

The Adolescent God

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[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Voice of Pastor Scott]

So I'd like to do our Gospel reading for today, and this comes from Luke 2:41-52. If you'd like to follow along you can find it in the red Bibles, which are in the pews - in the pews? Boy it has been a long time since I've been to a church with a pew! Um, in the chairs, in the pockets of the chairs on page 833. Luke 2:41-52:

“Now every year Jesus’ parents went to Jerusalem for the Festival of the Passover and when he was 12 years old they went up as usual for the festival. When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. Assuming that he was in the group of travellers, they went a day's journey and then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. After 3 days they found him in the temple sitting among the teachers listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. 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.” He said to them, “why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my father's house?” But they did not understand what he said to them. Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart and Jesus increased in wisdom and in years and in divine and human favor.”

So to get started today I wanted to ask you to picture yourself in middle school. Some of you are in --

[Congregant] Why?!

[Laughter]

[Pastor Scott] I'll tell you why in a minute. Some of you are in middle school, so if you're already in middle school, you can maybe picture yourself in like 2nd grade or something. But for those

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of us who are older, we're going to picture ourselves in middle school. How did you look? How did you dress? How did you do your hair? You have that picture in your head? Now, all of our current middle schoolers at Artisan are very cool and very put together, so it may surprise them to learn that their grown up friends we're not always as cool as we are now. And certainly weren't as cool when we were in middle school, as they are now. Not me of course, I have been super cool my whole life. Shall I prove it to you? You want to see a picture of me in middle school? Alright, let's see a picture of me in middle school. Ok.

[Loud laughter]

[Pastor Scott] You didn't have to laugh quite so loud! I...now...um, for accessibility reasons and for those who may be listening on the podcast, I will give you an image description.

[Congregant] No! No!

[Laughter]

[Pastor Scott] No, I must, I must. So, I am wearing what appears to be the "deal with it" sunglasses from that meme, I don't know why I had them in 1990, but I did. A wrist watch, which I'm pretty sure had a calculator on it. A friendship bracelet. A grey t-shirt with a moose on it because I was from Maine. And, inexplicably, also a long sleeved white shirt underneath that t-shirt, rolled up above my elbows. All right.

[Congregant] Don't forget the sunglasses straaaaap!

[Pastor Scott] Oh there's a strap on the sunglasses! Yes, we could not possibly miss that, we don't forget that. Oh my goodness!

[Congregant] The hair!

[Pastor Scott] Oh the hair, yes. This is, I think probably about 3 or 4 weeks grown out from the time I went to an old fashioned, like 60-years-old-in-the-90's-barber in a rural town in Maine and asked him for a flat top, by which I meant the cool flat top that the rap artists had, and by which he meant a military buzz cut with just a little bit of a thing that you pushed up with wax -- I'm not joking -- in the front. And that was thankfully grown out a few weeks from there.

OK I'm so glad I only brought one picture. Because it would be really bad if I had to show you, and describe for you a second image of myself at this same age...

[Congregation as a second picture appears] Clapping, oooohhhh!

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[Pastor Scott] Oh.

[Laughter]

[Pastor Scott] Yeah so my hair is a little longer there [laughs] as you can see, I think maybe I was in my spiked hair stage then -- tips down in the front, spikes on the top. I'm holding a kite string, but really the best part is the ensemble.

[Laughter]

[Pastor Scott] As you can see, if you're in the room with me, I have a yellow Simpson's tank top and some blue shorts which can only be described as very short.

[Laughter]

[Pastor Scott] And I'm pretty sure the only redeeming part of this image is the beauty of Portland headlights way off in the background [laughter] to which you can avert your eyes if you need. So enough of that could you please remove that from the screen. We all thank you.

[Laughter]

So today's sermon is titled "The Adolescent God" because it's a story of Jesus as an adolescent, or at least, as a pre-teen -- it says 12 years old in the text -- that's about how old I was in those 2 pictures. And I like to imagine Jesus going through a stage as goofy as I went through at that age, it's reassuring to me. And as you heard in the Gospel reading, today is an occasion where Jesus actually gets separated from his family at that age. And, by the way, if you've been studying the lectionary, we didn't do the Hebrew Bible reading (the Old Testament reading) today, but the story from 1st Samuel has a really neat connection to this because there's a concluding line in each of the passages about Samuel and about Jesus. The Samuel one says "the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the Lord and with the people." And then the end of the Gospel reading, as you heard a minute ago, says "Jesus increased in wisdom and in years and in divine and human favor." Now that's probably not a coincidence, and if that connection piques your interest, I encourage you to go and study those 2 passages from the lectionary a little bit more closely and maybe compare and see if there's more than just those 2 things that are similar there. That's a little Bible nerd extra credit for you, if you want to go do it.

