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Peace Lutheran Church
Holbrook, Arizona
1st Sunday after Christmas
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TEXTS: 1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26; Luke 2:41-52

Begin this message by playing the song from *The Cotton Patch Gospel* called, “It Isn’t Easy Growing Up To Be Jesus.”

Kids. Whether little or grown up, kids are a challenge. They cry, they get messy and they make messes, they demand to be fed, they get sick, they cost money and, whether little or big, they have attitudes. Before you have kids, you think you know how to do it. Your kids are going to turn out right. They, like Jesus at the end of our Gospel reading, will be “*obedient*” to the parental units. They will exceed expectations and, as adults, they will be doting, respectful toward and admiring of their parents, paying for the occasional dinner out and ocean cruise just because, well...they’re just so grateful for all you’ve done for them.

I got Alexa for Christmas. Do you know her? She’s this amazing little device that you plug in at home and you can ask her anything and she provides you with an answer or, if she doesn’t know, she has the humility to admit it. It’s very Star Trek-ish. I’m having fun with Alexa but you know what I like best about Alexa? You can tell her to be quiet and she does, immediately. There’s no argument, no talk-back, no attitude. Alexa simply obeys. Bliss!

In both our Old Testament and Gospel lessons today, we have stories about kids growing up. In the First Reading, we heard part of the story of Samuel’s boyhood; then in our Gospel reading we hear the only story known to us in scripture of Jesus’ boyhood, His trip with His family to the temple in Jerusalem when He was twelve years old. Even our Epistle Reading today, while not talking about a particular person, speaks of maturing as Christians. It talks about growing-up in Christ and what that looks like.

Today, I want to talk with you about growing up. Both our Old Testament Reading and our Gospel text end with similar phrases. In 1 Samuel, it says, “*Now the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the Lord and with the people.*” The Luke text says, “*And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.*” Certainly we can—and should—influence our children as they mature. They should be taught manners, respect, knowledge needed for living and, most importantly, love and fear of God. As parents, we may have done this well or poorly. As children, we may have experienced a great or terrible childhood or, most probably, something in between. This morning, however, I don’t want to talk with you about growing-up your children or your grandchildren or your students or anyone else. I want to talk with you about growing-up yourself. Maturing as a follower of Jesus.

I thought: What do these texts have to teach us about growing up as a Jesus-follower? I came up with nine points of instruction for us, taken from our Gospel text, which, I believe, if followed, would help us to mature as Christians. (I know, I know: Nine isn’t a very Biblical number. I should have three or seven or ten but, well...I couldn’t manage that and don’t you think part of maturity, even for a preacher, is playing with the cards you’ve been dealt?) So, my list contains nine points. You may want to open your Bibles to Luke, chapter 2, starting with verse 41.

(Project this list, one at a time, on the wall.)

Maturing as Christians from Luke 2:41-52

1. Be a part of your culture and observe its customs (at least its good ones).

Our text begins, “*Now every year Jesus’ parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. And when He was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival.*” There was a rhythm, a routine to life in the home in which Jesus grew up. As a part of the Jewish community, the Holy Family would have observed Passover, certainly (we see this in today’s text) but also other Jewish holidays: Rosh Hashanah (the New Year), Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) and

Sukkot (the fall harvest festival). And of course, every Friday evening until Saturday sunset, they would have observed Shabbat, what we call Sabbath. Many times we read in the Gospels how Jesus was found in a synagogue on the Sabbath, “*as was His custom.*” (Luke 4:16, e.g.) There was ritual—and not just religious observance festivals. We know there were marriages and funerals, although these too would have been overtly religious. I’m not sure how birthdays were celebrated, but I’m guessing there were. Certainly there were rights-of-passages, later known as bar (for boys) and bat (for girls)—mitzvahs. Nazareth, the town in which Jesus grew up, would have had customs of its own, I’m sure—celebrations of its history, perhaps, or of some famous citizen. I’m confident Jesus would have participated fully in all of these customs, excepting any which might have been offensive to God.

