

Week 16

A Hidden Life for Thirty Years

Guide: The Carpenter's Son



One of the most remarkable realities about Jesus is that we know almost nothing about the first thirty years of his life. We know the stories from his public life that tell us that people who knew his relatives were fairly underwhelmed by his background. One of the charges leveled against him was “Isn’t this the carpenter’s son?”

This week of our retreat allows us to get to know the developing person of Jesus. Because there are so few Scripture references to the period from his birth to his baptism, we will have to imaginatively fill them in from what we do know about him.

If we reflect on the kind of adult person Jesus became, it is possible for us to reflect on what kind of childhood he had, what kind of kid he was, what kinds of issues he wrestled with, what kind of choices he made. Using what we know about the development of children, young adults, and maturing adults, we can make some wonderful guesses at some of the human issues Jesus must have faced. Praying this way lets us get to know him more deeply that we might fall in love with him more intimately and come to our deepest desire to be with him in his mission from God.

Let us open our hearts to be shown the early childhood of Jesus. Can we go through this week imagining all the very human childhood traumas and growth that were his? And as we walk around in Jesus’ teen and young-adult years, we can let him show us how he became who he is today. Can we imagine his struggles? His questions? His strengths? His weaknesses? Can we imagine his relationships at different stages of his development?

If we can get beyond what we think we don’t know about those years, we can learn about how Mary and Joseph raised him. We can imagine what life in the town of Nazareth might have been like.

We know that Jesus saw himself as one called to proclaim liberty to captives and to preach the good news to the poor. We know that he saw the blessedness of being spiritually poor. We know that he understood that the reign of God was like yeast or a small seed, and that weeds and wheat must grow together. We know that he was not afraid to eat and drink with sinners and those who religious leaders avoided. We know that he saw himself as a servant, a foot washer, and as bread that would be broken and given for the life of the world. How did the carpenter’s son come to all of this?

The one who loves us will show us who he is, allow us to fall more deeply in love with him than we ever imagined, and draw us to follow him more closely, day by day, week by week.

Some Practical Help for Getting Started This Week

Contemplating the hidden life of Jesus can be challenging at first. We might be frightened off by the near absence of scriptural stories to use as a base for prayer. But with a bit of imagination and freedom—and with energy from our growing fascination with Jesus—this can be a wonderful week. And doing this in everyday life can be very powerful. The last two weeks' helps included some basic advice for contemplating a Scripture passage in a prayer period and in an everyday-life context.

We might begin by an internal process of *gathering data*. What do I know about how infants develop into little children, and how children develop into teens, and how teens become young adults, and how young adults face full adulthood? We know that the stages of growth involve facing crises. We know parents are critical. We know peers are critical. We know that early choices shape the context for future choices. And we know Jesus went through all these stages of growth and development. Luke tells us, "The child Jesus grew. He became strong and wise, and God blessed him" (Luke 2:40).

Now to give *shape* to our imaginings about Jesus' growing-up years, we turn to what we know about how he turned out. We actually do this all the time. We look at someone, particularly someone we dislike or who we think didn't *turn out too well*, and we begin to make assumptions about what that person's childhood was like. Or we might meet a college-age student who is just wonderful and say that the parents must have done something right in raising him or her.

The Gospels help us tremendously in knowing who Jesus is today. The Jesus who loves me today, the Jesus I speak with in prayer, has holes in his hands. We know he's comfortable with sinners and women and others whom society of our day might be uncomfortable with. We know that he is familiar with everyday life, using images about baking bread and growing things and going to weddings and talking about how property owners manage their affairs.

Then we are ready to concretize our imagination by setting up scenes. We might begin by getting a concrete picture of what Mary and Joseph's house in Nazareth might have been like. It helps to get as detailed as possible. How many rooms are there? How big are they? What happens in each room? What's the furniture like? Where do they sleep, cook, eat, welcome visitors? Where's Joseph's carpenter's shop? What's it like? Then we might imagine the layout of the village of Nazareth. Where do children play? Where's the well? The synagogue? The market? The wedding hall? The cemetery?

Now we are ready to imagine ordinary life events that surely happened in the life of Jesus. As we imagine them and walk around in those scenes and let ourselves become a character in those scenes, experiencing and learning about Jesus, we let our Lord reveal whatever he wants to reveal to us. We can imagine any ordinary life crisis, developmental crossroad, key situation in which we develop character, or any genuine human interaction. We picture what happens, what people say, what we experience in that scene ourselves. The beauty of this kind of contemplation is that the details don't have to be *historically* accurate. The context provides an environment and an entry point for us to be open to meeting Jesus.

Some scenes we might want to develop and contemplate: very early moments as Mary and Joseph learn to care for Jesus, feed him, change him; their teaching him to talk, to walk; their having to train him, correct him, discipline him; meal scenes, playtimes, prayer time; Jesus learning to read; their taking him to his first wedding, his first funeral; Jesus beginning to help in the carpenter's shop; his emerging peer relationships with young guys, the crises faced there; Jesus' first adolescent encounters with young women, the crises he faced there; how the family faced typical problems with relatives or neighbors; Jesus as a carpenter's apprentice, his delivering furniture, his building a home; the family's dealing with the aging, illness, and death of Joseph.

At first it seemed there would be *nothing there* to contemplate, that it was indeed a *hidden* life. Now we see there is so much to learn about Jesus. None of us will have time for it all, certainly not in one week, but entering into Jesus' life somewhere and letting him reveal something about himself will be grace filled. This is quite possible in our busy lives, particularly as our curiosity and fascination for Jesus grow.