But today, we want to talk about Jesus as a tween. As pastor Jessie mentioned at the Children's moment: during the season of Christmas, which we are still in, we think of Jesus a lot as a baby -- that's the easy and accessible one, we have all the Nativity scenes, we have all the imagery on

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the greeting cards, we have all the songs about Jesus as a baby... And the rest of the year, when it's not Christmas time, we think about Jesus as an adult. And what we don't often do is think of Jesus as a teenager. But this is important, and I'm glad that Jessie reemphasized it in the children's moment today, as I emphasized it last week in the children's moment, that Jesus was lots of different ages -- he was every different age from birth until adulthood -- and there's something to be learned from pondering the life of Jesus at those different ages. And, in this case, I think we have something important to be learned from the account of Jesus as an adolescent. He's doing what all adolescents do: he's pulling away from his parents and he's coming into his own sense of himself. And this ends up preparing him for his adult ministry. But his parents don't like it very much. Now it's no secret that parents and kids sometimes have a little bit of an experience of tension as the kids age. Sometimes it's when they're a teenager, sometimes it's when they're a threenager.

[Laughter]

[Pastor Scott] I always used to say my son Abel was very advanced because he was in his terrible twos by the time he was 18 months old, [laughter] he's not in his terrible twos anymore, thankfully.

But because the incarnation means that Jesus was fully human -- again on Christmas Eve I spoke of this and talked about how we kind of lose that aspect of it, we would much prefer, I think, a lot of the time, the divine Jesus, and he's there, but the human Jesus is so important to us because of occasions like this -- that because of the fact that he's fully human, I think this little story can serve as a helpful model for families that might be in the same stage of life. And I think there are some takeaways from this passage which I'd like to share for you, not only for adolescents and for their parents who might be anxiety-ridden and worried, but in fact for everyone because obviously not everyone in the room or not everybody listening to the podcast is in that same stage of life and you may never be and that's OK, because it's not just teenagers who are inclined to test boundaries, right? And it's not just parents who've lost connection with someone they care about, who might be searching for someone who they understand in some sense to be missing or lost. Those experiences are universal and so I think that this little account has something for each of us.

So I want to share those little takeaways that I identified in the passage. Now, what this is not meant to be is 5 foolproof steps for raising a teenager, I would not be qualified to do that and even if I felt I was, I'd like to think I'd have better judgment than to try. It's not meant to be a guaranteed method for finding those who have gone missing spiritually, or otherwise. It's none of that. It's really just a set of observations and ideas that I personally find helpful in this

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account and maybe that you will find them helpful as well, and ponder them and treasure them in your heart as mother Mary did.

So, here's the 1st take away: it's to embrace traditions. Traditions. "Every year," the text says, "his parents went to Jerusalem for the Festival of the Passover." If Jesus was 12 years old, this was apparently the 12th time that they had done it, depending on when his birthday was.

[Laughter]

[Pastor Scott] It probably wasn't actually December 25th. This family was a family that observed traditions and they went through the cycle of the year and they hit all the the high points together as a family. You see, traditions give us a way of navigating through the calendar. They give us a way of knowing when to turn here or get on the highway there as we're journeying through life. Traditions offer a familiarity and consistency to our spiritual lives, especially, that we sometimes find lacking. And some sections of the church are very good at observing traditions and keeping to a calendar and other sections of the church are not very good at that. And the truth is, we're probably somewhere in between, we try to borrow and steal from lots of different traditions here at Artisan, and I hope that our observance of the Christian calendar has given us a sense of rhythm in the years that has been meaningful to your spiritual life. But I'd also like to encourage you to think about the traditions that you keep, either in your family, or just on your own because they're important to you. It doesn't necessarily have to be overtly religious to have some spiritual value to you because it can put that same signpost, that same mile marker, in your year that these official religious traditions might do as well. And so I encourage you to think about those traditions and imagine ways that you might build in more meaning and depth into them. They're already there on your calendar, that's what's nice about them. Maybe you can expand those traditions. And if you are not the type of person who keeps a lot of traditions, or if you're displaced from a family setting where they used to happen, or they used to make more sense, maybe you could consider some of the rhythms of life that you find here at Artisan, or even in your community, your city, or your neighborhood. A lot of us have localized traditions that can help us in those same ways. And the thing about being a person of deep and abiding faith is that you can connect almost anything to it. I learned this when I was a homeschooler -- we don't homeschool our kids anymore but we did early on -- and when you're a homeschooler everything is an educational opportunity.

