



Chapter 3 Wise

Jesus in the Temple at Passover (Luke 2:41-52 CEB)

Each year his parents went to Jerusalem for the Passover Festival. When he was 12 years old, they went up to Jerusalem according to their custom. After the festival was over, they were returning home, but the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. His parents didn't know it. Supposing that he was among their band of travelers, they journeyed on for a full day while looking for him among their family and friends. When they didn't find Jesus, they returned to Jerusalem to look for him. After three days they found him in the temple. He was sitting among the teachers, listening to them and putting questions to them. Everyone who heard him was amazed by his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him, they were shocked.

His mother said, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Listen! Your father and I have been worried. We've been looking for you!"

Jesus replied, "Why were you looking for me? Didn't you know that it was necessary for me to be in my Father's house?" But they didn't understand what he said to them.

Jesus went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. His mother cherished every word in her heart. Jesus matured in wisdom and years, and in favor with God and with people.

What is wisdom? Is there a clear, black-and-white answer for anything or any decision? Can we make an exactly perfect, wise choice?

Here's a small disclaimer as I begin to attempt to describe what it means to be wise: I have defined wisdom as "Make good, positive decisions; capable of being trusted or depended on," but I am still figuring this out. There was a time in my life when I believed there was a clear and perfect right and wrong, and if I was wise enough and good enough, I would make the right choices and be worthy of God's love. I don't believe this anymore. It would have been easier to try to write this chapter before all of the years of therapy because I would have had a clearer answer.

But that would have been an unwise answer to a very loaded thing.

I have come to accept that wisdom looks different for different people. I have grown to question anyone who thinks they have all the answers. No human has all the answers. No human has finished their work of growing, learning, and waking up.

So, here is my attempt at helping you raise the kids in your care to be good people who are wise; who are people who make good, positive decisions; and who are capable of being trusted or depended on.

In the Book of Luke, we get a glimpse at Jesus' childhood. There are no other canonized writings on Jesus' childhood. (There are writings about Jesus' childhood that circulated in the early church, but none of them made the final draft of the Bible. If you're a Bible nerd like me, you can find a compilation of these writings online at <https://www.sacred-texts.com/bib/lbob/index.htm>.) In Matthew, we read that Jesus between the ages of 0–2 is visited by the magi and Joseph is warned in a dream that they need to seek refuge in Egypt before Herod begins murdering babies. After Herod dies, Joseph moves his family back to their homeland. But there is no commentary on Jesus' experiences as a child refugee nor are there any details on what he did between his move back home and his baptism in Matthew.

But Luke, the great storyteller, gives us some details! Jesus is born in Bethlehem, a town south of Jerusalem. Mary and Joseph take Jesus to the Temple when he is eight days old to dedicate him to God and to the Jewish community. Simeon and Anna proclaim that Jesus is the baby Messiah. Mary and Joseph return to their hometown of Nazareth, and Jesus grows up to be filled with wisdom and God's favor.

Every year, as was the custom of all Jews, Mary, Joseph, and Jesus traveled from Nazareth to Jerusalem for the Passover festival. When Jesus was twelve, just a year shy of his Bar Mitzvah—the special ritual that marks the beginning of adulthood for Jewish youth—the family traveled to Jerusalem like they always did. With all their neighbors, they caravanned south for the special meal and ritual and party.

At the end of the weeklong festival, all of the Jews visiting Jerusalem went home. The folks from Nazareth began caravanning back north. Mary and Joseph assumed their son was with the group, and maybe he had been for a little while. But at the end of the day when they were setting up their tent for the evening, Jesus was nowhere to be found. They went to all of his friends' tents to see if Jesus was with them, but he wasn't with any of his friends. He was gone.

Terrified, Mary and Joseph traced their footsteps looking for their tween. For three days, they ran all over Jerusalem checking with family, checking with friends, checking the markets, checking anywhere that a twelve-year-old boy might go. I am sure there were a lot of tears and anxiety as they continued searching.

Desperate, they go to the Temple. Maybe their son was there.

And wouldn't you know it, he was. There Jesus was in the middle of all the religious scholars, asking questions and telling truth the only way a tween can. Everyone was shocked and impressed by him, including his parents. But Mary, in her fear and frustration, gets angry with her son. Mary must have thought she had raised him better than to take off without letting her know where he was going.

Jesus, it seems rather coolly, replies that she should have known he'd be at the Temple, his Father's house.

I imagine she grabbed him by the shoulder and walked his booty home at that.

All the way home, Mary thought and processed and was filled with wonder about her child. He was so smart. He was so tender. He was hers and not hers all at the same time. She watched him grow from a tiny baby, and he was now standing on the cusp of adulthood. The time flew, and Jesus continued to grow in wisdom and years and in God's favor.