We’re in the middle of the Christmas season and, wow, our culture has come up with tons of traditions concerning it: Christmas trees, decorating, caroling, gift-giving, food, family gatherings, etc. Should one keep oneself apart from all of these shenanigans, many of which are far-removed from any observance of Jesus’ birthday? The Jehovah Witnesses think so. Or should one throw oneself into the fray, participating in every custom that has been instigated? I had a brief but sobering conversation with a woman on Christmas Eve. She said, in her family, Christmas—as well as birthdays, graduations, anniversaries—is simply an occasion to get together and party, translated: get drunk.

I don’t think we mature as Christians when we keep ourselves totally apart from our culture’s customs—live lives of isolation—but neither do I think we mature as Christians when we indulge in every sort of custom to which we’re exposed. That’s debauchery. We need to use the brain God has given us to discern which are the customs of our culture in which we can engage with joy and a clear conscience, knowing that in so doing we can celebrate this good life God has given us and we can connect with others so that we might bear witness to God in an effective way. Figuring out that balance—engaging with others but not endorsing ungodly behaviors—is tricky. I’m confident that Jesus, when He went to the wedding at Cana, for example, connected with people at various levels but yet did not condone drunkenness and depravity. We must seek to do likewise.

2. Have a mind of your own.

Our text says: *“When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem...”* While a part of His culture, Jesus was not a lemming. He did not follow the crowd blindly. He was a thinker. There were things going on at the temple in Jerusalem which intrigued Him—and He wanted to know more, even if that meant not following the crowd home to Nazareth.

When I was a boy, and particularly a teen, I’d confront my parents with the statement, “Well, everyone’s doing it” or “Everyone’s going.” And my parents would say, “And if everyone is jumping off a cliff, will you follow?” Did any of you have parents like mine?

My parents’ response was their way of saying, “Following the crowd isn’t always the smartest thing to do.” In this text today, Jesus is demonstrating that He had a mind of His own.

Do you? I don’t mean by this that it’s good or godly to be defiant or obstinate or recalcitrant. That’s not what a maturing Christian is like—but it does mean thinking for yourself and not necessarily following the crowd. If you’re intrigued by a subject and it’s not been forbidden by God, follow-up on it. See where it leads. Pursue a dream. Don’t be a clone of anyone other human. Be your own man or woman. Be willing to go against the flow if you think that’s where God may be leading you.

3. Take responsibility.

I’d like to look at Joseph and Mary’s behavior here in verse 44-45: *“Assuming that He was in the group of travelers, they (Mary and Joseph) went a day’s journey. 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.”*

We may think it odd that Mary and Joseph didn’t have Jesus in tow when they left Jerusalem, but we must be careful here not to put our cultural understanding of parenting upon the parents of that time. The phrase, “It takes a village to raise a child” certainly applied to the culture of that time. It would have been natural to assume that Jesus was with His cousins in the company of

uncle and auntie. But at the end of that day when a search for Jesus revealed His absence, Joseph and Mary took responsibility and went in search of their son. At considerable inconvenience and expense and worry, they retraced their steps to Jerusalem and three days later—anyone see a veiled reference here to the three days before Jesus’ resurrection?—they find Him. They didn’t give up on their child. They took responsibility.

I promise to not stand on this soapbox too long but I’m bothered—really bothered—by the role our government is assuming in the feeding of our children. I know kids need to be well-nourished if they’re to learn properly in schools and yet our government’s providing of free meals—not just lunches but now breakfasts—and not just during the school year but during the summers is teaching parents, inadvertently perhaps but nonetheless teaching them, that someone else is responsible for their kids. It’s not the government’s job to feed children. It’s the parents’ job to feed their kids. It’s their responsibility. I’m very concerned that we are perpetrating irresponsibility by stepping into roles and taking over responsibilities that parents should be taking. We’re creating a culture of irresponsibility and expectations of entitlement.