[Laughter]

[Pastor Scott] You see a bug and you can go, "let's have a math lesson about that bug" if the kid is interested in the bug. Believe me, I can turn a little kid looking at a bug into a math lesson, I've done it. As a person of faith I would encourage you to do that same kind of thing: always

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being on the look out for how you can use the handles that are built into the traditions of your life to have some spiritual meaning for you. So the first thing, the first take-away here is traditions. Mary and Joseph and Jesus went to Jerusalem because it was tradition and they had this little adventure together, which was formative for all of them.

The second one is the idea of wandering. Don't be afraid to wander a little bit and don't be afraid to give space for the people you love to wander a little bit. Mary and Joseph, you might have noticed, were not exactly helicopter parents. Did you see that? They didn't even know he was gone until they were a whole day's journey out of Jerusalem.

[Laughter]

[Pastor Scott] And when they went back and they didn't have any idea where he might be -- it took them three more days to find him. And where did they find him? Well in the Temple. "He said to them, 'why are you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my father's house?'" So here's the tip kids: you might get in trouble if you take off for four days, but if, when your parents find you, you are in church, [laughter] that might get you off the hook. Just tell them you're having a 72-hour Bible study and they'll love it. [laughter]

So the interesting thing here is that when Jesus wandered away from his earthly family, his earthly father and mother, he actually grew closer to his heavenly father, he actually grew closer to God. And I think we, it's real hard for parents especially, but as I said for anybody who cares about someone who seems to be wandering, to allow that to happen and not to try to, you know, reel somebody in right away because you love them so much. But remember that parable of the prodigal son! Even the prodigal son had to wander far away, had to completely reject his household and burn through his inheritance before he could get to the place where he knew his actual need and before he could come back to the father. So, I think our job as parents and as people who care about those who might be drifting away is not to build a fence or to put a leash on them, but to be ready like the father in that parable, expectant and hopeful and loving him with open arms for that moment when the one we love has returned. And here's something else you can do: you can trust your community. Remember what it says, Mary and Joseph, the reason they didn't know that he was not with them is because he was assuming that he was somewhere in the group of travelers. They went on a day's journey and then they realized he was gone and before they turned around and went back to Jerusalem what they did first was started to look for him among their relatives and friends. I hope that you have found here at Artisan, and perhaps in other communities that you're part of, a place where those you love can be entrusted to explore the boundaries and the edges in a way that's safe and ultimately building up of their lives. It really does, like, take a village, to borrow a phrase.

So the first thing is traditions: embrace traditions. The second one is wandering: allow some wandering to happen. And the third thing is, this is my favorite one: questions. Did you notice when they found him after three days they found him in the temple sitting among the teachers listening to them and asking them questions. So, kids, and anybody else who's sort of incessantly curious, don't ever let anybody tell you that questions are a bad thing. Sometimes we might want to tell you "ask me that later" just to build a little protection for some of the parents in the room, but questions themselves are not bad, as a matter of fact questions are great! They're not just OK, they're wonderful! Jesus himself was sitting in the temple asking questions. I love it! And then there's a little guideline in there for those of us who get asked the questions, maybe it's because we're parents, maybe it's because we're seen as a kind of a leader in a certain community, maybe it's because there are people who trust us and look up to us and they ask us questions... For anybody who gets asked the questions, here's the guideline: when people ask you questions listen to their answers. What? Did I read that wrong? Nope, I wrote it down like that, when people ask you questions, listen to their answers. Did you notice that in the text? I love this move! "All who heard him asking questions were amazed at his understanding and his answers." Isn't that a beautiful thing? What does that tell us? It tells us that the instructive model in the religious community that Jesus was part of not only allowed space for people to ask questions, but rather than immediately giving them the answers to the questions, asked the question in reverse and said, "what do you think?" I'm interpolating a little bit here, but from what I know about Jewish Temple -- second Temple Jewish Bible study, this is how it worked. And actually our Jewish friends still get this to a degree that we probably never will. I try to cover as much space as possible at Artisan but it's not in our D.N.A. the same way it is in Jewish communities to allow space for questions and to allow the questioners to give answers. That is really dangerous, especially when we want to be protective of doctrinal truth! If you come and ask me, "Did Jesus really rise from the dead in his human body?" it's very easy for me to say "yes" and to recite the creed to you. And I do believe that the answer to that question is yes, however what good does that do you? And so if you come to me and ask me that question -- and some of you have -- you probably can attest to the fact that my response to you will be: "Do you think he did? Why or why not?" And then we get to go into this place where I get to be amazed at your answers to your own questions!