This story is filled with so much.

I am always struck by the verses describing Jesus in the Temple, *"He was sitting among the teachers, listening to them and putting questions to them. Everyone who heard him was amazed by his understanding and his answers"* (vs. 46-47). How many times have you been in awe by the things the children in your care say and ask? Sometimes they seem to know a lot more than I do. They catch things I miss. They don't have a lifetime of doing things or thinking things in a certain way. The questions and explanations and meaning-making our children take part in is amazing.

Has your child ever said something or asked something that left you in awe of her or his wisdom?

In my first adult job, I had to fill in as the interim youth director for a short time. Our Wednesday-night programming for children had reliable volunteers, so I led the youth group during this time. The Wednesday-night crowd was made up of six to eight middle school girls. I had read *Doing Girlfriend Theology* by Dori Grinenko Baker and decided we would try out the practice outlined in the book. Each week, one of the girls would bring a true story from her life for us to find where God was working in and through it. It was a really amazing theological refectation for all of us.

One Wednesday night, I heard the most profound understanding of God expressed from a twelve-year-old girl. She said, "God has billions of faces. God is in each and every person. We can see God in each of the billion faces on this earth."

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I imagine the religious leaders felt a bit like I did in that moment. Here was boy Jesus, on the cusp of adolescence, blowing the theological socks off the folks who are experts at the study of God. They probably studied Torah all the time, read the Midrashic texts, and talked together often about how God was at work in their occupied land. But here comes this kid, free of all the baggage and expectation, and he amazes them. Jesus has a faith in God, a passion for their shared faith and history, and has youthful insights that they lost touch with decades ago.

This is wisdom, folks.

Our kids have it innately. But as we grow, we begin to doubt and question who we are and what we are called to do. Sometimes these doubts and questions come from things that are said directly to us. Sometimes these doubts and questions come from being overlooked. Sometimes these doubts and questions come from seeing how others are treated for stepping outside of expectations. Our job is to help them navigate these many voices and help them tune in to hear what their hearts are saying. Our job is to help them stay awake to themselves.

When I met my now-husband, I remember seeing that in him. I wrote him a letter to tell him that one of the things I admired most was how awake to himself and to the world he was. He wasn't stuck in stereotypes of masculinity or unaware of himself. He was awake. He was aware. He could see the world around him and how he fit in it.

That's what I see and hear in this story of Jesus. It's what makes him wise—he is awake and can see the world around him with a fresh perspective, and he knows how he fits into all of it. I wonder if Mary told Jesus the story of his miraculous conception. I wonder if Jesus knew he was the Son of the Most High, Emmanuel. Or if Jesus just thought he was a regular kid who loved rituals, Torah, and debating with the elders. Either way, Jesus was wise and continued to become wise as he grew from this twelve-year-old boy into a man.

Becoming Wise

You won't be surprised that my first suggestion on raising your kids to be wise includes doing this awakening work first with yourself. Our kids learn so much more than we realize by watching and mirroring what we do. Our call to the ministry of parenthood is also a call to learning about who we each are.

When I went to therapy for the first time, I was a WRECK. I didn't know who I was, and I let other people dictate my life. This led to foolish decisions from time to time. I trusted the wrong people, I did things I wasn't proud of, and I ignored my needs. I was operating from a place totally disconnected from and totally asleep to who I am and how I fit into the world. I had to do the hard work of waking up. I had to figure out who I was—what I liked, what I felt, what I stood for—as a young adult. It was hard. It's still hard! But by giving myself this gift, I know I am a better parent. My hope is that Rowan will be able to do a lot of this work of self-discovery as a child because I was able to do it at all.

The next thing I would encourage you to do is to look with fresh eyes on who you are in group dynamics. What is your role in your family? What sorts of service are you drawn to in your congregation? No need to judge it; just see it. Are you engaging others from a place of authenticity and compassion? If not, what new boundaries are needed? What new areas of service could you support?

With my siblings, I am the Type-A perfectionist oldest child. I have taken on the role of Mama Bear my entire life. I overperformed in caretaking responsibilities. When I finally saw the ways this overperforming was affecting me and my siblings, I realized I had to draw back my overstepping and bossing. My siblings needed the space to learn who they were and how they wanted to be in the world. They don't need me to tell them how to do everything! We didn't have a conversation about it. I stop interjecting when they talk to me about their lives, listen well, and remind them often that I am always in their corners cheering them on. That is my role as their sister.

As a mom, I get to be the Mama Bear. I have to set boundaries with Rowan to keep him safe. I get to take care of him. I get to show him how to attune to his needs and the needs of others. That is my role as his mom. As he grows, we will continue to negotiate the boundaries of caretaking together.

Helping Our Children Become Wise

As you model the work of becoming wise, you will show your children the ropes. But here are some practical ways you can help your children.

