

IT'S THE MOST NECESSARY PART OF CHRISTMAS

O Come ye to Bethlehem, Come and behold him, Born a King, born to be our Savior. Amen.

15 years ago, Pixar Animation Studios released one of their more famous films, “Finding Nemo.” The story is of a little clown fish that gets lost with a forgetful friend, and an overly-protective father. But there’s another sub-plot going on – inside the fish tank at the dentist office. Throughout the movie, the inhabitants of that tank are plotting their grand escape. Eventually it happens; they are put in clear plastic bags on a window sill so the tank can be cleaned. Out the window they go, across the street they roll, finally plopping down into the harbor. It’s not until the final moments of the film, after all the credits have rolled, that they realize the fatal flaw in their plan. One of the fish simply says, “Now what?”

I wonder how many times Mary and Joseph uttered those same two words? Mary, the young virgin, is expecting a child – now what? Joseph finds out about Mary’s situation – now what? A census is demanded, and he must travel some 60 miles with a very pregnant wife – now what? There’s no room for them in Bethlehem – now what? In the middle of the night strange shepherds come to see – now what? Wisemen from the Orient come with super expensive gifts – now what? Murderous King Herod sends his soldiers to kill every baby boy born in Bethlehem in the last 2 years – now what?

Each and every time the question arises, the Lord provided the answer. Yes, this pregnancy was a good thing; it was a miracle! Yes, it’s right to go to Bethlehem. Yes, shepherd and kings will worship this child. Yes, it’s ok to flee to Egypt until Herod is dead and gone. These were all necessary, good things for Joseph, for Mary, for Jesus, for the whole world! When they finally got back to Nazareth, Jesus was perhaps 4-5 years old. And while the Scriptures do not give us a biographical sketch of Jesus’ life growing up, what schools he went to, what subjects he studied... we are given some of the most important and necessary details of his youth. You see, when Joseph got back to Nazareth, he could have very easily continued asking God, “Now What?” but he already knew he what was to be doing: training up and raising his foster son in the knowledge of the Heavenly Father.



It really hasn’t changed has it for us today. Yes, Christmas has passed but we don’t need to be asking, “Now What?” We already know that NOW is the most necessary time for every one of us here, parents, children, grandparents... to be knowing God’s Word and to growing in God’s Word.

I. Knowing the Word of God

Our text gives us a fantastic insight into the early years of Joseph’s household. ⁴¹ *Every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover.* The Lord required that all adult male Jews appear at the temple 3 times a year (Duet. 16:16): the Feast of Unleavened Bread – Passover; The Feast of Weeks – Pentecost; and the Feast of the Tabernacles. These he and his family observed faithfully. That is not to say they went to church 3 times a year; by no means! Their local synagogue in Nazareth was the life-blood in their worship where they would have heard the Scriptures and worshiped the Lord on a weekly basis.

Mary and Joseph took the responsibility of raising up God’s son very seriously. They made sure that Jesus not only learned how to read and write, but even more so, that he knew the Word of God. Yes, he was God-in-Flesh but he was also truly man and needed to learn. Jesus’ spiritual education would have begun in the home, learning the very simple prayers and Scriptures. Later on, the children would have learned of Moses and the Prophets at the synagogue – much like our Sunday school lessons. For most, their education culminated around age 12 when they would then be considered a, *ben hathora* – a Son of the Law – and invited to partake in all the rights and privileges of the Church – much like Confirmation.

Perhaps it is no coincidence that our text tells us, ⁴² *When he was twelve years old, they went up to the Feast, according to the custom.* That is not to say Jesus didn’t go in the previous years, but perhaps now, having been growing in the knowledge and wisdom of God’s Word, was the perfect time for Jesus to dig a little deeper into the Scriptures with the Jerusalem’s teachers.

