

The Young Jesus Christ

Laura Dekker is seriously grounded right now.

The Dutch teenager was desperate to be the youngest solo round-the-world sailor. She has her own sailboat and is by all accounts an amazingly talented sailor. But she won't be doing any major voyages anytime soon. That's because she ran away from home in the Netherlands, caught a plane in Paris, and turned up on the Caribbean island of St. Marten. Maybe you've heard her story. Laura made headlines last autumn when a Dutch court ordered authorities to take temporary guardianship of the then 13-year-old, delaying her plan to sail solo around the world until psychologists could assess her capacity to undertake such a risky voyage. Her sailing-fanatic father appealed for Laura to be allowed to make the solo voyage. However, judges decided she would face mental and physical risks on the journey. So she was kept under supervision of the child protection authorities. At first, it seemed as if Laura had resigned herself to her fate as a second-year high-school student. She agreed to postpone her dream. But then last week she was reported missing and a few days later was spotted in the Caribbean. There was some mystery about how she managed to board a flight. But now, by running away, she has, according to the authorities, "demonstrated a clear need of adult guidance". Furthermore, Utrecht police questioned her upon return to the Netherlands, about how she managed to leave without parental support or that of an adult.

Now we could respond saying, what a spoiled, rich brat! Where were the parents! But on the other hand, didn't Jesus do something very similar when he was Laura's age? Didn't he go missing for some days without his parent's knowledge of his condition or whereabouts? Well, yes. But while there is something of youthful adventure in the boy Jesus ending up in the Temple, found by anxious parents only days later, there are also some striking differences between what he did and the antics of young Laura Dekker. For one thing, the young Jesus was not setting out alone into uncharted waters, but. . .

Following a trusted, ancient path.

Today, we're moving beyond the story of Christ's birth to seek the *meaning* of his coming to our own personal and social lives. And we must seek this meaning in the ancient witness of the Bible. But we live in a day when people *distrust* ancient things. Modern society labels as arrogant any and all who would take such an ancient book as their guide. But consider this: one's faith, what one believes, never comes out of nowhere, doesn't drop down through the skylight. One's faith always arises out of a specific social and religious tradition. We are born into families and into religious traditions and educational experiences, and Jesus was no different. He was born into the path of Jewish piety. Luke's Gospel tells us that at each point of his life, Jesus was adhering to the Torah of Moses.

The last we heard of him, he was a mere eight days old and being presented in the Temple, to, *according to the Law of Moses*, be *circumcised*. That day, an aged mystic, Simeon, had an experience with the child in which the Holy Spirit revealed to him the child's identity as the Christ. Simeon had immediately accepted the Jesus as Israel's Messiah, and this gave the old man such tremendous peace that Simeon knew he could now die, for he had come face to face with the Lord's salvation. He'd reached the end of his long, searching path. Not only did Simeon acknowledge Jesus as the Saviour, he also declared that all who reject Jesus would be

heading for a terrible fall. Only those who would *follow* him would *rise* and find light on their path. For Jesus himself would later say, “I am the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father, except through me. But Simeon had got to this conclusion by following the ancient, trusted path. And so do we.

This particularity of Christian faith as the “only way to God” is seen as outrageous to our multi-faith society. Yet each man and woman is on a *path* today. We can only speculate how the Spirit works, leading people all over the world – each one on their own personal journey. But the witness born in the Gospels is that if they are to find peace with God, as Simeon, our path must lead us to Jesus Christ. If one’s path is not leading in that direction, then that path is either a cruel delusion *or* it may lead one who is otherwise on the *right* path, to a critical *fork* in the road – a life-changing decision one must make, a crisis of faith, a point at which “unless one abandons all trust in their own abilities and wisdom, unless they encounter the living God and follows him, they will know no peace.

The boy Jesus, just twelve, made no wrong turn. His was no error of judgement. He was following a well worn path set before him from his birth. It had been established from ancient times. His was not the impatient youth striking out prematurely. This was no lack of parental guidance. No. For him it is all about. . .

Taking the next step

41 "Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival."

Jesus had grown up in an atmosphere of worship and Torah obedience. The life of the Jew is always about holding an ongoing conversation with God, studying his word, and finding the holy in every aspect of human life. For Jesus at age twelve, the next step was Bar Mitzvah. At age twelve, according to Jewish custom, he was now ready to assume the role of a rational adult, responsible for own his actions before God. It was probably this very Bar Mitzvah ritual in which one pledged one’s self to live in life-long covenant with God, that brought him into this deep conversation with the teachers of the Law.

