

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
The Epiphany and Baptism of Our Lord, January 7, 2024
Matthew 2:1-12, Isaiah 60:1-6
The Quiet Years

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

This year, the Epiphany of Our Lord and the Baptism of Our Lord are so close together on the Church calendar, that it is reasonable to celebrate them together. They are major festivals of the Church year. The Epiphany of Our Lord was yesterday, January 6, as it always is, year by year. And the Baptism of Our Lord is always the First Sunday after the Epiphany, which means that the two festivals are side-by-side this year — Saturday and Sunday. So, we celebrate them together. Probably lots of churches across the land are doing that.

I bet many preachers are thinking that it would be best to preach on one or the other — either the Epiphany story, when Jesus is an infant, or the Baptism story, when Jesus is thirty years old. But I am going to do neither. Instead, I call this sermon “The Quiet Years.” I mean, we have a stretch of thirty years between the Wise Men and the beginning of the public ministry of Jesus. That is a mighty long stretch of time. They are quiet years in the life of Jesus. I can think of only a couple glances we get into those years. But these quiet years represent most of the life of Jesus, and they are bound to be important years. So, let us consider what little we can about those quiet years of Jesus and then think to ourselves that we ourselves might be in the midst of a good stretch of quiet years, but that these quiet years could well be years of preparation for a godly adventure ahead of us. I doubt that Jesus was a rabble-rousing young man who at the age of thirty suddenly straightened up and flew right. Maybe he did, and even that would be interesting, though I do not see how that could be so... how it could be that Jesus was sinful and wild at some point in his life given that he is the only begotten Son of God. I think it much more likely that Jesus used the quiet years of his life to prepare himself for the fairly brief ministry ahead of him — a ministry that offers salvation for the whole world.

Today’s reading from St. Mark does not tell us the age at which Jesus was baptized, but St. Luke tells us that Jesus was about thirty years old when he began his ministry (Luke 3:23). And the baptism of Jesus launches him into his ministry. That is a good way to begin and to continue a ministry, to know that the Holy Spirit has come upon you and that you have the approval of our heavenly Father. The ministry of Jesus must have been fortified by what happened on that day, the day he was baptized. Our text describes the holy events connected with the baptism of Jesus:

¹⁰And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens opened and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove; ¹¹and a voice came from heaven, “Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased.”

With this knowledge, Jesus marches out to the wilderness and does battle with the devil and all his wily temptations. Then Jesus calls his disciples and off he goes on his path toward Jerusalem and his crucifixion.

Before that, in his infancy, the Bible gives us beloved stories about the early years of Jesus — about his birth in the Bethlehem’s stable, about the visit of the Wise Men, about the flight into Egypt and the eventual return home to Nazareth. But we know little about Jesus as a grown man prior to his baptism. One piece of news we have about him is that his neighbors thought of him as “the carpenter’s son.” The people listening to the moving preaching of Jesus wondered where he got it all. They supposed that they knew him and knew his capabilities, and so they were stunned by his preaching. They said this about Jesus:

“Where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works? ⁵⁵Is not this *the carpenter’s son*? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? ⁵⁶And are not all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all this?” (Matthew 13:54-56, RSV, my emphasis)

St. Mark goes beyond this. He reports that his neighbors refer to Jesus, not as “the carpenter’s son,” but also as “the carpenter.” And so we read in Mark 6:3:

Is not this *the carpenter*, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him. (Mark 6:3, RSV, my emphasis)

So, that is one report about Jesus as a grown man during his quiet years. He is the carpenter’s son and he himself is a carpenter. He might have worked with his father in the carpenter’s shop. Jesus might have known about the variety and virtues of woods, about mortise and tenon joints, and about the tools needed in a carpentry shop. His hands might have been rough from working with the plane, smoothing out the wood. I bet Jesus did fair-and-square work, neither overcharging his neighbors nor doing shabby work for them.

So that is one report about Jesus: he was “the carpenter’s son.” I like to think this. I like to think that our Lord knows what it means to be a working person.

But the chief glimpse we get into the life of Jesus during his quiet years is his trip to the temple in Jerusalem at twelve years of age. There we learn that besides being a working man, Jesus was also a pious man, even as a child. His parents had lost track of him. Eventually they found him in the temple and were amazed at their young son. He was discoursing with the rabbis. The Bible’s note goes this way:

⁴⁶After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions; ⁴⁷and all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. (Luke 2:46-47, RSV)

Some children are brilliant. They can play violins and compose music and play chess and so on. Twelve-year old Jesus seems to have been brilliant in matters of faith and theology.

