incorporated it into His way of living and thinking. He was asking questions nobody else was asking. And He was only 12. But He was a 12 year old surrounded by people

who were committed to the discipleship of young boys and girls. They didn't just get their kids to Sunday School and VBS when it was convenient; they made sure that the focus of their lives was the faithfulness of God and the story He was writing for His redeemed people.

This is so different from our culture. There are so many other competing stories being told, so many divergent songs being sung. And even in the Church we have a hard time getting on the same page, let alone inviting an entire community of faith into the discipleship process of our children and young people. Just try to give some biblical advice to another parent. It doesn't often go over very well. Individualism and independence is too entrenched in our way of life.

But the Church can become counter-culture and revolutionary again – making disciples of Jesus that think and act and ask questions just like Him. It can embrace God's call to a 'life together' that has always been necessary to shape lives along the lines of the one who was born in a manger, fully God and fully human. Let's be that kind of church. Let's step up and take full responsibility for every child and teenager in the FPC family and beyond. Let's grow personally so that we get more familiar with the Good News of Jesus – the stories and the songs of this little child, who grew to be a man . . . who changed the world forever!