

# The Silent Years

The Presentation of Our Lord (Candlemas)

St. John in the Wilderness Parish, February 2, 2020

Imagine for a moment that you briefly meet a baby boy when he is just 40 *days* old. And you pay close attention to him to see what he's like — how big he is, how much hair he has, how he moves, how he smells, the kinds of sounds he makes — but also, what his general “mood” is like; the kind of “look” he has in his eyes; how he responds when he’s touched or held; his “temperament,” and so on. And you take all of those observations together, and they give you an “impression” of what this baby is like. But you only meet him briefly, so it’s a “quick” impression.

And then, you never see him again... until he's 12 years old. And when you meet him at age 12, the meeting is also very brief. Like before, you pay close attention to what he's like, physically and in other ways, and you form another “impression” of him, as an adolescent. But this time, he can have an actual conversation with you — and he does — about what he’s like from “*his*” point of view (how he thinks, how he feels, the kinds of things he likes to do, and so on.) And the things he says about himself add to your impression of him as an adolescent.

And, then, you never see him again... until he’s 30 years old. But this time, he “hangs around” for *three whole years*. So, this time, you have a real opportunity to get to know him — to see what he’s like over time — see how he acts, hear how he thinks & feels about himself, about others, about you, and about a broad range of topics. And you do. And, over time, you form an impression of him as an adult. A much “fuller” impression than you were able to form of him as a baby, and as a 12-year old. And, over time, you come to admire & trust & befriend him. In fact, you're so moved by who he is now, that you would even like to become more “like” him.

*But.....* Because, *until now*, the times you have been with him were so fleeting, so few and far between, you can’t help but wonder:

*How did the 40-day-old infant (you first met)... become the 12-year-old boy (you met next)?  
And, how did that 12-year-old boy... become this 30-year-old man (you know now)?*

There are big “gaps” in your understanding, and you can’t help but “*mind*” those gaps. What happened in his life during all of those “silent years”?

- What were the experiences he had — positive & negative?
- What obstacles & struggles did he face?
- What were his successes, and his failures?
- Who helped him along the way? And who made his life more difficult?
- What key choices did he make, for better and for worse?
- What “wounds” did he suffer.... and how have they healed?
- And what *life lessons* had he learned *through it all*?

Because of all those years — when you had no contact with him — many good questions arise about how he actually became the man he is now. You have a lot of “catching up” to do. But, in response to such questions, he remains silent..... That could be quite frustrating.

As you may have already guessed, this is the very situation we find ourselves in, with respect to what the scriptures tell us about the life of Jesus.

In today's text, when Jesus is presented at the Temple, he is only **40 days old**. He clearly can't speak for himself yet, but we hear several profound things *"about"* him (from wise, old Simeon, and confirmed by wise, old Anna.) And what we hear is no longer just the "bright side" of the glorious babe in the manger. We hear that Jesus will become a living "**sign**" of God on earth, revealing *"the inner thoughts"* of human hearts. And this revealing will lead to great, joyful celebration..., but also to violent opposition.

And that's all we hear... (*except a little footnote at the end that says "he then grew up, was full of wisdom, and that God was delighted with him."*) That's it.

After that, we don't hear a word, **until he's 12** — again with Mary and Joseph — again in the Temple, this time for Passover. And — *amazing as it sounds* — he's not just playing video games on his cellphone till his parents are ready to go. He's engaged in very "high level" spiritual conversations with the rabbis — **so** engaged that he doesn't leave when his parents do, and they have to go looking for him. So we learn that, already at age 12, he is a quite advanced, and quite wise, student of the scriptures. And, for the first time, we hear him speak. From his own words, we learn of his deep devotion to the one he calls "Father," and of his strong sense of calling to do his Father's work. We even learn that he placed more value on that sacred calling, than on his parents' anxiety (but that also — *eventually* — he was "obedient" to his parents.) But that's all we hear (except for another little footnote that tells us again that, from that day on, he kept *growing up* — in years, in wisdom, in divine & human favor.) That's it.

