**Room to Grow**
*Luke 2:41-52*
Rev. Dan Schumacher

Will you pray with me?

*God of all wisdom –*
*Open our hearts and our minds in new ways this morning.*
*Place within us a humility and a holy curiosity –*
*so that we might find within this story,*
*your desire for our growth.*
*We pray these things in Jesus' name, amen.*

It's a new year — perhaps a time to reflect on the past year, what went right, what went well… what *didn't* go so well…

2025 was supposed to be the year of artificial intelligence — of A.I. Gemini, Llama, ChatGPT, Grock — all supposed to improve our lives, make work easier, more efficient, better. Everyone's talking about it. Everyone has an opinion.

Some are raising the alarms about the moment when AI surpasses human intelligence and takes over the world. They call it a *technological singularity* — the moment when AI becomes smart enough to improve itself, leading to explosive, uncontrollable growth and unpredictable change, creating a super-intelligence capable of becoming the supreme being on planet earth.

Pretty scary sounding…

So, let me start our year with a counter argument for technological singularity… a real life example of how AI wasn't so intelligent in 2025.

AI giant Anthropic has been experimenting with AI-powered vending machines, did you hear about this? These vending machines can order their own inventory. They can set their own prices. They can interact with customers all without human intervention.

This past month, Anthropic asked *The Wall Street Journal* to allow one of their AI models, named Claude, to run one of their office vending machines. It did not go as Anthropic had hoped.

Within days, it had done what? Any guesses? Within days, it was hemorrhaging money.

The AI vending machine gave away nearly all of its inventory for free, restocked itself with dog treats, purchased a *Playstation 5* for "marketing purposes," gave the *Playstation 5* away for free, ordered a live fish as a mascot for the newsroom, offered to restock

itself with pepper spray, stun guns, cigarettes, and underwear, became convinced the year was 1962 and that it was in the basement of Moscow State University, bought Manischewitz wine, messaged an employee that there was stack of cash waiting for her in the side of the machine (there wasn't), and ultimately, at the end of the experiment, lost $2,000.

*Wall Street Journal's* Joanna Sterns, reported: "Profits collapsed. [But] newsroom morale *soared*."

Not a great way for ol' Claude, the AI vending machine, to end the year for AI… sure makes technological singularity seem further away than we might have imagined.

But if you think Claude had a bad year, imagine being Mary and Joseph in our story today…

They'd caravanned with family and friends to make the annual 65-mile pilgrimage from Nazareth to Jerusalem for the Passover festival. Everything went as expected — a successful holiday season by any measure. The time came to return home. There were hugs and smiles and "see you next years" before the caravan departed the big city to make the trek back home.

Mary and Joseph lingered in the afterglow of the holiday season — the festivities, the glad reunions with distant friends, the meaning-filled worship at the temple. They lingered in the afterglow for so long that it was three days before they realized that their twelve-year old son, Jesus, wasn't actually with them — not just *not with them*, but not in the caravan *at all*. They'd left him behind, *Home Alone*-style — only *Home Alone 2*, where young Kevin ends up in the big city all by himself.

Can you imagine the conversation that happened between Mary and Joseph?

"What are we going to do??? I mean, God literally sent angels to *each* of us *independently* to tell us how special this child is, and we've lost him! God will never trust us again!"

It's a great story, because parents everywhere know the panic of having forgotten or lost a child. And most of us also know the feeling of being the child who was lost at one time or another — most likely, because *we* had wandered off even though we knew better. And we remember acutely the feeling of realizing how much trouble we were going to be in when our parents found us.

It's also the only story we have in scripture of Jesus as a boy. We get "sweet lil' baby Jesus" and then — boom! — adult Jesus without anything in between *except this story*.

Somewhere along the way, the early church couldn't help but want to fill in the gaps of Jesus' childhood. The most famous collection of these stories is the apocryphal (meaning not accepted as scripture) book, *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas.* It portrays Jesus over the span of eight years, from ages 5 to 12 with some pretty unbelievable tales.

In one, a very young Jesus makes birds out of mud, claps his hands, and makes them magically fly. Another portrays the boy Jesus working with his father on a carpentry project in the shop. When Joseph discovers he's cut a board too short for its intended use, the young Jesus stretches the board so it can be used. Who needs to "measure twice, cut once" when your shop-boy is Jesus?

And there are even some that portray Jesus as more malicious than merciful as a child.

In one, he causes a boy who bumps into him in the market place to die — and, if that were not enough, he then strikes blind those who complain about it! So much for: "I am the light of the world."

