

When do you pass from childhood to adulthood? In our culture, there's no easy answer. We have lots of little ages and stages. When I turned 16 I got my driver's license. When I turned 18 I registered both for the draft and to vote. When I turned 19, I could legally purchase alcohol in Texas at that time. When I turned 25, my car insurance premiums went down. When I turned 35, I became old enough to be elected as president of the United States. We have many transitional ages in our culture where one slips gradually from childhood to adulthood.

In the Jewish culture, the line is much clearer. The age is 13. When you turn 13, they give you a bar or bat mitzvah. You are no longer a child. You become an adult in the Jewish faith.

So this morning, when we hear a story about Jesus when he was 12 years old, the light bulb should go on for us. If Jesus is 12, he's just on the brink of adulthood. He's still a child, but he's less than a year shy of becoming an adult when he turns 13.

Our Gospel lesson this morning is totally unique. There are a few stories about Jesus' birth and infancy. There's lots of stuff about his ministry. But there's only one story that deals with the 30 years that elapse between Jesus' birth stories and Jesus' baptism. If it wasn't for this short account from Luke, that 30 year period would be completely unknown to us. So this morning, we get just a peek, just a glimpse into the otherwise hidden and unknown years between Jesus' birth and his public ministry.

The story of Jesus in the temple is absolutely rich. Luke tells us that Jesus, Mary, and Joseph have gone to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. They do this every year, Luke tells us. This reminds us that Jesus wasn't born in a religious vacuum. Instead, he and his parents were devout Jews. They had a relationship with God that they intentionally nurtured. Their worship of God was important enough for them to drop everything, travel 3 or 4 days down to Jerusalem, spend Passover in Jerusalem, and then take 3 or 4 days to travel back home.

In our culture, we sometimes don't even want to give up an hour on Sunday to worship God. Jesus and his family are giving up a couple weeks to worship in the temple, in addition to their regular weekly worship back home. And they do this every year, Luke says.

So far so good. But then Luke tells us, that when they started home, Jesus stays behind, unbeknownst to his parents.

And it's on the way home that Mary and Joseph make a disturbing discovery. Jesus isn't with them. It's like a 2000 year old version of Home Alone. Joseph and Mary travel an entire day without knowing that Jesus has stayed behind.

Adolescence is never easy. It's not easy for kids. It's not easy for parents. Apparently, it wasn't a piece of cake for the Holy family either. Even having God's son as their own son didn't make things easy for Mary and Joseph.

We shouldn't blame Mary and Joseph. There's a cultural pattern that gets them off the hook. It has to do with ancient travel patterns. Turns out that in Jesus' time, since the women

and children would move slower, the custom was that they would break camp and leave earlier. The men would hang around and relax, and then leave later and catch up to the women and children at the end of the day. It would have been easy for Joseph to assume that Jesus was with Mary and the other women and children. But, since Jesus was right on the cusp of adulthood, it would have been just as appropriate for Mary to think that Jesus stayed behind with his Dad to come with the rest of the men. But then, that evening, when they compared notes, Mary and Joseph realized that Jesus was nowhere to be found.

They searched the entire camp, but he just wasn't there. A missing child is a nightmare for any parent. Mary and Joseph are no exception. They decide the only thing they can possibly do is to head back to Jerusalem. But the tension keeps mounting. The search for one day, but there's no sign of Jesus. Then a second day. Then a third. Where is he? What has happened to him? Then they finally find him in the Temple of all places.

He's sitting there in the Temple amidst all the great Jewish teachers. Now we often picture this wrong. I remember in one of my Sunday school classes growing up, there was a picture of the 12 year old Jesus standing with one finger in the air, lecturing all these gray bearded and experienced adults.

That's not what Luke is telling us at all. He says very clearly, that Jesus is sitting among the teachers, listening to them, and asking them questions. He's not acting like a teacher, but like a student. But he's a very good student. Luke tells us that all who heard him were amazed at his understanding, and at the answers he gave to their questions.

Even at 12, Jesus apparently has a good understanding of God. He also understands that his relationship with God is important and somewhat special. Mary finds this out when she asks Jesus what he's been doing. You can hear the worry and concern and anger and confusion in her question. "Child, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you." I don't know about the rest of you, but I've heard questions like this. "Boy, what were you thinking? Son, we've been worried sick about you." As a parent, I've gotten to ask these same kinds of questions myself.

I can sympathize with Mary's question:

"Child, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you."

But the amazing thing is Jesus' answer to Mary:

"Why were you searching for me? Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?"

But the word house is somewhat ambiguous. It can mean house, or it can mean something broader: household, or business, or affairs. "Didn't you know I had to be engaged in my Father's business?"

It's something of a rebuke to Mary. "Your father and I have been worried sick," is met with "Didn't you know I had to be tending to my father's affairs?" And Jesus wasn't talking about woodworking.

Even though he is only 12, Jesus still has a powerful sense of the unique relationship he has with God. Like all adolescents, Jesus has to begin to assert his sense of identity, and there's some pulling away from his parents. Like all other adolescents, Jesus is beginning to show that the overriding relationship in his life is not always going to be with his parents.

But, unlike all other adolescents, Jesus also has a growing sense of his absolutely unique relationship to his heavenly Father. And the rest of the course of his life will be guided by that overriding relationship with God.

This Christmas season, we celebrate the coming of God as one of us, both fully human and fully divine. Jesus and his parents were not exempted from all of the human trials associated with adolescence. But Jesus was also very clear about his identity as God's son. Jesus remained a good son, Luke tells us. He took care of his other relationships. But his relationship with God was primary.

His relationship with God would override all others. For Jesus, God came first. A good new year's resolution for all of us would be to follow his example. Let us be about our Father's business.