

## Windows On the Word: Jesus in The Temple

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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Luke 2:40-52

Today we begin a new sermon series that will last through the whole season of Epiphany. That means it will last all the way through the last Sunday of February - Lent begins on March 2. The series is called *Windows on the Word*, and that's because all the Jesus stories we will focus on over the next two months will come from our windows. As you've noticed, all the stories in our windows are New Testament stories, and all of them come from the life of Jesus. Do you know how many Jesus stories are in our windows? I counted them this week. Not including any of the stories in the great commission window behind me, there are 36 Jesus stories in our windows.

Today our story comes from this window right here. There's twelve-year-old Jesus in the temple. What's he doing? Listen to these words.

You just heard the story, now let's look at the way this story is pictured in our window. Many of you can see the image over there, and if you can, go ahead and look at it. If you can't, the Jesus part of the image is on the front of your bulletin and you can look at that. How would you describe what's happening in that window? It looks like Jesus is teaching the priests and the other scholars in the temple. There's Jesus, he's young, but you can tell it's him because of the cross in his halo. He's standing in front of all these bearded men who are seated at his feet. You can tell they're priests and teachers of the law because one of them is wearing an ephod with the 12 stones. And you can tell by his posture that Jesus is teaching them. He's standing there in an authoritative position. These learned men have their eyes are fixed on Jesus and they are not talking; they're listening. The one on the side closest to me looks like he might be about to dispute with young Jesus, but most of them are listening with rapt attention.

Let me say that the images in this window fit my conception of the story growing up. As I remember the story told to me as a child, our passage is about Jesus coming to the temple and teaching the teachers of the law. And, as I remember it told to me as a child, Jesus didn't just teach them, he disputed with them, he argued with them. Go to classical paintings and they just about all look like this, Jesus holding forth and the teachers of the law either listening or often, arguing with Jesus. There's a whole tradition in art of calling this scene the *Disputation with the Doctors*.

Now I love this window. And I love all our windows, but is this picture an accurate representation of what actually happens in our Bible passage? Does this picture fit what Luke reports? Here's the scene as Luke describes it in verse 46: "After three days, they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them, and asking them questions." Sitting, listening, asking questions. First of all, does this sound like a dispute? There's no dispute here. There's no hint of any conflict with the teachers. There's some conflict with his parents, but none with the teachers. Later of course, Jesus will be in lots of disputes with Pharisees and teachers of the law, but that's not what's happening in this passage. So there's no dispute here, unlike so many pictures of this story. And our window mostly gets that right.

But there's another way in which Luke and our window differ. Who is doing the teaching in our window? It's Jesus. Jesus is clearly holding forth, his hand is raised like a speaker, and he's standing up front. The priests all sit at his feet like students, like pupils in a classroom. But

let me read verse 46 again! “After three days, they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them, and asking them questions.” Jesus sits, he’s not standing. And he’s not lecturing, he listens and asks questions. Is that the posture of a teacher? No. That’s the posture of a student. If we picture this text like our window, we may have to tweak our understanding. This is not all-knowing Jesus coming to the temple to show up the teachers, this is humble Jesus, child Jesus, sitting at the feet of the Jewish rabbis, listening to their instructions, asking questions about the stories, getting a thorough instruction in Torah. *This is Jesus going to catechism class.* Clearly he is a gifted student - they all marvel at his answers - but he’s a student. He is in a posture of learning.

And if the way Luke describes Jesus in verse 46 isn’t enough to convince you that Jesus is the student here, look at the frame for this story. Look at verse 40 and verse 52. What are they emphasizing? Both of them emphasize how Jesus grew in wisdom and stature. They want you to see that Jesus learned from this experience.

Why does this matter? If you miss Jesus’ posture, if you miss the fact that he is learning from the temple scholars, you are missing a central part of what the Holy Spirit, through his servant Luke, is trying to teach us. Luke frames this passage with words about Jesus growing in wisdom and stature because he wants to show us *how* Jesus grew in wisdom and stature. Luke frames this passage with words about Jesus growing in knowledge, because he wants to teach us about how Jesus grew in knowledge. And he wants to show us how Jesus grows because it’s the same as how the Spirit grows us. We are the body of Christ. Watching Jesus learning in the temple can teach us about our own formation and the formation of our children.

What we see in this passage, is God using institutions and traditions to form Jesus. God uses the institution of the temple with its rituals, its customs and its habits to help Jesus grow in wisdom and stature. In this passage God is showing us that institutions with their customs, their teachings and their rituals are important for forming God’s people.

