



“Expectations – Wilderness”

Luke 2:41–52; Luke 4:1–13

***From the temple to the wilderness,
Jesus’ journey begins.***

So often, the Bible fails to meet our expectations; we want to engage the Bible on our terms rather than enter into its world. It strikes us as odd that the gospel writers give us only one story about

Jesus from infancy until he is well into adulthood. Only Luke gives us anything and his story is remarkable for its lack of miracles, angels, or other special revelations. Indeed, the circumstances and his parents’ reactions seem quite ordinary.

But, then again, the gospels are not biographies of Jesus. They don’t conform to any of our notions of what makes up a sound biography. All four of the gospels are narrative proclamations of the Good News, that in and through Jesus the kingdom of God had arrived, that things would never be the same. Every event, person, and movement in human history was either before Jesus or after. Does it really matter what Jesus looked like or the nature of his teen years?

The one story we do have from Jesus’ youth is telling and, not surprisingly, focused upon the temple in Jerusalem, the heart of Judaism for as long as the temple stood.

In Jesus’ day, of course, Jerusalem was quite different from our modern pictures. Rather than the Dome of the Rock, the city was dominated by the great temple Herod had built. It stood twice as tall as the golden dome today; Jew and Gentile alike traveled far just to see it. It was customary for Jewish men to go to Jerusalem at least three times a year for religious festivals. Entire families would accompany the men at least once a year for the Festival of Passover in the spring.

In today’s passage from Luke, Joseph, Mary, and their children are part of a large group of Galileans making their way southward to Jerusalem. Assuming they could cover fifteen miles a day on foot, the journey would have taken them four or five days. After the festival was over, everyone headed back north to Galilee. You can picture a large group making their way up the dusty road, with packs of children and teenagers doing their own thing while the adults tend to the work of the journey. It is certainly no surprise that Mary and Joseph expected Jesus to be running around with cousins and friends. But, actually, Jesus took it upon himself to stay behind in Jerusalem.

Having raised children, I’d bet Mary and Joseph headed back to Jerusalem both anxious and angry. Sure enough, when they find Jesus—who is only twelve—at the temple, Mary angrily asks Jesus how it is that he could treat his parents in such a manner. I’m sure she didn’t know whether to be angry with him or to hug him...probably both. After all, it had been several days.

Who is this Jesus?

During the days away from his parents, Jesus amazed all the adults (Pharisees, scribes, and priests) in the temple with his understanding and his answers to their questions. But Jesus’ responses to his mother’s questions are the center of this story.

Jesus wonders how she could NOT know that he “must be in my Father’s house” (v. 49). Must! What an interesting choice of words. Not “ought to be” or “want to be” . . . but “must be.” Even at this young age, Jesus knew that his life would be driven by the divine imperative. He would do what he did because that would be the vocation laid out for him by God. His life would not be controlled by fate. He was not working toward

some impersonal destiny. No one would coerce him into anything. He would simply do as he must, regardless of the consequences. God was revealing the boy's vocation to him and Jesus would be 100% faithful to that vocation, even if it took him to death on a cross.

What must this young boy, soon to be man, do? Jesus is actually very ambiguous about this. The New Revised Standard Version translates Luke's Greek as "I must be in my Father's house." However, "house" is not in the Greek; in fact, there is no word there at all. Hence, the King James Version translates the phrase as "I must be about my Father's business." In the NRSV footnote, there is yet another rendering, "I must be about my Father's interests." Regardless of exactly what Jesus meant, in these few words he claims for himself a special relationship with God. God would shape his life.

Many of us spend decades trying to find our identity, to come to know who we are and to find purpose in our life. Surely, in this story, Luke wants us to understand that by the age of twelve Jesus had found his identity, affirming it in his unique relationship with YHWH, the God of Israel. While still a boy, Jesus understood that he was called to obedience. He will do as he must. Jesus had grown up fast. He had come to the insight that obedience and commitment to God are expressed by participating in God's work, not adhering to an arbitrary list of do's and don'ts.

One might think that being about God's business would ensure a smooth road ahead, but such business must be conducted in this dark, sin-filled world. The shadow of the cross that fell across Mary at Jesus' consecration (Luke 2:35, from last week) would never leave Jesus as he confronted the evil powers of this world. I wonder if Jesus reflected on his "home alone" story as he set out toward the Judean wilderness two decades later at the beginning of his public ministry.

A time of testing

Over the course of our lives, we are tested many times. Some tests are inconsequential, though it may not seem that way at the time. Some prove to be crossroads in our lives, shaping all that comes after. This was true even of Jesus.

After his baptism in the Jordan River by his cousin, John the Baptizer, the Holy Spirit led Jesus out to the Judean wilderness to be tested. Was he really ready to take on the vocation given him by his Father? Was he prepared to be Israel's Messiah and to remain faithful to his work, even when it would take him to his death? Would he truly trust his Father in all things?

Now, it may be a bit hard for you to see Jesus in this way, a man genuinely tested in the wilderness. He's God, we say . . . how real could the test be? No way he could ever fail such a test. But this way of thinking is a trap. It robs Jesus of his genuine humanity, turning him into an actor on a stage playing out his part for the masses. As Culpepper writes:

Temptation is a universal human experience. Had Jesus not been tempted, he would not really have been human. The temptations, therefore, are a vital part of the narrative Christology, which portrays Jesus as fully human. The author of Hebrews, writing in a different genre, asserts that Jesus "in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin" (4:15). The wonder is not that Jesus was incapable of sinning but that he was able to avoid sinning although he was tempted. Along with the birth narrative, therefore, the temptations make an important anti-docetic¹ statement: Jesus was fully human and knew what it meant to be tempted.²

The test was "administered" by the devil, who is unnamed in Luke's telling. The devil tempts Jesus three times. The first time Jesus is tempted to feed himself by using his power to turn stones into bread. He refuses, grounding his refusal in the Law of Moses. The third time Jesus is tempted to accept an offer to put God to the test. But, he refuses, knowing his vocation and trusting his Father. But it is the second of the three

¹ Docetism (dō'sēdizəm) is the heretical (false) claim that Jesus was not really human, but only appeared so.

² R. Alan Culpepper, "The Gospel of Luke," *New Interpreter's Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck, vol. 9 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994–2004), 100–101.

temptations that is our focus this week. The devil offers to give Jesus authority and power over the earth. Just think of the good Jesus could do. All it would entail is Jesus' worship of the devil. This seeming shortcut to putting wrongs right must have been attractive. But there can be no shortcut to salvation; Jesus' path would necessarily be paved with suffering. So, as in the other two temptations, Jesus responds with the Word of God as set forth in Deuteronomy. Jesus will worship only the Lord and will serve only him. What was true for Jesus is true for us.

Rather than embracing the false gods on offer in our world, we devote ourselves to the worship of the one true God, the Lord God. This worship can take many forms as we have learned during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is our corporate worship, our common experience, our common prayers that makes us a church.

Daily Bible Readings *More wilderness stories*

Monday	Exodus 3	God leads the Israelites into the wilderness after they flee Egypt.
Tuesday	Numbers 14:1-25	The people refuse to enter the promised land and are condemned to wander in the wilderness
Wednesday	1 Samuel 23:15-29	David eludes Saul by fleeing into the wilderness.
Thursday	1 Kings 19:1-18	Fleeing Jezebel, Elijah flees into the wilderness.
Friday	Mark 1:1-8	John calls the Jews out to the wilderness to be plunged into the Jordan River and embrace genuine repentance.
Saturday	Revelation 12	The vision of a woman who flees into the wilderness after giving birth and is saved from the dragon by the earth.