Help your children tune in to their feelings and their bodies.

Very early in your child's life, they processed every bit of information through all their senses. They held things and licked things. They observed and listened to everything. You might have even gotten frustrated by how often they were "getting into" everything. They experienced the world with their bodies. Their bodies told them when they were hungry, sad, sleepy, enjoying something, and frustrated. That body knowledge set off feelings—sometimes really big feelings.

That body knowledge is wisdom. It ensures that your child survives in this world! As they grow, it is our job to help them understand what they are feeling and to help them notice how these feelings show up in their bodies. When Rowan is frustrated he can't walk, he scrunches up his face and flaps his arms. I tell him, "I can see you're frustrated! Your face is scrunched and you're flapping those strong arms. I know you want to be able to walk right now, and it's frustrating that you can't. You will soon, though! Look at all the things you have already learned to do!" My hope is that I will get comfortable helping him identify what he's feeling and how he is responding to it, because one day in the future, he's going to be angry and I want to help him process that anger in healthy and not harmful ways.

When your child is having some feelings, practice talking it through with him or her. You can also do this with yourself. Our feelings and our bodies are so amazing, and they have so much to teach us about who we are.

Teach your children how to detach with love.

Detachment is a coping skill that helps us remove ourselves from potentially hurtful situations. Sometimes it's easy to get sucked into patterns with others that set us off and then set them off and then set us off again. In order to disrupt this harmful cycle, we need to practice detaching with love. It's a mental step back. It gives us the space to see ourselves and then make better choices.

I learned about detaching with love from 12-Step Recovery. It helps me see what is my responsibility and what is someone else's to do. It keeps me from spinning my wheels and getting sucked into enabling patterns. Detaching with love helps me see things better and then make healthy choices for engaging with others. It helps me see how I fit into the community and what my role should be. You can read more about it here: <https://al-anon.org/pdf/S19.pdf>.

Read everything!

Stories give us the ability to imagine new and amazing futures for ourselves and for our world. Surround your family with books and media that give your children stories to aspire to. Here are a few books I love:

God's Dream by Archbishop Desmond Tutu

God's Paintbrush by Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso

Come With Me by Holly M. McGhee

Growth mindset.

In 2006, psychologist Carol Dweck published the book, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*. In the book, Carol talks about two main mindsets: the fixed mindset and the growth mindset. A person with a fixed mindset believes a person has a fixed amount of knowledge and skill. If you are a runner, it's because you have a fixed amount of ability to run. A person with a growth mindset believes a person can learn and grow because ability and knowledge aren't fixed. If you're not a runner, you can become one by growing that skill.¹

These mindsets affect the way people face challenges. If you believe you have a fixed intelligence, you don't push yourself to grow or learn. You might even feel threatened by learning! If you believe you can grow in intelligence, you will seek out opportunities that push you to learn new things. You see challenges as exciting adventures!

I have memories of being afraid to try knitting because I wasn't already good at this hobby I had never tried before. I didn't want anyone to know I couldn't do something. Instead of accepting that it was a skill I could learn through imperfect attempts, I just didn't try. This is the fixed mindset.

As I got more comfortable with my humanness, I made more space for growth. I didn't need to be perfect, and I gave myself space to learn and mess up and try again. I recently started crocheting. It's something I am not good at, but every time I attempt a new project, I am better! I don't want to give up learning how to do this new thing, because it now brings me joy to learn something new. This is the growth mindset.

Our kids are born with a growth mindset. They have no common sense, and no understanding of reading, writing, and arithmetic. They are growing and learning. But we adults can get in their way of trying new things and failing and trying again when we don't make space for imperfections—our own and our children's. We need safe and secure spaces to be imperfect, to be human; this is necessary for us to grow in wisdom. Give yourself permission to grow. Give your child permission to grow. This leads to wisdom.

¹ <https://www.brainpickings.org/2014/01/29/carol-dweck-mindset/>

Encourage curiosity.

Children are curious by nature. They have an innate drive to explore, figure out how things work, and ask lots of questions. This is such an important skill! I do not want Rowan to merely accept everything as fact, because not everything is. I want him to be curious, to consider that he might be wrong, and to ask more questions. I want to be curious, to consider that I might be wrong, and to ask more questions. This curiosity is important for cultivating wisdom, as well as compassion, empathy, and faith. When your child asks you why—a million times in a row—try really hard not to get frustrated. They literally don't know and are using their skill of curiosity to make sense of the world. Instead of being frustrated, remind yourself that your child is growing the wisdom necessary to be a healthy, well-adjusted human.

Becoming wise is a lifelong process that begins as soon as a child is born. Create safe space for messing up and learning, so you and your children continue to grow in God's love and wisdom.