

Series: Stretched by Jesus

“Amazed, Astonished, and Puzzled”

Introduction: We’re beginning to look, in these weeks of Epiphany, and likely on into Lent, at the life of Jesus. In particular, we want to observe how his life stretched those who encountered him to think and live differently. Mostly I have in mind to explore the texts where we read that someone was amazed, or astonished, or puzzled by something Jesus said or did. In this morning’s gospel reading, we have all three! Those in the temple courts were amazed at the depth of this 12-year-old’s knowledge. And his parents were both astonished by how he had treated them and puzzled by what he had to say to them. What we’ll begin to see is that if we’ve been searching for Jesus (which I hope we all have), it’s likely he’ll not say or be what we expect him to when we find him. If we’ve truly encountered him, Jesus will stretch us because he wants to lead us into deeper ways of loving him and our neighbor.

I. The Home Life of Jesus

A. Passover was one of the three, major, Jewish religious festivals. It celebrated God’s deliverance of his people from slavery in Egypt. If you could, you would try to celebrate this event by making a pilgrimage to Jerusalem for this week-long celebration. It seemed that Mary and Joseph and Jesus had been able to do this every year, covering the three-day, 80-mile journey with collection of relatives and friends. Right from the start, we get a glimpse of the home life of Jesus and how, when the text ends by saying that Jesus grew in wisdom, that might have happened.

B. As we consider that, well might we ask why, if Jesus is God, he needed to grow in wisdom in the first place! Wouldn’t he already know all that there is to know? But I think what we can say is that this is a part of what it means for Jesus to be fully human, as well as fully divine. For, as Paul explained it to the Philippians, Jesus “emptied himself...being born in human likeness” (2:7, NRSV). That is, in some way Jesus limited himself, and part of what he limited or emptied himself of was omniscience—knowing everything. So, for instance, we hear Jesus say that he did not know the time his return (Ma. 24:36). All of which means that Jesus needed to grow, not only physically but spiritually, in knowledge and understanding, just like we do.

C. What we see from last week, where Mary and Joseph followed the Law of the Lord in seeking her purification and then also the consecration of Jesus, followed today by the noting that *every year* his parents celebrated the Passover in Jerusalem, is that Jesus was raised in a home that took spiritual growth seriously, a home in which God was honored. It’s a home, I think it’s safe to say, where the scriptures were read and discussed regularly, where prayer together was a habit, and where other kinds of spiritual disciplines were practiced. Thus, Jesus was raised in an environment in which a foundation was laid to help him understand who he was and what God was calling him to do.

D. If this kind of environment and structure was important for Jesus to have, it would certainly be important for us to have and to provide as well. Do we have an adequate grid against which we can process all that is thrown at us in a given day, at work, at school, and over social media? Do we have a solid, biblical foundation to help us sift through all of the truth claims and conspiracy theories and spiritual options with which we are presented? Are we secure in understanding what it means to be a child of God, and to live as a citizen of the kingdom of God while being a faithful presence as a citizen of

this world? Can we discern the difference between political power, which is dangled in front of us as Christians by those who want our vote, and the power that comes through the self-giving death and resurrection of Jesus whose life we are called to model? The boy Jesus would highlight the importance, for him as well as for us, of this core of belief and practice.

Illustration: Such a core is sometimes referred to as a “rule of life.” The word “rule” comes from a Latin word meaning trellis. It’s something, in other words, that helps to give shape and form to your life. One’s rule is a collection of rhythms and habits and disciplines that are employed to help you grow. It’s worth considering what your rule looks like, or to begin to craft one. What habits or rhythms, daily, weekly, monthly, annually, might you intentionally put into practice to help you process life in this world and to shape your relationship with Jesus so that you can become not just someone who is forgiven, but the kind of person who God has created and desires you to be? If you think about it, we make a plan for many other aspects of our life, whether we’re planning to run a marathon, or mapping out our career goals, or looking ahead to retirement . . . why not make a plan for our spiritual growth as well?

