

December 31, 2006  
Luke 2:40-52; Colossians 3:12-17  
First Parish UCC  
©Mary E. Beard

## *Growing in Wisdom*

The other day in Target a woman was walking up the aisle calling out, “Ariana, Ariana.” She stopped me and asked if I’d seen a young blond-haired girl. Then, with an honest, but harried, confession she said, “I don’t remember what she’s wearing today.”

Imagine Mary and Joseph wandering the streets of Jerusalem, asking if anyone has seen a twelve-year old boy. Jesus and his parents have gone to Jerusalem for the great festival of the Passover. As many as 100,000 pilgrims traveled to Jerusalem for the festivities. I suspect it might be something like Time’s Square on New Year’s Eve. Even though Mary and Joseph probably knew exactly what Jesus was wearing, since people had so few clothes in those days, his clothes probably wouldn’t have distinguished him anyway. They were probably exactly like everyone else’s. Every twelve-year old boy looked like every other twelve-year old boy. So where is Jesus?

In our days of super vigilance in keeping track of our children, it’s a bit hard to imagine that they didn’t miss him for a whole day. But they were part of a large extended network of travelers made up of relatives and friends. Maybe his parents thought he was with his cousin, John. John probably assumed he was with his parents. Eventually, it became clear that he was nowhere among them.

This is the only story in the gospels that tell anything of Jesus between the birth

narratives and his baptism. It’s interesting that the story puts Jesus at the age of twelve in this story. The Bible is full of this number: The 12 tribes of Israel; Ishmael’s 12 sons who became princes; 12 apostles; the woman who hemorrhaged for 12 yrs; 12 baskets of leftover fish; and the 12 symbols of Revelation.

We live 12-hour days and 12-hour nights over the course of 12 months of the year. And of course we are in the midst of the “Twelve Days of Christmas.” The number twelve was very significant for the Hebrews and early Christians and is still deeply embedded in the ways we live.

Today, twelve is the age when young Jewish people are preparing for their bar/bat mitzvah, and many Christians are preparing for confirmation. They do much of what Jesus was doing in the story – sit in the temple/church, explore the scriptures, ask questions of the rabbis/ministers, and ponder their identity as a child of God.

In this process, people begin to more actively differentiate from their earthly parents.

Irene Zimmerman in her book *Incarnation*, p. 39, reflects on this story from Mary’s perspective.

*“Mary Pondered all These Things”*

*She had no words to express  
her feelings of awe and loss  
after their return from Jerusalem,  
as she watched the boy Jesus  
tear himself tenderly but firmly away,  
though he still obeyed them.*

*She had always known  
she did not own him.  
Yet his words to her in the Temple  
when she and Joseph found him  
after searching three days  
were seared in her heart with live coals.*

*Mornings now she brought him  
to her heart's Temple and offered him.  
Evenings she stood at the door and  
welcomed him home again.  
At supper she watched him  
eat like every other hungry boy.*

*She knew this life in Nazareth would end;  
how soon, she did not know.  
Each day she taught the young Son of  
God how to wait and trust.  
Each day she plumbed new depths  
of letting go.*

In the sacrament of baptism today we reminded ourselves that none of our children really belong to us. In some respects, we don't even "belong" to ourselves. We are always in the process of "letting go," and letting God – with our children and with ourselves.

Mary, Joseph and Jesus were on the cusp of a new way of being together. When his parents finally find him, after the proverbial three days, Jesus doesn't say, "Oh, I thought I'd spend some time in the temple with the rabbis." He says, "I must be in my (Abba's) house." The must is emphatic. Jesus was growing in wisdom and his calling was deepening within him.

Today we sit on the cusp of a new year – 2007. In some ways the world has

changed a great deal in 2,000 years. In other ways it is very much the same.

-Parents are still pondering their children's lives in their hearts and struggling to support them when God calls them to difficult things.

-The religious community continues to ask questions and to ponder the ways of God and to be amazed that wisdom can come in all shapes and sizes, and all ages.

-World leaders still are caught in the temptations of power. Just this week we have seen the deaths of two previous world leaders – one who didn't really want the power (Gerald Ford) and one who grasped and hoarded power (Saddam Hussein.)

-The world still struggles with how to respond to those who commit violence. Is more violence the appropriate response?

The coming of a New Year gives us pause to ponder. It is a day when people gather for festivities. Although New Year's is not an explicit religious holiday for us, it is a time to take account of our own growth in wisdom. The intensity of the holiday activities has abated. Some of us are already regretting the quantity and quality of some of the foods we have eaten recently. A few days away from work or school help us to gain some perspective on our commitments. Interactions with family and friends nourish our spirits and sometimes test our patience.

So we find ourselves, like the god Janus looking both backward and forward, examining the year past and pondering the year ahead. We make resolutions to change our behavior. But are we re-making the same resolutions we made last year and the year before?

John Foster Dulles once said, "The measure of success is not whether you have a tough problem to deal with, but

whether it's the same problem you had last year." Maybe it's time to come at those resolutions in a new way. Maybe instead of focusing on the problems we would be wise to pay attention to wise ways of being.

On this New Year's Eve, many people will be dressing up for the festivities. The focus will be on external attire. Whether wearing tuxedos or their best blue jeans, people want to look their best. There's nothing wrong with that.

Clothes do give a particular impression and they often identify people in their roles – the white lab coat in medical settings, police uniforms, or a clergy robe. Many years ago I was in the park with my children. I was dressed in normal park attire – shorts and a T-shirt. I was talking with a woman I didn't know. She looked at me puzzling and said she thought maybe she had seen me before. When I identified myself as a pastor at the local church, she exclaimed, "Oh, I didn't recognize you without your clothes." Then, "Oh, I didn't mean it that way." It was a good chuckle.

In today's Epistle lesson, Paul reminds us that we would also be wise to consider our spiritual attire. Paul suggests we look at what "clothes" we are putting on. His use of the metaphor of clothes is especially meaningful to the Colossians, whose city is a textile center and known for producing a particularly fine wool called *colossinus*.

As is the case in many of Paul's letters, he is writing to a community of people who are finding it hard to live together. They have a reputation for trouble. The people have been trying to dress themselves up as "Christians," but often it looks like "The Christians New Clothes," a play on the book "The Emperor's New

Clothes." It turns out indeed there is really nothing there.

Paul knows how hard it is to change one's ways, to put on the clothes of Christ. That hasn't changed in 2,000 years, either. The challenges of life together – whether in families, in work places, in churches, or the whole world – those challenges are still with us. So, "As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience...Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony."

Maybe if we want to grow in wisdom we would be wise to give more attention to wise things – to good inner clothes – to compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience and love - than to the things that are troubling us.

Maybe instead of resolutions to **stop** doing certain things...we should resolve to pay **more** attention to compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, and love.