

## *“What Lies Ahead”*

*Ecclesiastes 5:10-14; Luke 1:41-52*

December 27, 2020

One time, when Ben was just about to turn three, I took him with me to the Food Lion right up the road from our house. Oh, we'd been there dozens of times in the past together but this day, for whatever reason, Ben decided he really didn't want to ride in the cart. I nervously agreed to his request vowing internally to keep my hands and eyes on him at all times.

Then we got to the cereal aisle and I was trying to find a box of Grape Nuts, top shelf at the Food Lion in Mount Holly in case you're ever looking for it. As I scanned the shelves for that little white box, for just a second I'm convinced, I was neither looking at nor holding onto my two-year-old son. Well, for those of you who know Benji, you know he's got a lot of energy, so while I searched for that box of cereal, Ben abled off and into another aisle.

As I emerged victorious from my cereal search, I looked down to discover the Ben was gone. Adrenaline coursed throughout my body like never before and my heart filled with dread. “He's gone” I said aloud as I went scrambling to find him.

Thankfully, all it took was for me to turn the corner and look up the next aisle. There I discovered Benjamin staring at an assortment of cans which I've got to figure he was only a beat from pulling over.

So, I've got to confess – today's lectionary reading from the Gospel of Luke always leaves me a bit flummoxed. Theologically, I can see the vital need for Jesus to remain sinless for us and for our salvation. At the same time though, we come upon this passage from the Gospel of Luke and my heart really goes out to Mary and Joseph. I can't help but put myself in Mary and Joseph's place looking for their 12-year-old son for three long days.

And so, like I said, Jesus behavior here isn't sinful, going to learn more about God the Father while leaving his parent's searching high and low all over Jerusalem for him. But still, I wonder what Mary and Joseph would've thought about Jesus choosing learning over dutifully following them home.

There are a host of good topics for sermons nestled within the verses of this passage. A faithful pastor could talk about the specialness of Jesus. There's a preachable sermon in this passage that would highlight the nature of Jesus to be doing things in an unexpected manner. One could easily talk about the relationship between God the Father and Jesus the Son that clearly emerges towards the end of this passage as Jesus declares the Temple to be “his Father's House.”

But what really preached to me this week as I studied this passage comes to us in the final verse of the passage which reads – “And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.” I mean, here is Jesus, son of God, one part of the Trinity and as he lives his life incarnate in a human body, he deems it important to be engaged in the process of growing in wisdom.

“And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.”

In some regards, this particular verse functions as literary bridge which allows Luke to leapt 18 years into the future. After all, Jesus is twelve years old when this passage happens. He'll be thirty when his ministry to the world begins publicly. Lost to the scriptures are 18 years of our Lord and Savior's life. Assuming Jesus would've lived his life as a regular-ordinary-person for those 18 years which span this event in Luke's Gospel, there are a whole lot of questions we can ask about his life.

Sadly, that's all we can really do – speculate because neither the Scriptures nor any other extant source that's from the period really tells us.

We might make assume some things about these 18 years. If we did, we'd be standing with a host of quote-unquote secular Biblical scholars and fiction authors who posit all sorts of things about these missing 18 years of Jesus' earthly life before the Resurrection. Some would try to convince you that Jesus took a wife. Others, including a professor right up the road at UNC-Charlotte argue that Jesus was part of a group deliberately trying to give the impression that prophecies were being fulfilled through his actions.

And that's all fine well and good until you realize that no matter how erudite or well-reasoned speculations may be about these missing 18 years, they all boil down to a big guess. Or, perhaps prejudiciously one might call it arguing from silence.

There are precisely two things we know about Jesus from the Scriptures in this 18-year hiatus from public life. First, we know that Jesus learned a trade. In Mark's Gospel, the people gathered around Jesus are amazed at his teaching because he's only supposed to be a carpenter. The actual word is *Tektone* in the Greek which makes Jesus more likely to have been a stone mason than a carpenter but one of the other, we know that he worked with his hands.

The other thing that we can know with certainty is that "Jesus increased in wisdom and in years."

