

Jesus grew. ...Are we growing?

2nd Sunday after Christmas. January 4, 2009. (Text: Luke 2:39-52)

Everybody gets sentimental about babies. Steve, the construction manager for our building project, is a fine, bright young man of 35. He's a leader, a "man's man" kind of guy, who's really happiest when operating a piece of Caterpillar equipment big enough to smash down concrete walls. He and his wife Lisa recently had their first child. Steve said that almost all the presents they received, when they went to be with his parents in Montrose for Christmas, were for their baby daughter. He found himself opening present after present that contained little frilly blouses and other tiny girl things, holding them up for everybody to admire, and saying, "Aw-w-w, isn't that nice." He told us this past week, "There's something about babies that affects even a tough guy."

Sentimentalism of that sort touches all of us at Christmas. But, you know what? Baby Jesus grew up. Much as we love the *Silent Night* Christmas-carol-picture of the "holy Infant, so tender and mild," we've got to come to grips with the fact that Jesus outgrew the swaddling clothes. He got too big for the manger. He ultimately abandoned his dependence on Mary and Joseph. Jesus did not remain tiny, helpless, and cuddly. He matured into his vocation and his destiny as Son of God, Savior, and Lord.

He grew up, and the full-grown Jesus was compelling, and insistent, and inspiring. He became a man, and as a man he was prophetic and disturbing —and irritatingly inconvenient sometimes. (Often, in fact.) Truth is, without the *mature* Jesus, the romantic and sentimental events of his Nativity would have faded into the mists of legend. As pretty as the manger scene may be, leaving Jesus asleep on the hay is not an option for us. And, though it's still the Christmas season, we move on from the stable behind the inn in Bethlehem to look at other dimensions of the story of God's sharing our humanity — including today what we can only call "the adolescence" of the Son of God.

In the space of twelve verses, Luke today tells us first that the boy Jesus "*grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was on him,*" and later that he "*increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.*" In other words, Jesus grew both stronger and wiser as he got older, and apparently both God and the neighbors approved of those developments. But the developing didn't happen overnight.

All of us know people who haven't "grown up," even though they've grown older. They've been stuck. In some cases, one phase of life apparently felt so good that they decided to stop there and live that part over and over again. (These are the people who keep reminding us about their athletic exploits in college.) Some people got stuck in the fantasies of adolescence for a lifetime, never quite sure what they wanted to do when they finally grew up. For others, a personal calamity like the loss of a career or a divorce freeze-framed their life like a DVD when somebody hits the "pause" button. They became locked in place, unable to get beyond the hurt, living in pain and refusing to heal. Then there's the classic mid-life crisis that comes upon some of us when we realize at, say, 45 or 50, that we've been very busy, maybe even made a lot of money, but haven't really *grown*.

Though we all agree that it's tragic when children won't grow up, there is also in our culture a phenomenon that some psychologists describe as "an epidemic refusal to become adult." Besides generally worshiping youth (which has made the practice of cosmetic surgery a very lucrative career in this country) there also seems to be a tendency among us to want to be taken care of... to be able to make messes and have other people clean them up... to be irresponsible and then

pass the buck to somebody else. We saw this attitude at the end of the past year on Wall Street and in Detroit, whose irresponsible kids told us, in effect: “We were just having some fun, and then this crazy, unexpected thing happened. —Could you grownups please come and help us out? But don’t criticize, and don’t start telling us what to do!”

Luke is determined that the Jesus we encounter in his Gospel is one whose humanity cannot be disputed. He begins life in surroundings that are grubby, poor and human, with two very human parents. Today he becomes a predictably precocious and somewhat self-absorbed adolescent. We must never forget this. It’s all too easy to push Jesus off to a position way beyond the boundaries of our common humanity.

The gospel says that Jesus grew. He matured. And there was a *process* to his maturation. I believe that Luke fully intended for the first chapters of his book to describe Jesus’ life in such a way that readers could observe the progress as the Son-of-God-who-was-Son-of-Man moved through key stages in his development. Over time, the sweet infant, the exasperating adolescent, and finally the confident adult Jesus of Nazareth grew fully into his identity and vocation – building to the moment when the Voice from Heaven would speak and say: “*Yes! You are my Son, my Beloved. I am so pleased with you!*” Jesus grew. No question about it. —But are WE growing?

Jesus grew to maturity, and I would say that a growing Christian is one who – in various ways – is becoming more and more like Jesus. Physical maturity is pretty much automatic and usually finished by the time we’re 20. But full Christian maturity takes a lifetime, and it involves choices we make as well as what rubs off on us from other people. If we’re growing as Christians, there’s going to be *evidence* of that growth. Here are three areas to check for evidence of whether we’re growing:

The first area is *Biblical understanding*. As a boy Jesus was taught the sacred Scriptures and learned to apply what he was taught. That prepared him to sit in the Temple and talk with the elders. It’s essential for us to know *what* we believe and *why* we believe it. Some of us get theological and philosophical whiplash from snapping our heads towards every new idea that comes by. We haven’t acquired the capacity to exercise spiritual judgment and discernment. Christianity is not a vast umbrella under which every possible religious concept may take cover. Jesus is not endorsing every product out there in the spiritual marketplace. Growing in Christian maturity involves understanding the meaning of Scripture and applying its principles to our lives.

A second area is *dependence on God*. Jesus was thoroughly dependent on his heavenly Father. He was so aware of his deep connection to the Father that it seemed obvious to him where Mary and Joseph should have been looking for him. “*Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house and about my Father’s business?*” The mature Christian life is not produced by clenched teeth, white-knuckled effort, and sheer will power. Maturity grows as we become truly receptive to God’s love, responsive to God’s will, and confident in God’s provision. Christian maturity entails coming to know *whose* we are.

The third area where we can check for evidence of increasing spiritual maturity is *healthy relationships with one another in Christ*. Part of the theological mystery of the Incarnation is that the One “through whom all things came into being” was provided for by Mary and Joseph. He became a dependent child who needed mom and dad, and who had to be taught his lessons in school and in life. We grow up in relationship with others – parents, teachers, sisters and brothers, friends and neighbors – not in a vacuum all by ourselves. We need other people. We mature as we learn to live with and love one another, in and through the rough and tumble of ordinary life.

How will the world know that we belong to Jesus? The world will know we are Christians by the degree to which we come to love one another and risk depending on one another.

Baby Jesus grew up. He moved through the stages of maturation and growth – physically and spiritually. Childhood. Adolescence. Young manhood. When he was a fully grown, spiritually mature man, he changed the world. The grown-up Jesus is inviting you and me to grow up “into” him. We are at different places on our spiritual journey, different stages of growth, but we have companions on the way, with much to learn, much to share, and much to give. —So let’s get growing!