

## *Putting on Big Boy Pants*

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Text: Luke 2.41-52; Colossians 3.12-17

The poet W. H. Auden captures the subdued, sometimes even melancholy post-holiday mood for this Sunday after Christmas in his poem, “For the Time Being”:

Well, so that is that. Now we must dismantle the tree,  
Putting the decorations back into their cardboard boxes –  
Some have got broken – and carrying them up to the attic.  
The holly and the mistletoe must be taken down and burnt,  
And the children got ready for school. There are enough  
Left-overs to do, warmed-up, for the rest of the week –  
Not that we have much appetite, having drunk such a lot,  
Stayed up so late, attempted – quite unsuccessfully –  
To love all of our relatives, and in general  
Grossly overestimated our powers. Once again  
As in previous years we have seen the actual Vision and failed  
To do more than entertain it as an agreeable  
Possibility, once again we have sent Him away,  
Begging though to remain His disobedient servant,  
The promising child who cannot keep His word for long.  
The Christmas Feast is already a fading memory,  
And already the mind begins to be vaguely aware  
Of an unpleasant whiff of apprehension at the thought  
Of Lent and Good Friday which cannot, after all, now  
Be very far off.

Luke follows suit with a familiar story which, quite frankly, lacks the charm of the nativity narratives – no Gabriel with an angelic annunciation, no Elisabeth and Mary feeling the growth within their swelling bellies, no manger, no angels, no shepherds, no mysterious Simeon and Anna shrouded in incense offering a blessing over the infant, no poetic lyrics for memorable carols and canticles. No, suddenly through some ancient literary version of time travel we’re in Jerusalem with a middle school kid. Forget the Sunday School paintings of the sublime twelve year old. Jesus is a teenager. Annoying and frightening his parents. And to complete the scene, he’s with a bunch of theologians!

This transitional story between the infant Jesus of Bethlehem and the adult Jesus beginning his ministry with the baptism by John and the days in the Wilderness, this in between story shows us Jesus beginning to claim his identity as a Jew, faithful to the Torah, and geographically oriented toward Jerusalem where the climactic events will one day take place. We are given hints of his divine character and calling – “Did you not know I must be in my Father’s house?” There is a continuous line flowing through this story that begins with Gabriel’s news: “He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Spirit’s announcement at the baptism, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

But at the most basic level, Luke wants us to know that the baby grew up. Our text is preceded by the word that the child “grew and became strong, filled with wisdom, and the favor of God was upon him.” It is followed by this echo: “And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.” The baby grew up. And quite frankly (if we’re completely honest), we’re not all that enthusiastic about that. Babies are cute. Grown ups are complicated. Grown ups make demands. They can be challenging. The infant Jesus simply evokes our wonder and praise. The adult Jesus asks us to be disciples, to take up the Cross. It’s what the poet is hinting at when he writes,

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Of an unpleasant whiff of apprehension at the thought  
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We know what growing up means for this baby and we’re, at best, ambivalent about it. When I was a pastor in Eastern Pennsylvania a report appeared in the newspaper that someone had stolen the baby Jesus from the Bethlehem, Pennsylvania municipal Crèche scene at city hall. (Last Sunday’s *New York Times* had an article that suggested this was not a once only phenomenon.) When the infant Jesus was finally located discarded in an alley, he was returned to the manger. But to avoid future thefts it was reported that the town officials bolted him to the manger. That’s where we like Jesus. Sweet and mild. Permanently bolted to the manger. But the baby grew up, living inexorably toward a confrontation with death on a cross. Just as Jesus “must” be in his Father’s house, a calling that preempts normal family obligations, so, too we “must” respond to our call to discipleship which may preempt the prevailing ways of the world. Can we do more than, as Auden puts it, do more than “entertain [Him] as an agreeable possibility?” It’s time to put on big boy pants.

In our text from Paul we are given a catalogue, if you will, of the garments that hang in the wardrobe of this new calling. “As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved.” Paul reminds us that this wardrobe will fit us because we share an identity with Christ. As those called, shaped like Christ, “put on compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. . . . Forgive each other.” And finally, “clothe yourself with love.”