That, to me, seems to be the entire point of the passage. I think it's fair to extract from this section of scripture there is something vitally important about growing in wisdom. Jesus, our blessed Lord and Savior, spent 18 long years doing precisely that. He even ambled off from his parent for three long days in order to grow in wisdom.

Now I want to caution everyone. There's a real difference between learning and wisdom.

At 49, I can rightfully and truthfully tell you that I've been blessed to learn a whole lot of things during the span of that time I've walked on this earth. I've learned the hard way growing up that I don't have to say every funny thing that I think. I've acquired the knowledge that there really are some battles not worth fighting. Somewhere along the way I even learned not to court trouble. And these are all wonderful life lessons. But there not the kind of wisdom that the Scriptures are mentioning here.

As it is used in the Scriptures, wisdom is all about God. Acquiring real wisdom, *Sophia*, in the Greek, is directly linked to the Lord our God not entirely the length of time one walks on this planet. Job really captures this as he asks and answers the question - "Is wisdom with the aged, and understanding in length of days?" "With God are wisdom and strength; he has counsel and understanding."

Proverbs reverberate with the central message "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."

We may more readily acquaint wisdom with span of days of years spent in study at the University but that isn't the way the Scriptures perceives wisdom at all. Wisdom is integrally tied to God. And God is best understood through the study of Scripture and Christian doctrine and in striving to live out God's will for us.

Darrel Evans puts it this way - "Wisdom is considered to be the ability to lead a godly life in the midst of conflicting impulses, pressures, and changes. It is learned through experience, observation, reflection, and dialogue with [the Scriptures and other persons who study them and try to live as Jesus' disciples.]

And therein lies the rub.

Living a godly life in the midst of conflicting impulses, pressures and changes is a difficult thing. Many of us need not look further than our checkbooks to see the disconnect that often occurs between God and ourselves. The biblical directive for our lives is a "tithe" or ten percent of our income should be given back to God. Recent studies indicate less than 5 % of Christians undertake such a radical restructuring of finances to accommodate such a demand.

And finances are but one example. One might do little more than read the newspaper and compare it with what an ideal life would look like to see the many ways both as a society and as individuals, we live out of whack with the way God would have us be.

Take for example this news item. A recent survey of high school graduates showed that nearly 90% of all of them stated that "being rich" was the most important goal of their life. Compare that to 1967, and it's over a 100% increase. Is it any wonder that our news is saturated with financial misdeeds from Ponzi schemes to derivative scams when the chief goal of our high schoolers by far is to strike it rich?

But it goes so much deeper than that I'm afraid.

Could it be so much of the stress and greed and violence that we see wildly proliferate in front of our eyes could be traced to this lack of wisdom? Could it be that much of the emptiness and worry and depression we ourselves encounter can be found in our lack of striving to become more knowledgeable about God's ways?

They're interesting questions to ask, even if one can't really answer them with an engineer-like precision. My feeling though is, yes, absolutely, without question and again yes. As I reflect on my life, I can't help but see a direct correlation between times of bewilderment, sadness and anger and either a complete lack of knowledge of the Lord our God or a waning interest in Him. As I reflect on American society and delve into the statistics, I can't help but see a correlation in rising incidences of violence, greed and diagnosed cases of anxiety as the country has veered towards secularism and away from God.

And I don't use that phrase lightly or as a cliché. The numbers are there. Percentagewise, fewer and fewer are calling themselves Christians. On top of that, within the Christian church, we don't know as much Bible or basic Christian doctrine as our forebears within the church did. 100 years ago, a typical churchgoer would've memorized at least one catechism. They would have then undergone a thorough *adult* confirmation process building upon what was learned as a child. Finally, ongoing Biblical education would've been gleaned through regular and frequent Bible studies and Sunday school classes.

Now look, this isn't some reactionary rant, the world wasn't perfect 75 years ago and the sad fact of the matter is that no matter what, it won't be perfect in another 75 to come should the Lord our God not return.

It is however to ask the very dangerous question – are we ourselves striving to grow in wisdom?