And see, I think it's too quick to say, "well, they were amazed at his answers because he was God." Yes, but, he was also human. Remember this duality that we hold in mystery as Christian believers. And I think the amazement that came at the answers to the questions that Jesus was giving was not just because he had all the answers right, from the moment he was born. I think it's because he was advancing himself in human wisdom and insight and favor. Questions are probably the best way that I know to learn the Bible and to understand it. And so that's why the

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questions one is my favorite one, it might be the most important thing I say to you today, that your questions are OK and you can answer them before you know the answers, and that's a really important part of your spiritual growth. Which is not to say that every answer to every question is right, but I have said for a long time that the best sermons that I preach are the ones that leave people with not a list of answers but with a list of more and better questions. So if I give a sermon and you go away feeling like I just, like, fed you every bit of information that I thought you needed, that's a failure on my part. If you go away and you have a conversation in the car on the way home, or you text a friend afterward and say, "I really didn't get that part, what did that mean?" that's when I know I've done it right. And unfortunately I don't get to see that because I don't monitor all your text messages...[laughter] Not all of your text messages I mean some of you I... By the way the last thing I'll say about questions is that this is part of the model that we've built into the Second Sundays experiences, so we have one of those coming up in a couple of weeks, it's at 6pm on Sunday, the second Sunday of the month and you can come with questions and we'll all be amazed at your answers when you do.

Alright so there's my three observations from today's story about the adolescent God: traditions, wandering, and questions. Traditions wandering and questions and I'm going to give you a bonus one, which is to hope for treasure. You know in the midst of this experience Luke tells us that Mary and Joseph did not understand. But by the end he says his mother treasured all these things in her heart. So if you're in the parental role in this story, literally or figuratively, seeking after somebody who's gone astray, I want to offer you the hope that there will come a day when you will treasure these moments in your heart, even the ones that don't feel like a treasure right now. And if you're the person in the adolescent part of the story, figuratively or literally, the one who has gone missing in some way, whether you were actually 12 years old or not, first of all take heart and great joy in the fact that YOU get to play the role of Jesus in this reenactment of a Gospel story. That's pretty cool! But also know that your moms and dads treasure you in their hearts. You may not know it or believe it, but it's true. And if you don't have a mom or dad, I want you to know that this community treasures you in its collective heart as well. And as a pastor I treasure you in my heart. And I have learned over the years, not very many things, but one of them is to trust the entirety of your journey, in my heart, as a treasure. Journey is as a super overused word for the spiritual life but I think the reason is because it's so fitting, it's so apt, because on a journey there's a destination and you're not there yet, and because there's so much to be gained along the way that you begin to see that the value is actually in the travel, and because even when you wander and even when you are lost, that might very well be exactly where you need to be because that might very well be exactly where you finally find yourself able and ready to meet God. So, wherever you are, I

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want you to seek the treasure of meeting God, the God who miraculously and mysteriously was once 12 years old. The adolescent God. Let's pray.

Thank you God for this amazing and weird and fun story that tells of a time when Jesus, though fully God, was fully human and specifically was a 12 year old human. Thank you for this model for how we might interact with our own world and we we pray and trust in the answer to the prayer that you would be with us at any stage of our life, at every stage of our journey, at every age that we would know Jesus present with us in our joys and our suffering, in our confusion and in our understanding, and that we might follow in his footsteps and find favor with you. We pray in his name. Amen.

[end of sermon]

[Male voice] For more information visit us at ArtisanChurch.com