This wardrobe offers quite a contrast to the armor many of us feel we need to wear every day in our current cultural wars when tweets fly like arrows, Facebook posts become a form of deadly jousting, and cable news abandons news altogether in favor of mortal combat aiming to dismember and destroy the opposition. To reside in Wisconsin is to live amid never ending conflict; no sooner has an election ended than a battle over gubernatorial powers begins. And of course, it's not just Wisconsin. It's as if the whole nation has flunked anger management class, as if the whole country has been ensnared in a kind of communal road rage. Bullying, name calling, and narcissism are the order of the day and we've become adept at them, all with a kind of self-righteousness that allows us to excuse it all. Compassion. Kindness. Humility. Meekness. Patience. Forgiveness. How odd and foreign these all now seem. We might as well be wearing bell bottoms, tie died T-shirts, and Nehru jackets.

But these are the virtues, Paul tells us, of mature Christians, grown up Christians, big boy and big girl Christians. The big boy pants we are called to put on. You might consider them worthy of New Year's resolutions. Forget the diets, the exercise. Try Paul's adult wardrobe. After all, you were made for this wardrobe: You are chosen ones, holy and beloved. While Paul envisioned these garments, these virtues as the community standards of the early church, wandering around in this wardrobe – at home, coffee shop conversations, your place of work, school, at community events, not to mention here at church – would make quite a statement, now more than ever.

This is not to say that we stop being passionate about issues that we feel strongly about or stand idly by when the most vulnerable among us are ignored or violated. To live into the maturity we see in Christ is to care deeply for the refugee seeking a safe haven for their children just as Mary and Joseph sought sanctuary in Egypt for their son, protected from the violence of King Herod. It is to advocate for policies that address the needs of the poor and the marginalized who were the first to hear of the birth of Jesus in the shepherds' field and who were to become the primary focus of Jesus' ministry of healing and inclusion. It is to protect the environment which is, after all, the physical setting for God's incarnation in the Christ child. It is to question the assumption that violence is the solution to the world's problems and that massive arsenals are the only effective deterrence to war. It is to refuse to remain quiet while religious, ethnic, racial or sexual minorities are demeaned just as Jesus reached across the fixed boundaries of his day to see the humanity in the Samaritan woman or the greedy tax collector. It is to affirm that people claiming a faith different from our own have gifts to offer like those magi from a mysterious east who brought gifts to the infant in the manger.

This is indeed the discipleship we must take up as chosen ones, holy and beloved, just as the teenage Jesus knew he must be in his Father's house. A call that is clear and compelling and one that may lead to our own cross-like encounters. The baby grew up and so must we. But Paul reminds us that as we do this we should not don the armor of mortal combat, and of the verbal, physical, emotional, and social abuse so prevalent today, but rather the raiment of alternative virtues that just might be the only hope for our polarized, volatile, and rage drenched times.

Yes, the Christmas tree is starting to look a bit worn, the needles dropping. The Christmas decorations along the street already feeling a bit forlorn. The anticipated visits are over. The feast tubbed up in Tupperware, eventually to be tossed when no one can stomach the thought of more warmed over stuffing. The candle lit mystery of Christmas eve is replaced by a long stretch of gray winter which a few of you are probably getting ready to escape for a few weeks of Florida sun which is never quite as warm in January as one had hoped. But here's the good news today: The baby grew up. Grew up, yes, to be a teenager. Full of himself. Inconsiderate of his parents. Astonishing his elders. Grew up as well to be a teacher and a healer, challenging, upsetting, confronting, transforming. Grew up to be a martyr. Grew up to be the risen Christ. He grew up. And so must we. Time for big boy pants.

The Twentieth century mystic Howard Thurman captures in his own poetry what the poet Auden offered us at the beginning. He writes:

When the song of the angels is stilled, when the star in the sky is gone,  
when the kings and princes are home,  
when the shepherds are back with their flocks, the work of Christmas begins:  
To find the lost,  
to heal the broken,  
to feed the hungry,  
to release the prisoner,  
to rebuild the nations,  
to bring peace among the people, to make music in the heart.