Anyone over the age of 14 can breed...but to parent? That takes maturity and requires responsibility.

But I don’t just want to talk about parenting here. I want to talk about taking responsibility for whatever action you may take. If you commit to a job, do it—or explain to your boss why you have to quit. Don’t just not show up or do sub-standard work. If you’re a citizen of this country and enjoy its benefits, pay your taxes—and don’t try to weasel out of them. If you’ve committed to a marriage, unless there’s abuse or some other egregious behavior, work out your problems, taking responsibility for your own part in them. If you’ve signed up for school and particularly if you’ve accepted a scholarship, study—even if it means postponing some of the fun you’d like to have. If you’ve joined a church or any organization, take responsibility and be involved. And if you’ve committed to too much, take responsibility and divest yourself of some of your duties—but in a responsible way and not just quitting. Mary and Joseph took responsibility for their son.

4. Continue to learn—and teach others.

Verse 46: “*After three days, they found Him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions.*” Jesus, as a human, had a desire to know more—and so He took action to learn. He went to where knowledge and, we hope, wisdom could be found: “*among the teachers.*”

Do you seek to learn? Do you want to know more—about God, about yourself, about life? Or, are you satisfied with your status quo?

As people made in the image of God, we have intelligence. Are we using it? Are we developing it? Or is our intelligence atrophying for lack of stimulation? It’s so easy to fall into a rut and keep doing what we’ve always done. That’s the path of least resistance but in this New Year I want to challenge you to learn something new. You’ll see from our bulletin that we have three adult education opportunities we’ll be starting in January. There are other Bible studies and Christian growth opportunities in our community, not to mention online. And not just Biblical matters, there’s a library full of books and other resources just downtown—and we have a community college with classes designed to stimulate your brain and expand your horizons. Take advantage of them.

But don’t just keep your knowledge—whether newfound or seasoned—to yourself: teach it in some manner to another. Jesus didn’t keep all His knowledge and wisdom to Himself, did He? No, he taught—overtly and by modeling. So much of the gospels is Jesus’ teaching His followers about this or that.

You don’t have to be an official teacher to teach. There are all kinds of leadership opportunities and, if not, you can create one. And there’s a whole world of younger or less experienced people out there who would benefit from mentoring—by you. I rewatched *Prayer Warrior* the other day. Great story in which a grandmother mentors a young woman with a troubled marriage about prayer. Continue to learn—and teach others.

5. Be open to being amazed.

Verse 47 & 48: *“And all who heard Him were amazed at His understanding and His answers. When His parents saw them, they were astonished...”*

There is so much to this life—and there’s so much about God—which stands to amaze us. Too often, folks, we become so calcified in our thinking, in our routines, in our lives, that we neglect to get out of the box or out of our chairs and experience the wonder of life with God.

On the night of our progressive dinner, we were all sitting in the fellowship room enjoying our soup & salad course when Vicki called us to get out of our chairs to check out the sunset. Incredible! When is the last time you visited the Grand Canyon and stood on the rim with gaping jaw? Or stepped outdoors on one of our clear, starry nights and spent a little time gazing upwards?

Have you considered recently the complexity of the body and how magnificently it functions? A miracle if there ever was one! I’ve been amazed recently at the wonders of technology when I can sit in my dining room and ask, “Alexa, what is the average weight of an adult in the United States?”—and she’ll tell me. I hope you don’t take Safeway or any of our Stateside grocery stores for granted. Having lived in developing nations, the options and the quality and the low prices we enjoy, yes even in Holbrook, are amazing.

But most amazing of all is that the God who created that vast starry universe knows my name and cares about my situation and has provided for my future, eternally. Totally awesome! That God could not just overlook my sins but expunge them from my record and want me—me!—as His child, oh my! Overwhelming. And that God would leave the glories of heaven to become human in order to not just show us a better way to life but make possible a glorious eternity...beyond words.

