

# Jesus' Bar Mitzvah

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Luke 2:41-52

**Sermon Series:**  
**God's Big Story**

*There are no super boy feats of strength in the four gospels.*

When people become famous, we want to know what they were like as children. This is happening right now to president-elect Obama. Everybody wants to analyze his life as a boy growing up in Hawaii.

Historians scour the annals of history to come up with facts on our first president, as well. I was taught that George Washington confessed to chopping down a cherry tree as a boy. Mason Locke Weems reports this incident in his biography of George Washington, written in 1800. Incidentally, Rev. Weems was also rector of Truro Church in nearby Fairfax. Financial hardship forced Rev. Weems to seek employment as a book publisher. He initially released his Washington biography as an 80-page pamphlet, but by its fifth printing, it ballooned to 200 pages, including the cherry tree incident. His father is reported to have asked young George, "Do you know who killed that beautiful cherry tree yonder in the garden?" Our future first president is said to have replied, "I cannot tell a lie, father; you know I cannot tell a lie. I did it with my hatchet." Historians are convinced Rev. Weems fabricated this story to underscore George Washington's honesty.

We have a single story which survives from Jesus' childhood. In

the absence of credible stories of Jesus' childhood, it is tempting for well-meaning disciples to invent stories about Jesus' childhood and fashion him into some sort of precocious whiz kid. Thomas, a 3rd century follower of Jesus, does just that. In his fabricated account of The Infancy Gospel of Thomas, he portrays Jesus as one who dazzles his playmates and intimidates his foes. At age five, Jesus charms his playmates by fashioning sparrows out of clay. At age six, when a playmate jostles Jesus' shoulder, he tells him, "You shall not go further in your way." And just like that, his playmate drops dead in a heap. When the child's parents protest to Joseph, Jesus afflicts them with blindness. When another playmate dies after falling from the upper story of a house, Jesus leaps from the roof with a single bound to resuscitate the boy to life again. When Jesus builds a bed in his father's carpentry shop and ends up with one beam too short, wonder boy simply lengthens the beam with his supernatural powers.

There are no super boy feats of strength in the four gospels. The lone story about Jesus' youth is told by Luke with quiet dispatch. Yet don't be fooled—this seemingly unpretentious story epitomizes Jesus' mission.

Jesus is 12-years-old in our story, a critical age for religious maturation.

***...God pulls the curtain back on Jesus' identity...and then closes it again.***

tion of Jewish boys. Twelve-year-old Jewish boys began a year-long tutorial of the Torah in preparation for their Bar Mitzvah when they became “sons of the law.”

Jesus and his family travel caravan-style with other pilgrims to the holy city of Jerusalem to observe the Passover. After the festival, they begin their trek home to Nazareth. In those days, women and children traveled in front, while men followed behind. By the close of the first day, Mary and Joseph come to the horrible realization that Jesus has been left behind. Can't you hear them talking—Isn't Jesus with you? But I thought he was with you.

Retracing their steps becomes a three-day ordeal; one day out, one day back and one day canvassing the neighborhood. Fortunately, they find Jesus right where they left him. He has become so engrossed in a “Q and A” session with temple rabbis that he seems oblivious to the consternation he causes his parents. In the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, Jesus not only asks the rabbis questions, he proceeds to lecture them on the finer points of astronomy and medicine. There is none of that here in Luke's gospel. Jesus' penetrating questions are reason enough to astonish his teachers.

His parents have spent days fretting about Jesus, so who can blame Mary for her gentle rebuke, “Why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been worried sick about you.” Jesus' reply contains reproach as well, “Why were you looking for me?

Didn't you know I must be in my Father's house?”

Then, just like that, it's over. Jesus resumes his role as dutiful son. It's as if God pulls the curtain back on Jesus' identity for an instant and then closes it again. Life goes on as before, except for Mary pondering all these things in her heart. This isn't the first time Mary ruminates on the future destiny of her son. When angels announce the Messianic proportions of her son's birth, Mary ponders these things in her heart, also (Luke 2:17).

Jesus' first recorded words, “I must be about my Father's business,” set the tone for Luke's gospel. Mary realizes in this instant that her son doesn't really belong to her. All parents come to this realization sooner or later in life. We do not really own our children. They are not ours in some possessive sense.

Mary's words, “Your father and I,” stand in marked contrast to Jesus' words, “My Father.” Jesus is not only Mary's son, he's also the Son of God, who must be about his Father's business. This realization cuts like a sword into Mary's heart. Jesus' agenda will not always coincide with his parents'. Jesus claims allegiance to a higher authority, to one who has more pressing claims on his life.