After that, we don't hear a word — either *from* him, or *about* him — **until he's an adult**, 30 years of age, when he's baptized in the river Jordan by John the Baptist. *After that*, we hear *a lot*, and see him in action *a lot*. And it becomes clear that he *did indeed grow*, not only in age, but in wisdom, and in divine & human favor. But this makes the question even more pressing: **how exactly** did he grow from the helpless 40-day-old baby... to the *quite wise* 12-year-old adolescent... and, then, to the *supremely wise* 30-year-old man? We just don't know.

Knowing what happened during those "silent years" in the life of Jesus might be pretty important for people who are seeking to grow – to become – more like him. Because, as we all know from personal experience: A lot happened in **our** lives between the time we were *babies* and the time we were *12-years-old*. And between *age 12* and *age 30*. And between *age 30* and whatever age we are now.

**Think about it:** *You had countless experiences* (some of gain / some of loss ... some pleasant / some painful ... some of praise / some of blame.) *You faced various obstacles*, (some small / some great.) *You struggled* (and sometimes you succeeded / sometimes you failed.) *You were in many kinds of relationships* (some helpful / some harmful / some a mixture of the two.) *You were sometimes wounded* (and sometimes healed.) *You made countless choices* (some small / some life-changing ... some wise / some foolish.) *You sometimes learned valuable life lessons* (and sometimes did not.) And so on...

So, if Jesus **also** went through all of these – *common, normal* – human experiences (*which he inevitably did*), wouldn't it be nice to know what they were? And to know how it all was – **for him** – and how **he** responded to all of these 'ups' and 'downs' ?

I think it would be *very* nice to know. And if the archeologists ever dig up an ancient scroll on "*The Silent Years of Jesus*," I'll definitely want to read it! But — *realistically* — do we really "**need**" to know all of those fine-grain details?

Sometimes I imagine that "*if I'd just had a complete blueprint of every moment of his life, I could have carefully followed it from childhood to now, and taken all the mystery out of how to become a holy, happy, healthy human being.*"

But the more I think about it – at least for me – it's a really good thing that I never did, and still don't, know all the details of his "silent years." You may already know this, but... I can sometimes be a bit of a "spiritual nerd." So if I knew what happened in his "silent years," I probably would have made big charts, mapping out his life, and mine, and the lives of all my family members & friends & parishioners – at every age, in fine detail – and tried to draw parallels, to "*figure it **all** out...*" (all by myself.)

It would have made it all too easy for me to get distracted from the simple truth.. of the Living Christ... and my need for a living relationship with him in the here & now. So, I thank God for "the silent years" of Jesus ....

What they can teach us all, I believe, is that there is no fine-detailed blueprint for this life of ours. That what we all need most is to keep discovering and getting to know the Living Christ – who is almost always "*subtle*," but never *silent* — who is always communicating to us *in a still, small, wise & compassionate voice*, within our hearts & minds.

He may not tell us everything that happened — and everything he thought & felt & did — when he was 17, or 25. (At least I know he hasn't told me.) But we can tell **him** how it was for **us** — at any age – and be enlightened by his counsel. This is an especially important need for those of us who are now in the "second half" of our lives. *We're* now the "Wise Elders" in our congregation. It's not Simeon & Anna, or the apostles. It's us.

We, especially, need to prayerfully look back on our own story — prayerfully review & reflect on the experiences we've had, and the choices we've made, along the way. As we do, the Spirit of Christ will teach us **now** — in the present — how to make good sense of it all... how to glean the key lessons from our own personal histories. So there won't need to be "silent years" in **our** lives. So there won't need to be times in our past that – regret, or shame, or fear – keep us from reflecting on, learning from, and being healed. So that our own history won't keep us from responding well to whatever experiences are unfolding in our lives right now. So we'll grow in wisdom. Wisdom in living our own lives, and wisdom to pass on to the next generation (when opportunities arise.)

This kind of prayerful "life review" – which I'm encouraging us to do – is quite *personal*. So it's mostly done in private, just between us and God. But when we start the process — *and we get "stuck" in the process* — we often need to talk it through with some other person we can trust to give us wise & compassionate counsel. So it's important to discern and figure out who the right person for that would be (*if we don't know already*.) Christ is *always*, and *will* always, be with us. But it's also good to have a trustworthy, ordinary mortal "on standby."

*May the grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, free us all – to **learn** from our past — to **live** & to **love** well – in the here & now. Amen.*