Stand amazed, people. It is a wonderful life!

6. Have expectations of others—but don’t base your value on their performance.

Verse 48-50: “‘*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.”

Joseph and Mary were right to take responsibility for Jesus, searching for Him until they found Him. I’m guessing, however, unless they were very different parents from us, they were unprepared for Jesus answer, and probably not happy with it. And yet, make no mistake, they were good parents. We can only hope they didn’t judge themselves badly because of Jesus having a mind of His own and being about God’s business.

It’s perfectly fine to have expectations of our children, and of our students, and of our grandchildren, and of our employees, and of our fellow church members. In fact, we should have these expectations, particularly if those people don’t have any expectations for themselves (which often they don’t). It’s not always the case but often children, students, employees and others rise to the expectations we have of them, particularly if they are convinced of our love for them.

However, when children and others don’t rise up to our expectations for them, don’t think you’ve failed. Don’t think, “If only I had done..., then maybe...” You’ll drive yourself crazy with that kind of thinking. If you have erred in your parents or teaching or employing, admit it. Repent of it and receive God’s forgiveness—and then move on. Don’t wallow in what might-have-been.

I’ve worked a lot with youth and young adults. Some kids have had the best of parenting and have turned out well. Some kids have had the best of parenting and turned out badly. Some kids have had the worst of parenting and, as expected, have turned out terribly. Some kids have had the worst of parenting and, surprisingly, have turned out wonderfully. You just never know. You do your best. You do what God wants you to do. But know that you can’t control the results. God has given humankind—including our children, grandchildren, students and employees—free will and they can use that free will for life or death. You do the best you can, pray and then...*que sera sera*.

7. Be obedient.

Verse 51: *“Then He went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them.”*

Mary and I were talking about this matter of obedience to law recently—not just God’s law but civil law, as well. Our sons are willing to obey laws if they can see the point in them—but if they can’t, they have no compunction about disobeying. Speeding laws, for example. Stop signs. Paying taxes. And when they were younger, being in by 10 o’clock. Doing the chores they were assigned. Staying out of trouble. In our family, it’s more the boys that have issues with obedience, not our daughter—and I’m not just saying this because she’s sitting here. I speculate that it has to do with testosterone. There’s someone about guys that really wants to call their own shots and that resists authority.

I don’t recommend blind obedience to authority. Look where that got the German people during Hitler’s regime. Or the followers of any number of cults. Jesus Himself, while obedient as a whole to His parents, did not always do what He was told. Remember when His mother and siblings tried to take Him away because they thought He was off His rocker? He didn’t listen to her but instead said, *“Who are my mother and brothers and sisters? Those who do the will of my Father who is in heaven?”* (Mt. 12:46-50) In general, however—except when His family would pull Him away from His Divine mission—He was obedient. And He was always obedient to His heavenly father: *“Nevertheless, not my will but Thine be done.”* (Lk. 22:42)

Where we—and maybe men and maybe Americans in particular—have trouble obeying is when we don’t understand the reason for the command. We’re like big kids saying, “But why?”

Do you trust that God knows what He’s doing? Do you believe that God has your best interests at heart? Are you convinced that God is good?

If so, then obedience becomes an easier matter.

8. Treasure your relationship with God and others.

Verse 51b: *“His mother treasured all these things in her heart.”*

Mary knew her relationship with her Son was special—and while she may not have understood everything that had happened and would happen to her, she knew her Son was of God. As we considered last Sunday, Mary, like Abraham, submitted herself to God and His will for her life. And she treasured her relationship with Jesus and with the God who provided Him for her.

Ladies and gentlemen, let's not take it for granted that the God of the universe, the One who can still storms and who can cast out demons, make the lame to walk and the blind to see, the One who willingly gave up His life for willful children like us—this One loves us, wants us, provides for us. Let's not take this for granted but instead, let's treasure it. It can mean so much—giving us the joy and the peace and the purpose each of us is looking for in this life.