This week, let's let this whole experience of the life of Jesus, and the kind of person his life shaped, fill our imagination. We will see how throughout the week, in all the background moments, we can let ourselves become very prayerful with these delightful imaginative exercises. Our ordinary crises will help us keep his life human and real for us, and they will draw us more and more closely to him.

For the Journey: Closer to Jesus

We begin this week by looking at and listening to the events of the early days of Jesus' life. Shepherds and kings, the poor and the rich, have come to see he who has come to help us see ourselves. The Word has been spoken in the City of David, and that Word is being prepared for the hearing of all, Jew and Gentiles, near and far, rich and poor.

Joseph, who was told in a dream to take Mary as his wife, now in a dream is told to take Mary and their child away to a distant land. We are asked to consider the trust that it took for him to believe in those dreams and the faith that it took to hear them as invitations rather than demands. Journeying, not knowing to where or what for, seems to be an early theme in this historical drama. The shepherds have returned glorifying God; the kings have gone back pondering what they have seen. Mary, Joseph, and this mysterious bundle are left alone to leave for Egypt and to there wait for further instructions, which will come in time and in faith.

We are invited to visit the temple twelve years later, when the holy trinity of Joseph, Mary, and Jesus journey again to Jerusalem. This time they leave without Jesus, and fear seizes the parents. Here, Ignatius asks us to listen and to imagine their feelings. They find Jesus seemingly unconcerned about the feelings of his parents. Jesus has completed the law of being obedient to his parents and now is fulfilling a new law of obedience to his heavenly Father. He had to be about his Father's business, which will be his business for the rest of his days: speaking and doing the words of God.

We watch carefully the confusion of feelings in the hearts of Mary and Joseph. The exclamation "Why!" changes to the very good question "Why?" Mary will ask this question many times in her life. We assume that she prayed so that her questions resolved into acts of faith and hope even standing at the foot of his cross. The drama seems to drag a little bit after they all return to their home in Nazareth. For the next eighteen years of very valuable time, Jesus does something. Does he study the Scriptures of his Jewish tradition? Does he help Joseph in the carpenter shop? Does he learn, as we all do, about the human ways of loving and hating, of helping and rejecting? We are meant just to watch and ponder, as his mother must have, at the ways of God in dealing with us. It is all a mystery to her and to Jesus as well. He is preparing by being faithful to time and in time learning trust in his heavenly Father.

This week, we let amazement, confusion, and questioning be places from which to watch the beginning of the life of Christ. We pray with our own reactions of questioning and even doubting. As Jesus becomes more real to us, we ourselves become more real in the simplicity and mystery of our own lives. We are beginning to let him get closer to us individually and globally. The Word has been spoken first in the City of David and now for all and everywhere around the globe of God.

In These or Similar Words . . .

Dear Jesus,

Somehow I have always thought of you as fully formed. Yes, you were a baby, but then the Gospels suddenly have you leaving home as an adult. But what about all of those years in between? What happened when you left the stable in Bethlehem and your parents took you home?

I want to know more about the kind of child you were. Were you ever a “terrible two” as a toddler? I’ve never seen it written anywhere, but it is comforting for me to think of you as a delightful two-year-old, exploring, getting into things, climbing where you shouldn’t in the house, getting underfoot in Joseph’s carpenter shop, playing on the floor in Mary’s kitchen. I like to see you like that, because it makes you so very human and it’s how you and all of us learned about things and developed our curiosities about life and others with us in it.

How did you learn to read? Did Mary take you on her lap and begin to teach you the Scriptures? Did Joseph take you with the men to the synagogue? What kind of playmates did you have? What did you learn about the world by watching the traders at the market, the neighbors, Joseph’s customers, and your relatives?

Joseph was such a strong influence on you, and you often stood next to him as he traded with merchants. He was gentle and trusting but strong. He even went to the market for the widow next door because the merchants always tried to cheat her. You watched as Joseph talked with them, insisting on fairness but never trying to get more than he was due.

With your engaging personality, you were a leader among the boys in your neighborhood, racing them through the town and then dashing back in laughter to Joseph’s shop. Once you cheated in a race and Mary saw you do it. She took you aside and quietly told you a story, a parable, about cheating, and you burned with regret. Her gentle correction was all you needed to return to the boys with a deeper sense of honesty and of your responsibility as a leader among them.

At twelve years old you had a favorite trip into Jerusalem with a huge crowd of family and friends from Nazareth. When you got there you peeked into the temple and were mesmerized by the discussion going on there. You wanted to stay and watch, but your friends pulled at your sleeve and soon you were off, racing through the streets of Jerusalem. I know you were excited about the huge market, with its foreign wares for sale, near the temple. You looked with such interest at the different kinds of people in this big city—so different from your small town.

But in a quiet moment you slipped away from your friends, drawn back to the temple by the power of what you heard discussed there. But, Jesus, didn’t you think about your parents? Sometimes I wonder about you at the temple. After all, you were a smart twelve-year-old. Shouldn’t you have paid more attention than that? Mary and Joseph must have been sick when they realized you weren’t with them on the journey back. But they were so relieved when they found you. As I picture the scene, Jesus, when you got home, they grounded you for a week.

But you were a wonderful child, and their discipline, love, faith, and sense of justice helped to shape you as much as Mary’s story telling and Joseph’s carpentry did.

I feel closer to you when I pray with all of this, as I see you slowly maturing into the adult I want to know more. When did you begin to feel that you had a special role to play? When did you sense that you were called by God in a special way? How did you begin to be a servant for others, a foot washer?

Dear Jesus, help me to understand you more so I can be more like you. Help me to find how I can serve God as you did. I want to be with you in this world and to be serving, like you.

Scripture Readings

Luke 2:22–38

Luke 2:39–40

Luke 2:41–52

Hebrews 1:1–2