

Every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover. When he was twelve years old, they went up to the Feast, according to the custom. After the Feast was over, while his parents were returning home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but they were unaware of it. Thinking he was in their company, they traveled on for a day. Then they began looking for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they went back to Jerusalem to look for him. After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him they were astonished. His mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you." "Why were you searching for me?" he asked. "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" But they did not understand what he was saying to them. Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. But his mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil; for thou art with me;
thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

Psalm 23:4

As practicing Jews, every year Jesus' family went up to Jerusalem at Passover time to re-remember when their God freed the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. When Jesus became of age, he went and actively participated in the Feast too. In my faith imagination, I envision him in the temple in worship, praying psalms that their frightened forebears might have prayed during that terrible, fearful time of deliverance and escape into freedom. I am thinking that one of the prayers was psalm 23, the same one that we encourage our confirmands to learn by heart today. In his UCC daily devotional, "We Shall Walk Through the Valley in Peace," Rev. Richard Floyd wrote: The 'shadow of death' is a colloquial saying in Hebrew meaning 'mortal peril'. For many people in our world who are in mortal peril 'the shadow of death, is literal. We might think of the people of Syria, or refugees in leaky boats, or young men in gangs. Or we might think of people we know who are dying. They live in 'the shadow of death'. For most of us, though, 'the shadow of death, is an abstraction. Even so, we need to remember that in the New Testament death is never merely death at the end of life. It is that, but it is more than that. More often in the New Testament, death means a power that insinuates itself into our living of these days, robbing us of the fullness of life that God wants for us. If we then live in 'the shadow of death' the question arises, 'How do we follow Jesus in such a time as this?' Often our real enemy isn't death so much as it is fear. Psalm 23 tells us we can walk through the valley of the shadow of death without fear only because God goes with us. There is a powerful Gospel song by Moses Hogan called, 'We Shall Walk Through the Valley in Peace.' Its words echo psalm 23: 'We shall walk through the valley in peace. There will be no sorrow there. There will be no dying there.' Why? If Jesus himself shall be our leader, we shall walk through the valley in peace."

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Luke 2:46-47

Mutual listening to and questioning of each other is the Jewish way of teaching, learning, and growing in faith. Here, I like to imagine that Jesus might have been asking lots of questions about the ten commandments as found in Exodus 20:1-18.

You shall have no other Gods before me.

You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below.

You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.

Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.

Honor your father and mother.

You shall not commit murder.

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal.

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

Thou shall not covet your neighbor's house, wife, manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey or anything else that belongs to your neighbor.

Did Jesus and the teachers, through mutual dialogue and respect, grow in understanding of the meaning of God's commands? In our teen Sunday 9:00 Bible study we had the opportunity to study them together. One of the review questions that the confirmands could choose to discuss with the Deacons was: 'What are the Ten Commandments of Moses? Which one claims your attention? Why is it important to you?'

In The First Church, Confirmation is a coming of age rite which is rooted in and stems from our religious practices of baptism and dedication. In it, our teens affirm how their immersion in the life of the traditions of the UCC and UUA has helped them grow in Jesus/God/Spirit faith. In her reflection on Acts 8:36: 'As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, 'Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?' Rev. Talitha Arnold wrote in her devotional entitled, "Wake up!": "Are you a god?' the disciple asked the

Buddha. "No," he replied. "Are you a saint?" "No." "Then what are you? The man asked. The Buddha replied, "I am awake." Like the Buddha, the Ethiopian eunuch was awake—awake to new ideas as he read the Prophet Isaiah, awake to his need for someone to interpret the prophet for him, awake enough to find a stream in the desert and know it was a chance for new life. Like the Buddha, the Ethiopian eunuch wasn't a god or a saint. He was just awake. Being awake doesn't come easily in our world of unending distractions. It takes practice. Yet, as author Barbara Kingsolver affirms, it's the most important work we'll ever do. "In my own worst seasons," Kingsolver writes, "I've come back from the colorless world of despair by forcing myself to look hard for a long time, at a single glorious thing: a flame of red geranium outside my bedroom window. And another: my daughter in a yellow dress. And another: the perfect outline of a full, dark sphere behind the crescent moon. Until I learned to be in love with my life again. Like someone recovering from a stroke, retraining new parts of the brain to grasp lost skills, I have taught myself joy, over and over again." The Ethiopian eunuch taught himself joy, too. After his baptism, he "went on his way rejoicing" —a sure sign of being truly awake.'

Luke's story about Jesus' heart to heart talk with the teachers in the synagogue ended with parents saying: 'Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you.' "Why were you searching for me?" he asked. "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" But they did not understand what he was saying to them. Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. But his mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.' (vs. 48b-52)

Confirmation is not graduation from church, but rather a coming of age rite in which parents and church members acknowledge our teens' ability to choose the ways in which they would like to be involved in church life in order to grow in faith. On Confirmation Day, we ask God to bless them with joy, as they continue in their journey of faith, growing as Jesus did, in wisdom, stature, and favor with God and people.