

COMING OF AGE by Mrs. Bonnie Gleesing

Twelve-year-olds. A special age. Twelve is an in-between time, not yet fully grown but no longer a little kid.

Twelve-year-olds in this country are maybe beginning middle school. Boys might desperately want to be taller, maybe they feel left out because they don't or can't play sports. What are they thinking when they are listening to their iPods? What about the 12-year-old girls? Maybe you see one whose makeup is on so heavy that you can't guess what her age is. There might be one whose parents are pushing her to take advance placement classes so she'll get into a good college when all she really wants is to be a 12-year-old.

Twelve-year-olds in some countries are working fulltime, or they are picking through garbage dumps searching for copper wire or computer parts to sell, or pounding rocks into small pieces to make gravel, earning pennies a day for their families. In some parts of Africa a girl who's 12 now heads her household, caring for younger siblings after their parents have died. In far too many countries a boy who's 12 is carrying a rifle as part of a rebel army he probably didn't choose to join.

When Jesus was 12, he probably lived the normal life of a young boy of that time. He had been dedicated in the temple by Simeon, but between that day and when he was 12 going to Jerusalem with his parents, we don't know much. He probably had already gone through his bar mitzvah, so now he was able to start speaking for himself.

Jesus' life as told in each of the gospels, varies. Matthew and Luke describe the birth of Jesus through his baptism. The Gospel of Mark starts with the baptism of Jesus. The Gospel of John tells of the Jesus who was in the beginning with God, the Jesus who was the Word, the Word who became flesh and lived among us. Luke, however, is the only gospel that tells of Jesus as a 12-year-old taking the journey with his parents to Jerusalem for the annual festival of Passover.

Many of you have probably taken trips with your children when they were 12 and older. How were they on the trip? If they were like our children, they tried to stay away from you as much as possible, declaring their independence, to prove

that they could take care of themselves. If there were other children at our campground, our children and the others would play and be in the swimming pool as much as possible. At the end of the day, however, we were all together again as a family for the evening meal. Imagine not being able to find your child at the end of the day, let alone for three days!

So Jesus, the 12-year-old, on this long trek to Jerusalem, would naturally hook up with other children his age and walk and play around with them to help pass the time. There were probably aunts, uncles and cousins also on this trip, so Jesus would probably hang out with them also. If this was a yearly trip and the same people from his home town made it every year, he probably knew other people. So it wasn't odd to Mary and Joseph that they didn't see their son all day, and they returned to Jerusalem figuring he was with others from their town.

It took three days for them to find him, and we can only wonder why it took that long. But they found him. They found him sitting with the teachers in the temple, asking them questions and answering questions that they had. Everyone was amazed at his wisdom and understanding.

But Mary and Joseph were probably not too happy. They asked him why he had not gone home with them - didn't he know how anxious they were at not being able to find him. Jesus answers, maybe as our children might have, "Why were you worried? I knew where I was. I'm fine." They left and I would imagine there were a few words between Jesus and his parents on the way home. It's not surprising to read further that after their return, he "was obedient to them."

Actually, the way Jesus answered them when they found him in the temple was "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" Jesus knew where he was supposed to be, but evidently his parents had forgotten who he was. Remember the angel coming to Mary to tell her of her pregnancy: "He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Remember Elizabeth, Mary's cousin, greeting her as "the mother of my Lord." Remember the shepherds who came to see the baby in Bethlehem who were told that this child was the Savior, Christ the Lord. Had Mary forgotten all these

things? She was probably just so happy to see him she wasn't thinking straight, as we would say today.

Mary knew, but had temporarily forgotten, that Jesus was her child, on loan to her, such as our children are on loan to us. We have been blessed with having them come into our lives, and we bring them up as best we can to become adults and watch them go out into the world. The following is an excerpt from a poem written by Kahlil Gibran, a poet and prose writer in the early 1900s:

“Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself. They came through you but not from you and though they are with you yet they belong not to you.”

We don't know if or when Jesus was aware of who he was, what was special about him, what was expected of him. He was growing into being who God sent him to be. Jesus was taught by his faithful parents, and he celebrated Passover yearly. He would have been instructed and brought up in the Old Testament writings. He had questions he wanted to ask the teachers. He had to live into what it meant to be God's son.

Luke concludes this presentation of Jesus in the temple with the words, “And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.”

Jesus knew who he was and whose he was. He found strength in his daily life and struggles through the presence of God and the Scriptures: “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one. You shall worship the Lord your God and God alone shall you serve.” That same word directed Jesus at every step, from the day he was twelve to the day he died. That same word and abiding trust sustained Jesus from every temptation to let someone other than God define who he was. Even as he was being nailed to the cross, he said the words he might have learned as a child, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” It's similar to what he said in today's reading, “Do you not know that I must be in my Father's house?” Now he is. Forever.

Do you know who you are and whose you are? As Jesus did, we must also figure out who we are and whose we are, not by birth, but by God's generous grace. The most important discovery we can make is to find that our identity is

connected together with the one whom Jesus called “Father” – God. We have all been created with a purpose: to know God and to be loved by God.

It is our hope, as well, that our children will also discover the holiness and awe that speaks of God and that we will be able to “lose” them to its embrace just as Jesus was “lost” by his parents. Our children, after all, are only loaned to us.

Amen