In another, Jesus raises a boy who fell from a roof and died — not because he's concerned about the boy or the boy's family, but because somebody has accused him of pushing the boy off the roof. So Jesus raises the boy so that he can testify that Jesus didn't push him.

Perhaps my favorite, though, is the story of when Jesus' friends refused to play with him, so in a fit of disappointment he turned them all into stinky, dirty sheep. The horrified parents go screaming to Mary, who insists that Jesus "turn them back into children right this instant," which he eventually does. The last scene of the story portrays the parents lecturing their children: "The next time Jesus wants you to play with him, you play with him!"

Sounds more like a lesson out of *Grimm's Fairy Tales* than something we'd find in the scripture.

The biblical scholar John Dominic Crossan says he thinks Jesus resembles "Dennis the Menace" more than "Jesus the Messiah" in the apocryphal stories of his childhood.

So, maybe it's worth paying attention to what's different about Luke's portrayal of Jesus as a boy. And the most noticeable difference is that there is no mention of Jesus demonstrating miraculous power in Luke's story — no raising children back to life or taking their lives for hurting his feelings, no striking people blind or making clay pigeons fly, and no one gets turned into a sheep.

Jesus might be precocious enough to disappear from the caravan and not check in on time, but that kind of behavior was true of most of us at one time or another.

According to Luke, what's different about Jesus — what sets him apart as a twelve year-old — is that, even as a boy, he gravitates to the temple which he calls "my Father's house." From a young age, it seems, he's at home among those studying and debating scripture. He asks great questions, and nothing makes a rabbi happier than a student who asks great questions.

Why include this story Jesus as a child? Because, for one, it marks the moment in Jesus' own development when he, at twelve years old, chose the faith for himself. Faith wasn't just something his parents made him do. It was something he was choosing for himself.

The second thing Luke shows us with this story is a foreshadowing of Jesus' competing realities.

All those who heard him may have been amazed with Jesus' understanding and his answers (2:47), but his parents were not as impressed.

"Child," said his mother, "How could you do this to us? Don't you know what you've put us through? Your father and I have been searching everywhere for you!"

And what does twelve-year old Jesus say? "Why were you searching for me? Didn't you know that I must be in my Father's house?"

You here the sting of his words, right?

She says, "*Your father* and I have been worried sick." And he says, "I was with *my Father*."

That had to hurt. Already at this young age, Luke shows us playing out the competing realities of Jesus' life: fidelity to his family or fidelity to God?

This little story seems to give us our first hint that early on Jesus knew the primacy of God's call and that his relationship with God would surpass all others.

A third thing that Luke seems to want us to recognize from this story is actually the part of the story we seem most eager to ignore.

The story closes with Jesus returning home, being obedient to his parents for the time being, and Mary holding all these things in her heart. Then comes the verse that we mostly ignore:

"And Jesus *increased* in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor" (2:52).

He did not spring fully formed from the head of God, as Athena did from the head of Zeus, but *grew up* physically, mentally, spiritually, and socially — as we all have to do.

And in Greek, the word for "increased" is actually in the imperfect tense, which means it ought to be translated, "And Jesus *kept increasing, kept growing* in wisdom and in years…"

We largely ignore this verse, I think, because we don't like the idea of Jesus *learning* — or maybe it's the idea that Jesus still had things to learn. That idea butts up against our

understanding of Jesus being perfect in all ways — all knowing, all seeing, all powerful. Jesus didn't learn. He is "the same yesterday, today, and forever" (Heb. 13:8).

And it's not just a problem for us. It's been a problem for the church for a long time.

I've shared this with you before, but let me share it with you again as a reminder. This is a medieval icon from the 1200s depicting Mary and her baby, Jesus (*see image below*). Do you notice anything strange about Jesus?Anything that seems peculiar? Anything funny about that baby Jesus?

The adult face? The fully-formed body, sitting up like a grown person? The receding hairline??

He's small like a baby, but with a grown man's face and head! And this icon isn't unique! If you were to Google "medieval icons of Mary with baby Jesus" you would find icon after icon after icon of a full grown woman Mary holding a Jesus that looks more like a miniature man than a baby.

Why is that?

Because it was what they *believed.* They believed that Jesus was born into this world already grown, already all-knowing, already perfect with nothing left to learn. He didn't need to grow in wisdom. He was born fully-formed.

We aren't that different. We like the idea that Jesus was born all-knowing. What we don't like is the idea that Jesus had to grow up — just like us.

But the witness of scripture here, and in other places, is that Jesus had to *grow*, had to *increase* in wisdom. And if even Jesus had some things to learn, then don't you think we might, too?

Or are we really going to leave all the learning to AI?

Amen.

*Madonna and Child by Berlinghiero,* 1230s, via The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.