The Hebrew people would never dare call God “My father.” God is too holy to be addressed in such intimate, personal terms. Using a familial name for God was considered scandalous. No one ever spoke this way about God before. Yet, Jesus, at age 12, has the audacity to call God my Father. Jesus aspires

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redemption.*

not only to become a son of the law (Bar Mitzvah), his mission entails fulfilling his role as the anointed Son of God (bar Yahweh).

Human language has its limitations. God is not literally Jesus' Father. This is where Mohammed, founder of Islam, takes a wrong turn. He interprets this Father-Son language literally, as though God fathered a child through sexual relations with Mary. Jesus is the Son of God in a metaphorical rather than literal sense. God as Father and Jesus as Son conveys a relationship of intimacy and trust, similar to the ideal relationship between a human father and son. God and Jesus exist in the closest possible relationship, like that of a father and son.

We've reached that point in this sermon where it is appropriate to ask, So what? So what difference does this make in my life?

We've been preaching our way through God's Big Story this year. Three words will help you remember God's Big Story: creation, fall and redemption. The Bible begins with creation. We are created to live in relationship with God and each other. Sin, however, severs these relationships. In theological terms, we call it "the fall." Adam and Eve fall out of relationship with God. So God seeks redemption of these relationships through a covenant made with Abraham and Sarah: "I will be your God and you will be my people." The Ten Commandments express what it means to live in covenant relationship with God. When God's

people fail to keep the covenant, God raises up prophets to call people back into covenant relationship. These prophets also announce the coming of the Messiah, who will ultimately bring redemption to people.

The Peruvian Desert contains an assortment of large-scale drawings etched into its sandy terrain that stretch for 193 square miles. These lines were created by the Nazca Indians somewhere between 200 BC and AD 700. No one was certain what these lines represented until their patterns took shape from the air. Archeologist Dr. Paul Kosok of Long Island University confirmed in 1939 that these 300 drawings, when viewed from an airplane, form geometric shapes—triangles, circles and trapezoids. Drawings of enormous animals, birds, spiders and monkeys became visible from this aerial perspective.

We often regard the Bible as we do these seemingly random Nazca Lines—as a series of individual, unconnected stories. But when you take a bird's eye view and survey the Bible as a whole, we discover the Bible tells God's Big Story of redemption.

Our survey of the Old Testament is now complete. Genesis 1-2 tells the story of creation. Genesis 3 chronicles our fall out of relationship with God. Genesis 4, through the final curtain call in Revelation, tells God's Big Story of redemption. God's redemption is ultimately accomplished through Jesus Christ.

Redeem means to purchase or buy back, as a slave would be set free with a payment. The sins that

***God does for us what we cannot do for ourselves.***

separate us from God are redeemed or “purchased” by Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross. This redemption draws us back into relationship with God and makes God’s abundant life possible.

Redemption is not our work. Redemption is God’s work through Jesus Christ that we receive in faith. God does for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

Lou Johnson languished for 10 years in the minor leagues. But when Los Angeles Dodger’s star player Tommy Davis broke his ankle early in the 1965 season, the Dodgers promoted Lou Johnson to the big leagues. Lou played in 131 games that year, batting a respectable .259 and hitting 12 home runs. Not bad, but nothing great. Yet, in the 7th and deciding game of the World Series, with Sandy Koufax on the mound, Sweet Lou hit the deciding home run.

After his career, Lou turned to alcohol and cocaine. To support his addiction, Lou sold all his baseball memorabilia. At his lowest point, he even sold his World Series Ring as collateral for a cocaine transaction. When Lou became sober, he tried to recover his World Series ring. In 2005, it turned up for sale on the internet. But Johnson, now a goodwill ambassador for the Dodgers, didn’t have the money to buy it back. So, the Dodger organization bought it for him. The Dodgers did for Lou what he could not do for himself.

God does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. We cannot redeem our lives from sin.

Redemption is what God offers us through Jesus Christ.

Have you invited Jesus Christ to redeem your life? Have you received the abundant life God intends for you? You may have made this decision in your past but have lost your way. Receiving God’s redemption through Jesus Christ can be the jump start you need to experience the abundant life God intends for you. Ask God to transform unredeemed areas of your life. What better time to appropriate God’s redemption through Jesus Christ than at the outset of this New Year.

