

When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth.

The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him. Now every year his 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.

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 travelers, they 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.

After three 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.

I once heard the famous preacher and teacher, Fred Craddock speak (this was back in the '70's, sometime before he was acclaimed one of the five greatest preachers in the USA), and I still remember the gist of what he said. He was recalling his earliest days as a Pastor & preacher, serving a congregation that worshipped in a little white clapboard chapel in the rolling hills of west Tennessee.

He had set out to astound this congregation with his learning and erudition. His first set of sermons to these good folks was not the usual fare; not Jesus' parables, or miracles, not the Psalms or the great heroes of the Old Testament.

He decided to preach on passages that no one had ever heard before, proving his intellectual acumen and insight. He shared stories about Jephthah, the sons of Caleb, King Hiram of Tyre, Jereboam and Rehoboam, passages no one had ever heard before, from 1 & 2 Chronicles, drawing out meaty conclusions from the slimmest of evidence, proving God's providence and presence of love in places never before explored. He did this week after week, until one day,

after the service concluded, a Church Elder said to him; “Pastor, we don’t know the Bible you’re preaching from. Is it the same one as ours? Maybe you can dial down your book learnin’ for us so that we can hear the Gospel.”

Fred Craddock got the message and never forgot it.

This is the second of our Autumn “Putting Second First” sermon series, focusing on the unique and special gifts God has bestowed upon our congregation, for us to acknowledge, celebrate and reinforce. Last week’s theme was “Spiritual Nourishment,” today’s is “Education & Insight.”

As Fred Craddock found out, there’s a world of difference between education and meaningful insight. Before we can learn anything new, we need to properly encounter, wrestle and deal with the baggage of what we are already carrying, which is oftentimes a heavy enough load for us to bear.

As a graduate of a number of fairly, well, prestigious institutions of higher education, I’m pretty sensitive to this myself. I remember the first public sermon I ever preached, back in the church I was raised, I think it was in 1983. I still have a copy of it. I thought I had done pretty well, touched all the bases; had the sermon make some sense. All I remember from it, really, is that, in greeting folks at the door, a fairly grumpy guy said to me; “Y’know, I didn’t come here to be lectured to....” Ouch.

There surely is something in a sermon which is to speak to more than just the mind, but also the heart... I get that. At the same time as Christians, and especially as Presbyterians, we walk in a very long and proud tradition of grounding in learning, which is the underpinning of insight and faith.

The New Testament lesson today is as clear an example of how this works as there is in the Bible. Our story comes early on in Luke’s Gospel, written by a scholarly type, a physician who found Christ, and clearly wanted to set the record straight about exactly who this Savior was and what he meant to the entire world.

The story of young Jesus in the Temple is remarkably disciplined, restrained and focused- considering what was being said about Jesus’ upbringing in other circles in Luke’s day. At every period of Jesus’ life, Luke shows how he stood stride for stride with Jewish tradition, in home, Temple and synagogue. At every point of his life he remained in continuity with tradition; circumcised at eight days, presented to God in the Temple at six weeks, ‘bar mitzvahed’ at

twelve and public life at age thirty. These are the moments that Luke marks in Jesus' life. Through Luke's eyes the events unfold matter-of-factly, free of miracles, absent any prophetic drama.

If you are at all familiar with any of the extra-biblical accounts of Jesus' youth, Luke's simple tale told set in the Temple is remarkably tame in comparison. Apocryphal accounts have young Jesus turning clay birds into live ones, striking down dead a bully of a kid, stretching out a plank of wood for his father Joseph in his shop, and more eccentricities like that. The Jesus we learn about in the Gospel was amazingly bright, but even more so, according to Luke, he was obedient; faithful to the process set out for him, and grounded in God.

This is a story familiar to us all... it's about as Sunday-School friendly as they come!

Which brings to mind, briefly, how it is we do Sunday School here, Christian Education, that is; grounded in God, a strong and sure foundation for life. The opportunities that are offered here are solid, biblically based, and not up in the clouds. From the weekday studies offered, Tuesday mornings by Gene Haupt, Friday evenings hosted by Grace Serafini, Anna Maria Colwill, the Slingluffs & others, our Adult Sunday Seminars led by Mari Quint & a team of others, our new 1 K Churches Bible Study group, our monthly offerings of Men's Bible Study, and renewed Candlelighters group for Women, and a very full slate of Youth & Children's Sunday School programs, with teachers who put special amounts of love and care into every lesson taught, all put us in very good company with those who continue the tradition that Jesus embodied.

What we learn here makes a difference in the rest of our lives.

Our orientation to the Word of God and it's meaning for our lives is something we carry with us as a compass and a guide; to stir and inspire, to assure and comfort, with the bottom line always being God's love for us- through thick and thin...

At the same time, when I think about the Bible, an adage always comes to mind... I'm pretty sure that it comes from Leighton Ford, a Pastor who had worked with Billy Graham for some time.... "God loves us the way we are, but God loves us too much to let us stay that way." Maybe that's how you've experienced life of late.

Perhaps, as much as anything else, the Bible serves as a kind of mirror for our lives, a constant, unchanging story in itself, whose story reflects back onto our lives with new meaning and insight at every turn. (You think?) It has been that way for millennia.

I've always loved Bible study as a way to look at life; there is no better way to do it. The

interactive quality about a good Bible study is like nothing else; a good question is as good as a good answer every time; because God is in the questions just as much as the answers.

It was back a few years, 2003; it was, when I interviewed with the Pastor Nominating Committee here, and ‘the ball was in my court’, as it were... you know how it goes with interviews, after you’ve been grilled with all the questions that can possibly come your way; there is a pause, and a silence, and a slightly awkward moment, and then the question; “so do you have any questions for us?”

I remember what I asked... (Does anyone on the PNC remember?)

It was a question about what Bible verse or story best described the journey of faith you were on as a congregation....

Perhaps it was the disciples in the boat in very stormy weather, or Jesus’ readying to feed the 5,000, with the disciples yet unawares, or maybe the eve of Pentecost, with the disciples waiting, watching for how it was that the Spirit was yet to be revealed to them.

What would the answer to that question be for you? Think about it...

(and especially if you’re reading this!!)

You don’t really need to try too hard; hard is not the point, you don’t need to find an obscure passage- the first one that comes to mind is likely the best one... What speaks to you ? (or how it is that God is speaking to you?) How is God tugging at you?

It may be where you are in the life of this congregation, now in it’s 212th year; finding your place as a new member or a new officer to be, or engaged in life in some other varied way: as a grandparent, parent, caregiver or seeker. It may be about how you are putting Second first, or getting ready to.... or it may be about where you are in your own life, whether you are 7 or 97...

The good news of the Gospel is that God meets you in your story; wherever you are, to instill wisdom, confidence and hope, every step of the way, and will never, ever depart. Amen.