Part of the reason we misinterpret this passage is that we can’t imagine Jesus sitting at the feet of the priests and the teachers of the laws. We know all those other stories from later in the gospel, those stories where Jesus fights with the scribes and the Pharisees, those stories where the teachers of the law try to trap Jesus and make him look bad, the parts of the gospel where Jesus tells those pointed parables. We see Jesus hanging around with priests and we can only imagine conflict. We think of Jesus as an enemy of the religious tradition.

But that’s letting your mind jump ahead. Read what Luke has written so far and we see that Jesus and his family are good Jews who submit themselves to the laws and the prophets and all rules and the customs of the temple. Luke tells us that 8 days after Jesus is born his parents take him to the temple to have him circumcised - just like a good Jew. When he was just a little older they took Jesus back to the temple for his rite of purification as prescribed in Exodus 13. At his purification they offered the sacrifice required by the Leviticus 12 - a pair of doves. In Chapter 2:39 Luke goes out of his way to tell us that Mary and Joseph did everything that was required by the law of the Lord. And why are Mary and Joseph even in Jerusalem to begin with? Because they were in Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover “according to the custom.” Luke is showing us a man who grows up, not with hostility toward his tradition, but with deep love and respect for the Torah, and the ways of his fathers and mothers. Jesus is not overturning Judaism. He’s not some hater of tradition. He believes in the power of tradition and custom and ritual. He respects authority. He believes in experts.

Of course, Jesus relationship with traditions and institutions is complicated. In this story, he sits at the feet of tradition here and learns from it. Later he will challenge it. Later he will

challenge some of these same priests. And through his death and resurrection he will completely change the institution of the temple. Jesus will change everything, but this change is not throwing away the old traditions and the old way, it's a fulfillment of the old traditions and the old ways. This change is not a repudiation of the old traditions and the old ways, it's a fulfillment of the old traditions and the old ways.

So...God uses institutions with their traditions and their customs and their learning to shape Jesus and God uses institutions with their traditions and their customs to shape us. The Holy Spirit moves in these places and through these means. Traditions, institutions and customs may not be the most exciting Spiritual movements, but they are important and powerful. I know I've told this story before, but it's worth mentioning here again. When I was in seminary a professor once gave me a C on my life story. I got a C on my life. Actually that's not entirely fair. We were supposed to write a two-page personal testimony which we could share with other people to tell them how the power of God had moved in our lives. I wrote mine turned it in and got a C. Why? Because my testimony was all about how God had formed me through ordinary institutions and regular habits of faith. My parents bringing me to church every Sunday. My mom praying with me by my bedside. My dad reading the Bible at the dinner table and talking theology with me in the living room. My Sunday school teachers who were always good to me. My faithful ministers Reverends Salomons and VanNeijenhuis. My Christian school teachers. I wrote about how God used them to build faith in me. My prof found this all a little dull. A little pedestrian. My friends who got A's had interesting lives full of rebellion and catastrophe. My poor grade made me think, 'If only I'd done drugs in high school! If only I had renounced my faith and lived in a hippie commune only to be rescued by a spectacular conversion experience!' But poor me, God chose to surround me with institutions and people who loved me and taught me about Jesus.

We love stories of large unexpected movements of God's Spirit. They are dramatic. They have a 'wow' factor. There's one of those kind of stories represented in the window right beside our window. Right next to Jesus in the temple is the story of Jesus' baptism. When the Spirit moved in that story, the heavens are opened and the voice of God says, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased!" All the miracle stories have that wow factor - God does something that leaves onlookers amazed. All of those movements of the Spirit were way more exciting than Jesus sitting in catechism class.

But the Spirit moves in catechism class too. They may not be exciting movements, the heavens may not open up when they work and people may not be filled with wonder when they see these institutions work. But when you participate in the regular Sunday worship of God's people, the Spirit moves through the institution of the church. When you and your household faithfully bow your head to pray before dinner, the Spirit is moving through the institution of the family. In our church school classes, in our youth group meetings, in book clubs and Bible studies, in elders visits and committee meetings, when we recite of the Apostles' Creed and the Lord's Prayer, when we pour out the water of baptism and eat the bread of this table, the Spirit moves. In all these places the Spirit moves, and the body of Christ is formed, and we grow together in wisdom and stature, we grow in the image of likeness of Jesus, our Lord.

As we move into this new year, I hope you have some moments where the Spirit rends the heavens and makes God known to you in a strong and vivid way. But I pray that you will keep this window and this story in mind too. May this window and this story remind us to seek out all the places where God's Spirit moves. And may they remind us that even though some of

these places may be ordinary, conventional, traditional, institutional, they are still powerful.

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