

Sermon for the Second Sunday after Christmas January 4, 2026 jj
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✠ sdg ✠

Did Jesus have a Bar Mitzvah? As I understand it, the ceremony wasn't done in Palestine until several centuries after our Lord's Epiphany in the flesh to this world. Also, Luke wrote specifically that Jesus was 12 years old in our reading today, and the age that a boy becomes a "Bar" that is, a son, of a "mitzvah" or commandment is actually the age of 13. The third evangelist may have gotten some details of the story we read today from a possible conversation with an elderly Mary looking back on this significant event in her Son's life, but the Holy Spirit is clearly at work here in this reading, giving us a crucial window into how our salvation actually works. It's the perfect prelude to the themes of Epiphany, which officially begins in our Church Year in two days on January 6.

It's tempting to use the occasion of this reading to delve into the challenges and heart-stopping panic-filled moments of parenting, the example of perfect obedience found in the young man Jesus that we should follow, and the untapped mysteries of the all-knowing Son of God humbling Himself somehow to be able to grow in wisdom and stature. Those are all worthy topics to consider, but I think this episode in the youthful Savior's career is included in our Bibles for a higher reason. And I think the illustration of the bar mitzvah, combined with our catechism's explanation of the Creed, may shed some light.

On the surface, the bar mitzvah functioned as a mere rite of passage, a sign that you're entering adulthood, and I realize for many Jewish communities in the last 50 years,

they've added a bat mitzvah, for 12 year old girls, but I will stick for now to the original example. A lot of social customs have clouded its original theological intent, which is something you can argue similarly for how many Lutherans have come to regard Confirmation over the past few generations. For a bar mitzvah, it's much more than finally taking your turn to read the Torah, that is, the Scripture scroll.

The boy reading Hebrew in a Jewish public service is at the same time making a commitment to that Divine Word. He is separating from the moral authority of his own father and mother and joining himself to the Bible as his sole accountability before God. With a blessing traditionally spoken by his father, the boy is now expected to tie the commandments literally to his forehead and straps around his arm, as a reminder of Moses' words in Deuteronomy. He now has a clear duty to fulfill his identity as a son of the commandment, he is himself called a bar mitzvah, an obligation from that point forward to walk, speak and think as one called into the kingdom of Almighty God.

Who better to fulfill the bar mitzvah, with all its rights and obligations pertaining thereto, than Jesus Himself? I think Luke is leaning in that direction also, even if the good Doctor had never even heard of that Jewish ceremony as we observe it today. First, he makes a point to include Christ's age of 12, one year for every tribe of Israel. It also points forward to the selection of twelve apostles to bring the Word to the entire Church. Then, the Evangelist points out to us that Mary and Joseph are taking

Jesus to Jerusalem for the yearly Passover celebration. This, too, is no mere ritual but a solemn festival with loads of preaching that would have specifically tied the death of the Passover lamb to the promise of a Savior whom God will send in His Name as the Divine Redeemer of all the world.

I remain convinced that even at the age of 12, especially with His mention of His “Father’s house” and telling Mary “he must be about His Father’s business,” Jesus Christ was aware of His mission to offer up His life as the redeeming price, the offering of young Isaac in which Abraham was prevented by the Angel, would come to fruition when He, firstborn Son of Mary, would be nailed to the cross in two decades’ time. One rabbi even claimed that the lavish feast Abraham gave for Isaac’s so-called “weaning” was actually intended to make his long-promised heir a bar mitzvah, a sign that Isaac is holder of the Divine promise of blessing for all nations. I’d say he’s on to something, but to point it even more clearly to Isaac’s Messianic descendent, Jesus, the true Bar Mitzvah who was the One ever genuinely worthy of the title.

Not only did Jesus willingly assume the entire Commandments and obeyed them perfectly, He gladly accepted their deathly consequences for others who had broken those Commandments, indeed, the punishments for the sins of everyone who has ever lived in human history, past, present and future, were laid on Christ, the true Passover sacrificial lamb. He left the Father’s heavenly throne, gave His precious Mother into the care of His beloved disciple, and He went up alone, not to a mere reading bench to recite the Scripture, but ascended up a horrid cross in utter agony and shame, in order to fulfill the Scripture and

pronounce in the midst of His pain that it is all totally complete.

Not only did He tie the Word to His head and arms, but He is the only one who came through on the real meaning of that symbolic gesture and performed that Word perfectly. Only Christ walked, talked and thought as the perfect Son of God and Son of Mary. He received His heavenly Father’s blessing in His Baptism, which we will highlight next Sunday, but also received the Father’s charge of accountability, and became Himself responsible for all the hurt that you have caused, and all the hurt that has been done to you. Jesus is the One and Only Bar Mitzvah, because only He took that Commandment and removed its curse and brought its blessing upon you, just as He did for Abraham and all nations.

Did Jesus impress the teachers of God’s Word with His enlightened answers rivaling the Wisdom of great King Solomon? Sure He did. But He also demonstrated for you that He was the true Bar Mitzvah, Son of the Commandment, when He reminded His Mother and legal father Joseph, that He must be in His Father’s house, and tend to His Father’s business. That’s what brings you into God’s presence for His gifts today, and assures you of everlasting life, and resurrection in the world to come.

In the Name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.