Can you imagine what sorts of questions the young Jesus might have asked? This conversation with the teachers in the Temple was pivotal in shaping his future teaching as a rabbi and thus directed the path of all who would later follow him. Here, begins the long journey of the church out of the synagogue. That journey would unfold through the Book of Acts. But it begins with a twelve year old who is the very embodiment and true fulfillment of Torah. How does he relate to Torah? How is he perplexed by the teaching of the Scribes? Jesus did not rebel against the traditions of his people, but asked how he could respect the teachings of the elders, while at the same time follow the new and radical path set before him by his Father. He must of had *a lot* of questions. Perhaps it’s through becoming totally absorbed with these questions that he ended up . . .

Staying behind

43 “When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it.”

Sooner or later everyone must *stay behind*. What I mean by this is that even the best of family ties, the most devote of church communities, the most diligent of religious practices and observances mean *nothing* unless they lead one to a personal encounter with God. The essence

of our faith is an genuine dialogue with God. For Jesus and his Jewish kinsmen, faith is a recognition of the presence of God in every aspect of life and a commitment to follow God no matter what anyone else does. So just because the festival of Passover was over, Jesus' conversation with God was not thereby finished. There is so much more he needs to know that could only be learned by personal experience.

Now, his parents, that day, made an logical *assumption*. They simply assumed he would be taken care of by relatives and that he would come along like a good little boy whenever they were leaving. Perhaps like any parents of adolescents, they had a hard time grasping the full reality that Jesus had taken his Bar Mitzvah vows seriously. Their boy was growing up.

Later he would tell his own followers that anyone that was not willing to leave behind family and home for the sake of the kingdom could not be his disciple. He stayed behind to enter into a deeper walk with God. Mary and Joseph went . . .

Searching for a child but found a Messiah

Without any defiance or oppositional attitude, they find their son sitting, asking questions, listening, answering questions put to him by the teachers. We wonder if he assumed the position of teacher himself at the centre of the circle? But here he is *interpreting Torah*. *Speaking from his own personal walk with God*. "And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers."

For Jesus, it was quite a surprise that this created for his parents any difficulty whatsoever. He was simply going about his business in his Father's house. Although Mary and Joseph already knew he was Messiah from the experiences surrounding his birth recorded in Luke 1 and 2, they could not consistently and fully realize this in their experience *as parents*. It would not be until after his death and resurrection and the Day of Pentecost that Mary herself would fully realize who her son really was.

But we can.

In this scene of the learned scribes and the anxious parents and the twelve year old Messiah we can see the *most* profound difference between Jesus and the runaway Dutch teenager I spoke of earlier. And it's just this:

Knowing God is never a solo adventure

51"Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart. 52 And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor."

One has to wonder *why* a kid, or anyone else, would even *want* to sail around the world all alone anyways. Why would *anyone* even want to face such a daunting challenge with no one to help them. The extreme dream of young Laura Decker would be incomprehensible to the young Jesus Christ. Maybe this is something that can only be seen as desirable in our modern Western culture with it's extreme emphasis on personal autonomy.

But in Jesus life, we see no desire for the personal autonomy that seems to be so important in the modern west. In Jesus, from what little we are told of his early life, we certainly can see the importance of community in our spiritual formation.

"From the very beginning, the Bible sees human life in terms of relationships. In Jesus' relationship with God, there is no attempt to strip away or shun the accidents of birth that put in Nazareth with his parents. Human life is always to be seen in terms of mutual relationships –

first and most fundamentally, that of man and woman, then between parents and children. Then between families and clans and nations. (Newbigin, The Gospel in a pluralistic society, p82)

So, in the words of the famous hymn we sing at Christmas
Jesus is our childhood's pattern,
day by day like us he grew;
he was little, weak, and helpless,
tears and smiles like us he knew:
and he feels for all our sadness,
and he shares in all our gladness.

(#175 Cov. Hymnal)

So what have we learned from this rare glimpse into Jesus early life? Our need to commit ourselves to growing in the love and knowledge of God and to carry on the conversation that allows that to happen.