II. In the Temple Courts

A. So, arriving in Jerusalem with their gaggle of friends and relatives, I imagine it was not only a growing, but also a fun week for all. It kind of reminds me of the Memorial Day weekend camping trips a number of our church families use to take to Maine each year. There was great joy in being together. The parents would relax around the campfire while the kids would all disappear and enjoy one another’s company. However, on this particular occasion, Jesus disappeared just before they all left, and no one knew he was missing until the caravan had begun its journey home. After three days of travelling and searching, they finally found Jesus. Remarkably, they found him fully engaged in the temple courts with the teachers of the law. Jesus was both listening, and asking questions, and those who overheard the interaction were amazed at his maturity. This was obviously someone very special, gifted, and unique.

B. His parents, however, were not so amazed; they were astonished! Which, judging by the conversation between mother and son, means they were not thinking about special and unique; in fact they were pretty fussed with their almost teenager! “Son, why have you treated us like this?” Mary asked. “Disappearing like that without telling anyone has given me an anxiety attack!” To which Jesus responds, “Why were you searching for me? Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?” We can relate to this conversation, can’t we? From a parent’s perspective: “Boy, just who do you think you are?” And from the teen’s perspective: “Mom, dad, you just don’t understand me!” Even in this “holy family,” there were struggles. Again, it’s helpful to remember that while Jesus was the unique, divine Son of God, he was also fully human and born and raised into a family that was completely human. Mary and Joseph not only gave birth to a baby; they raised a teenager, who stretched them all!

C. Most stretching at this point was Jesus’ growing self-understanding. Note the subtle shift from Mary’s, “Your *father* and I have been anxiously searching for you,” to Jesus’, “Didn’t you know I had to be in my *Father’s* house?” If Mary kept a notebook of cute and memorable sayings by her son, she very well might have recorded this one. But it was far from cute! Jesus, as much as I’m sure he loved the man who had raised him, was not talking about Joseph. There was another Father, one with a capital “F,” one who you would meet in a house known as the temple. This is the place, and the Father, with whom Jesus knew he had to be. There was a unique connection, an intimate personal relationship Jesus knew he had with the Creator of the universe. Jesus would not just be a prophet or great teacher. As he would later declare: “All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows who the Son is

except the Father, and no one knows who the Father is except the Son" (Lk. 10:22) . . . "If you knew me, you would know my Father also," and "I and the Father are one" (Jn. 8:19; 10:30). This last remark was not only puzzling to the religious leaders but considered to be so blasphemous that they picked up stones in order to put him to death.

D. At this point in his life, Jesus simply knew that he had to be in the Father's house and had to continually seek his presence for the Father had something unique that lay ahead of him. To that end, we find this phrase, "had to be" (or "must"), which is sometimes called the "divine necessity." We find it in contexts where Jesus has a definite understanding of the Father's call: "I *must* preach the good news of the kingdom of God" (4:43). "The Son of Man *must* suffer many things . . . and he *must* be killed and on the third day be raised to life" (9:22). "I *must* press on . . . [to Jerusalem]" (13:33). "Zacchaeus . . . I *must* stay at your house today" (19:5). "Did not the Messiah *have to* suffer these things and then enter his glory?" (24:26).

E. This last one, uttered just after a Passover Festival that would take place nearly twenty years later, offers a particularly intriguing parallel to today's text where Mary and Joseph had lost Jesus for three days and when they finally found him, he certainly didn't say what they expected him to. Neither did Jesus say what these two followers, who had lost Jesus for three days, expected. But the Passover would come to hold a particular significance for understanding the death of Jesus, as we recall each time we share the last supper that comes out of that festival.

F. All of which led Mary, now for the third time (at least!), to treasure, and ponder, all that she had heard from Jesus, all that she was being stretched by, even though she didn't fully understand. And that might be a good posture for us to take as the life of Jesus begins to be unfolded for us by the gospel writers. You might want to ponder Mary's, "Boy, who do you think you are?!" For it is a question Jesus asks of all of us: "Who do you say I am?" Its answer holds the key to life. As you ponder, be prepared for Jesus will turn out to be a little more elusive than you might have imagined. If you think you've got him all figured out, and supporting of your causes, he may very well surprise you. So, keep your eyes open and your heart alert, as he leads you deeper into love!