Joseph’s adopted son was definitely growing in the Scriptures; this is quite evident in our text. Although Mary and Joseph had already headed back to Nazareth after observing the 7-day Passover feast, they failed to tell Jesus the bus was leaving. Where was he? ⁴⁶ *... they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions.* ⁴⁷ *Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers.*

Jesus sat at the feet of teachers of the Law in Jerusalem. From the questions this 12-year old was asking, they were dumb-founded and blown away at his understanding, at his answers, at his knowledge of the Scriptures. We don't know which parts of the Scriptures they were discussing. Perhaps it had to do with the meaning of the Passover, the lamb's blood on the door, the miraculously delivery from slavery in Egypt... It matters not, the most necessary point is that this young boy has been learning and growing in his understanding of God's will for his life.

By now most of us have completed our Christmas celebrations. The presents under the tree have been replaced with crispy fallen pine needles, the Christmas cards are only trickling in and you've already had that Christmas ham three times... ***now what?*** Now is not the time to put Christ away with the decorations. Now is not the time to think that just because we came to the manger last week, we don't have to come this week or next. Now is not the time to think that we know it all. Even Mary and Joseph struggled in their knowing – and they had angels explain to them that this was no ordinary child. Yet our text tells us that they did not understand Jesus' words, ***“Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?”***

Now is the time to draw closer and closer to the manger. Now is the time to be searching and seeking this 12-year-old boy. Now is the time to be sitting at the feet of the Scriptures, listening learning, asking questions. Now is the time to be growing in God's Word, in regular worship, in Bible study, in Sunday school, in catechism classes, in personal devotions – so that we too can grow in our understanding of God's will for our lives.

II. Growing in the Word of God

And even though Luke tells us that ***“They did not understand what Jesus was saying to them,”*** (vs 50) that does not mean they ignored his words. Quite the contrary! Yes this was difficult, but Mary ***“treasured all these things in her heart.”*** She kept his Words even closer to her heart, pondering, thinking, meditating on the words of her Lord and Savior.

Too often people do just the opposite. If there is a Biblical truth that they find difficult to follow, if some portion of God's Word speaks against the way they are thinking or behaving – their sad solution too often is to ignore God's Word and continue living in a way that pleases oneself, regardless of what God says. This fatal flaw is what happens when we don't keep ourselves close to the Scriptures, when we fail to treasure the truth, when we spend our time pondering playoff picture instead of the magnificence of God's Word. Should a person keep up this pattern, one will eventually know even less of their Lord until they finally forsake that little child who came from heaven above.

If this is you... even if you think that this might be you... or someone in your family... the answer to “Now What?” is pretty clear. The most necessary part of Christmas is not that it happened but that we've been given the one particular present we need most – the very presence of Jesus Christ. God himself came down from heaven above. He clothed himself in our human flesh. He grew up in our world and each day learned and lived His Father's will. He took our sin upon his human shoulders to free us from utter ignorance of God's incredible love for us. By His death He freed us from sin and the chains of eternal death. Now He has sent us the Holy Spirit who has opened the eyes of our heart to see that through faith in this little 12-year-old boy in the temple we have life eternal.

Now is the time to draw closer to Jesus that ever before. And for the strength to do this – so that this desire doesn't fall flat like every other New Year's resolution – we again flee to our Savior and to one another. As fellow Christians, may we lovingly encourage one another. May we, like Joseph, bring our families to the temple regularly that we may bask in the joy of God's grace and mercy. May we as parents put a premium on the time we spend equipping our children with the Scriptures, preparing them for the spiritual battles they will face. And while we will not overcome everyone, we know we have a Savior who has, from day one, through age 12, and through all 33 years he lived on this earth.

From this event at age 12, the next time we see Jesus, he's 30, being baptized by John. Immediately following his baptism, we see how utterly invaluable his early years of training in Scriptures were for him. Jesus began his ministry in the wilderness where for 40 days, he was continually tempted by Satan. Each time he overcame Satan – with the Scriptures he had learned as a child.

Now what? We know the answer: the most necessary and important part of Christmas starts now. Enlightened by the Holy Spirit may each us strive to know our Savior Jesus better, and each day grow in faith so that we too can resist the devil and live our lives to the glory of Him who sent His only begotten Son, to be our Savior. Amen.