And neither let us take our relationships with others for granted—but instead treasure them. Sometimes it takes a bit of separation in order to better appreciate the relationships you have—but whatever it takes, don't just go about business-as-usual. The people in our lives are not just business-as-usual but precious gifts given to us to cherish. I mean our spouses and our children, certainly, but also so many other precious relationships. I thank each of you for the ways in which you've reached out to me during this Christmas season and shown your support and that you care. I treasure you.

9. Reflect upon your experiences of life.

Again I quote verse 51b: *“His mother treasured all these things in her heart.”*

We heard a similar phrase about Mary on Christmas Eve, didn't we? *“But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.”* (Lk.2:19)

I don't think we take enough time to reflect upon our life experiences. I'm particularly guilty of this. For example, I knocked myself out with my Kiwanis Club's *Twelve Homes Of Christmas* event. I recruited the owners of twelve homes here in Holbrook to open their beautifully decorated homes to the public for a Christmastime parade of homes. The paying public had four hours on

the afternoon/evening of December 15 to tour these twelve lovely homes. It was a beautiful day. Everyone one of the homeowners were gracious and hospitable. The public thoroughly enjoyed the experience and were delighted in catching up with old friends and meeting new ones. We made a little over \$1,600 for our Club's treasury. And yet, as soon as that was over, I had to get ready for worship the next morning and the next day was our Advent progressive dinner for which I had some responsibility and then there was getting ready for the Christmas services and, and, and... The *Twelve Homes* event was truly wonderful and yet, I took no time to ponder it in my heart because I was on to the next thing.

I need to slow down and savor more of the experiences of life, and I suspect you do, too. Instead of gulping that glass of egg nog, sip it. Instead of rushing through the gift opening, prolong it. Instead of being in a hurry to take down the Christmas decorations, enjoy them—perhaps even leaving them up until Epiphany on January 6, when we observe the coming of the wise men to the Christ Child. Continue to celebrate the Twelve Days Of Christmas.

And when it comes to our experiences of God, savor them, too. When you come to worship, open yourself up to how you might encounter God during the service. Don't be timing the preacher to see if he can bring it in under an hour. When you open your Bible, begin with a heartfelt prayer which may go something like, "Lord God, show me Your truth today. I want to know You better that I can order my life more faithfully." When you talk with another believer, don't just inquire as to their well-being. You do that with anyone at Safeway. Take the time to really listen. Share something of importance that may be on your heart. Foster relationships that mean something.

I look forward to my retirement when I can do more reflecting upon my experiences of life but let's not wait until then. Mary wasn't a senior when she pondered. She was but an older teenager. Take time to reflect and, I'm guess, in so doing, you'll find occasion to praise and thank God all the more—and in doing that, you'll become the more mature Christ-follower you desire to be.

Kids. We're all kids of God, aren't we? But let's not stay at children. I conclude with these words of scripture recorded for us in Ephesians 4:14-16. Read it with me, please (project on wall):

“No prolonged infancies among us, please. We’ll not tolerate babes in the woods, small children who are an easy mark for impostors. God wants us to grow up, to know the whole truth and tell it in love—like Christ in everything. We take our lead from Christ, who is the source of everything we do. He keeps us in step with each other. His very breath and blood flow through us, nourishing us so that we will grow up healthy in God, robust in love.” Amen.

Songs:

Opening	“Angels, From The Realms Of Glory” (ELW#275)
After O.T. Reading	“Let All Together Praise Our God” (ELW#287)
Before/After Gospel	“Jesus, What A Wonderful Child” (ELW#297)
Message	“One Pure And Holy Passion” by Mark Altrogge
Offertory	“Infant Holy, Infant Lowly” (Piano Solo)
Special	“Angels We Have Heard On High” arr. by Reuben Morgan
Closing	“Cold December Flies Away” (ELW#299)