What books of the Bible did you study this year?

Did you seek out any opportunities to advance in your knowledge of the Christian faith?

Did you do any additional reading of the Bible in your free time?

Ask yourself this question truthfully. Do you know Jesus Christ any better as this year ends as you did at the beginning?

If the answers across the board were no and you're not planning on doing anything different in 2021 I can guarantee you one thing.

You may be richer or poorer come the end of the year. You may be happier or you may be sadder standing on the threshold of 2021. You may be healthy or you may well be sick. But the guarantee is this – you darned sure won't be any wiser.

Don't let another year pass without learning more about Jesus through the study of God's word. The Lord Jesus Christ took on flesh and walked among us so that we could know God in a tangible way. That's the central message of the entire Christmas season. It isn't the presents, it isn't the time with family or away from school. It's that God is willing to take on human flesh so that we can know Him.

In knowing Him more and more, we grow wise.

Strive to grow in wisdom as you grow in years and you will grow in divine and human favor. You'll discover that God has a wonderful purpose for your life. You aren't just some random creature with an expiring life span. You'll know, beyond a shadow of a doubt that you are God's child, claimed in the waters of baptism and you were made to enjoy Communion with Him forever and ever.

Strive to know Jesus with greater clarity in 2021 and you will know peace, joy, hope and love. You will find yourself unsawed by the vicissitudes of life because you'll be standing on the solid rock of Jesus Christ. The one who left his parent's behind for three whole days to learn more about His Father.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit...Amen.

## *“Lectio Divina”* {outline}

December 27, 2020

### Facts on Lectio Divina

- Ancient way of “entering into” scripture
  - When we preach, we generally hear the Scripture and think, why is this being said?
    - For example, when we read the Gospel of John and hear Jesus say, “peace be with you,” for example, we wonder why He said that there?
    - What other parts of Scripture make sense of this particular verse?
  - Lectio Divina instead seeks to have us enter into the Scripture, apart from theological reflection.
  - It asks us to “experience” the Word by interacting with it in a personal, reflective way
- It’s an ancient practice
  - Began in a rough form with Origen (2<sup>nd</sup> century) and was then carried through Ambrose to Augustine
  - It’s St. Benedict (founder of the Benedictine order of Monks) who sort of codifies the practice and makes it a central piece of ongoing spiritual development for his monastic order.
- Still practices
  - As late as the previous, retired Pope Benedict, the practice remains commended by not only the Roman Catholic Church from which it came but also from various denominations, including our own.
- The ultimate aim remains to individually “hear” God’s voice speaking directly to you
- How it will go
  - I am going to read one passage of Scripture 3 times. Prior to each reading, I’ll provide a meditative prompt.
  - Then I’ll read the passage
  - Afterwards, I’ll give us all several minutes to contemplate the passage or to reflect on the word or phrase that God is calling us individually to.
- I remember the first time I did this was in spiritual development group at Duke Divinity School
  - I remember thinking at the onset, ‘oh boy, here we go.’
  - Turned out to be an extremely meaningful experience, one that I continue to remember and reflect upon every time I do Lectio Divina with other groups.

### Introduction to the Text

- It’s early in Jesus’ ministry and crowds are following him.
- He’s just taught them that the Kingdom of God is like a little mustard seed that grows into a tree that provides rest for the birds.
- Then Jesus goes on a boat ride with his disciples.
- A terrible storm hits
  - Jesus shows the disciples what it looks like to be at peace in the kingdom by napping during the storm.
- When the panicked disciples wake him, he speaks the peace in his body into the storm to calm it!

### Mark 4

On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, “Let us go across to the other side.” And leaving the crowd, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. And other boats were with him. And a great windstorm arose, and the waves were breaking into the boat, so that the boat was already filling. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion. And they woke him and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” And he awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. He said to them, “Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?” And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

Focus questions to think on as you hear the passage.

1. What is one word or phrase the Holy Spirit impresses on you? In silence meditate on that.
2. What do you feel? What specific situation in your life today relates?
3. What invitation to you do you hear from God in this passage of Scripture?