This story of Jesus talking with the teachers in the temple is followed by two nice notes about young Jesus. First, the Bible says that Jesus went home with his parents “and was obedient to them” (Luke 2:51). The Maker of heaven and earth was obedient to his parents. The one “through whom all things were made and without whom was nothing made that was made” (John 1), this only begotten Son of God obeyed his Fourth Commandment: he honored his mother and his father. Surely there were times when he knew better than them. Still, he obeyed his parents.

The other nice note about twelve-year old Jesus is a note with implications for the remainder of his quiet years. It goes this way:

⁵²And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and man. (Luke 2:52, RSV)

Did Jesus have a period of adolescent rebellion? Were there years when he became distant from his parents? We do not know for sure, but I rather doubt it because of this matter of increasing in wisdom and in favor with God and man. It suggests that Jesus used his thirty quiet years in a pious, thoughtful, and kind way.

As a grown man immersed in his ministry, Jesus was a man of prayer. He could go up a mountain and spend the night in prayer (Luke 6:12). It is likely then, that in his youth, he was also a person of prayer. In his ministry as a grown man, Jesus could quote scripture and reason with others about scripture. It is reasonable to think that in his youth and in his quiet years as a

grown up, he was reading and studying the scriptures he later expounded for others.

You can see that there are a few definite things we know about his life prior to his baptism, but not much. There are things that are reasonable to speculate about Jesus in his quiet years, but we do not know for sure because the Bible does not tell us all we would love to know.

What is more certain concerns you and me. By God's grace, many of us have known seasons of peace — quiet years when life went along pretty smoothly. Indeed, we might be in the midst of such a season of peace right now. If so, I am quite confident that Jesus wants me to tell you to use these quiet years well. Count them as years of preparation for what lies ahead. We do not know the details about that. We do not know what tomorrow might bring, but we do know that we should use our present time well, to prepare ourselves for what might be a great opportunity for the church, for ourselves as individuals, and for our loved ones. We do not want to fritter away our quiet years because something important might well lie ahead of us.

How do we know whether we are amidst a season of peace? I am thinking of practical things. I should think that we are in a quiet time of life and a season of peace if we have our health, we have some money, we are not on the lam, trying to avoid the police, we have a good reputation in the eyes of others, and so. If we are having good days like that, let's try to enjoy them, but also to count them as days in which we mean to prepare ourselves for what lies ahead.

Suppose we have had quiet years, but have not made much use of them. Suppose they were rabble-rousing years — years when we were not really much of a blessing to our neighbors here on earth. Well, in a sense, no matter! Today is a new day. If we are able to look around at our life and our world and to think to ourselves that things are okay, things are pretty good, then now is the time to forget what lies before and to press on, trying to make something of ourselves, to help prepare us for the road ahead. And Private Confession and Absolution are available to us.

As an old man or an old woman, you might be in a challenging stretch of life now. Life has its pressures, the going is not easy, but still you feel a deep sense of responsibility to live these years well, to carry your responsibilities well, to not be too much of a burden on others, or to use well the opportunities you face nowadays. If this is such a challenging stretch of life, you can be glad for those ways in your past in which you prepared yourself for what you now face. God bless you as you face things.

And if you feel overwhelmed, as if your past has not adequately prepared you for what you face now, still you can pray for God's help and you can do your best day by day. That is the great combination: to live this day as best you can and to ask God to help you.

For years, I printed up and taped to my bookshelf a saying from St. John Chrysostom. It is a saying about time. It goes this way:

For God will say also to us, "I gave you time to learn this art of piety, wherefore have ye foolishly and uselessly wasted that time?" (St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on St. John*, NPNF, Vol. 14, page 211)

I lost that saying. I guess it fell from my bookshelf. I should put it up there again, because it reminds me of something important: These years... they are a gift to us. They are years that we can use to prepare ourselves for some holy adventure ahead of us.

One way or the other, Jesus was certainly prepared for his ministry. He had only a few years ahead of him — maybe three years all told — but he was ready to go. That does not mean that those three years were easy. In fact, they were hard years of disappointment, betrayal, and in the end, crucifixion. But he faced each day with integrity, as we must face our remaining days with integrity. If God grants us some quiet years, let us enjoy those years but also use them to prepare ourselves for lies ahead, so that, in some true measure, we can follow the integrity of Jesus, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.