

Monica Parker asked children a series of questions about God and their answers were published in her book, *OMG! How Children See God*. Some of their answers include:

Who is God?

I think God is a big hug that goes all around the world. Liam, 5

I believe that God is everything. He is our ruler, he is our father, and he is our friend. Stephany, 12

God is a really, really famous spirit. Leo, 5

What does God Look Like?

God is so beautiful you can't see him. Rebecca, 6

It's a big secret what God looks like, because he's one of us. Cole, 8

God needs someone to take his picture so we'd know what he looks like. Maybe he could do a selfie. Abby, 7

What can God do?

Anything. Lorelei, 7

Create more things. Give love to people. He can do anything. Brooke, 6

Change the world. Daphne, 6

He makes the trees, water, everything. James, 8

God can grow you and he can dance, but he cannot type. Piper, 5

Oh those precocious kids, including **Jesus**. **That's what we are talking about** today—Jesus as a child and as he grows up to begin his ministry. Let us pray:

One of my summer jobs was working on 1- 800 Hershey, the information line for the Hershey Entertainment and Resort Company, which runs Hershey Park and several hotels. This was back in **the 80's so no smart phones for quick information**—instead people would call the 800 number—from home, because mobile phones were pretty rare too.

One night, I took a call from a family. They were from Philadelphia, about 2 hours from Hershey. It was a large family and they had driven from Philly to Hershey in three vans, spent a fun day in the park and then returned home that same day. And when they arrived home, at around 11 pm, they realized that one of the children, a 5 year old, was missing.

Everyone was sure the child was in the other van and it wasn't until they were back in Philly and everyone got out of all three vans that they realized one of the children was missing—this was two hours after the park closed. Two hours during which no one had seen this 5 year old. The mom was, understandably, in a complete panic and dad was already on the road heading back to Hershey. They were beside themselves.

Mary and Joseph had to be beside themselves even more than that family from Philly because while knowing your child was alone for 2 hours would seem an **eternity**, **Mary and Joseph's child was alone now a full day**.

It would be overnight and another day before they would get back to Jerusalem to find him. And then it took 3 more days to find him, 5 days altogether that their child was on his own. Not surprisingly they were beside themselves, Mary and Joseph. When they finally found him, sitting calm as can

be with the scholars at the temple, Mary responded much as I would have, with anger: "How could you do this to us? Do you know what we've been through these last 5 days? We've looked everywhere for you."

Jesus rather cheekily replied, "why were you looking for me? You should have known I'd be at my father's house."

The thing was, the scholars and priests and others, they were amazed by the young Jesus. They were amazed at his wisdom, at his insight. His desire for knowledge and his wisdom was far beyond his years—or how adults usually see the wisdom of 12 year olds.

The rest of Jesus' childhood and even his young adulthood is summed up in a short verse: "Jesus matured in wisdom and years, and in favor with God and with people."

The next we see Jesus is at his baptism with John the Baptist. John the Baptist was an upstart of his own. The son of a temple priest, John breaks with tradition. While it's true that the practice of baptism was not entirely new—ritual cleansings were a part of Judaism so that people who might otherwise be unclean and unable to participate in worship at the temple could be cleansed. But John isn't baptizing in the temple—he's baptizing people in the Jordan river. Moreover, he isn't a priest like his father. He has traded priestly robes for the rough clothes of a beggar. So in John we see someone who has rejected the organized religion of his father and instead of being part of the establishment, he challenges them, calls them a den of vipers. And those who receive his message ask him, "what should we do?" And he responded: "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise."¹² Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?"¹³ He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you."¹⁴ Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

To the people, John says repent. Turn your life around, change direction, into this unorthodox ministry, Jesus comes and is baptized. The heavens open and God's spirit speaks, even as a dove descends. This is my son in whom I am well pleased.

As a child on the edge of adulthood, Jesus claims God as his father when his earthly parents found him in the temple. Now, on the edge of his public ministry, God claims Jesus as his son, the beloved.

And the sign for Jesus is a dove. Not a sign of strength and aggression, like a lion or a tiger. Not a bird of prey and majesty, like an eagle or a falcon. A dove—the sign of peace, the sign of God's grace after the flood, remember when the dove returned with the olive branch Noah knew that the time of God's judgment, the time of the flood, would be soon be over and a new covenant, the covenant given to Noah in the sign of the rainbow would be established. Jesus has grown up.

Perhaps you do not see the need to grow up further in these ways. You may be in denial like much of the world where we live. If that is your opinion take a hard look around. How many broken marriages and bad relationships do you see? In the ones you know about, how many of the problems are caused by childishly selfish attitudes and behaviors as well as outright disobedience of God's laws? Why do we keep trying to relive our youth and not grow up? It's called the Peter Pan Principle, we don't want to grow up! The film *Forest Gump* portrays a childlike character who manages to deal with life rather successfully, though not without pain. This may be a sign of our times, trying to say look, we can continue to be childish and still do okay.

I admit, I don't quite understand this resistance to growing up. I remember when growing up, being an adult, was everyone's ultimate goal. Do you remember that? When all the kids would say things like, "I can't wait until I'm grown up." And we couldn't. We couldn't wait to get a job and be independent and get our own car or make our own decisions, decide whether we wanted to eat vegetables or not. Because that was what came from being an adult—you got to do those things.

We see many who are resisting growing up. It's led to a pet peeve of mine—the use of the word "adult" as a verb. As in, "I don't want to adult tomorrow." and "When adulting gets too hard." But now, I see mugs and t-shirts and facebook memes that say things like: I can't adult today.

As if being an adult is something you do, as opposed to something you are. And it's come to mean being responsible, having a job, doing the work of survival and that has become separated from the benefits that come from that work, like making your own decisions, buying a car, choosing where you live and even deciding what's for dinner.

That autonomy, the right to make decisions, and the respect that goes along with that, are all part of being an adult. But now we have an entire generation many of whom have received or think they should receive all of those benefits without ever putting away childish things or becoming an adult. And so they say things like, "I can't adult today," even while they expect the privileges, rights, and respect that is due an adult, as if the rights and privileges can be separated from the responsibility of actually growing up. It drives me and many people more than a little nuts.

Scripture, after all, teaches that growing up, increasing in maturity, is a good thing.

In addition to Jesus growing in wisdom, it was Solomon's prayer—his one request of God. Because his prayer for wisdom was selfless, so he could be a better king and better care for the kingdom, God granted Solomon's prayer and Solomon's wisdom remains legendary.

In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul writes:

¹¹When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.

How did this happen? How did becoming an adult become a burden rather than a privilege and even a goal? I think in part it may be the church's fault because I think it happened in the church first. How many in the church are happy to attend services, but we see fewer and fewer people stepping up to be members? And even among members, we see fewer and fewer stepping up to do the work of church, to be leaders, to accept positions of responsibility—let someone else do it, they say. It is a statistic we have heard for years—10% of the people do 90% of the work. In our own congregation, as long as one or two people will do the work of the trustees, no one else needs to find time or energy to do it. As long as at least one person will take care of hospitality, no one else needs to step up. The problem with this system becomes obvious when that one person goes on vacation and no one else knows how to make coffee or where the keys are.

But there is an even bigger issue here and it is a spiritual issue with two sides: First, someone always has to do the work of the adult—in the household and in the church. Someone has to pay to keep the lights on or to buy the car or to prepare the food.

In the family setting, when parents are providing grown children with cars and food and rent, and the children are getting the benefits of driving the car they want, living where they want and eating what they want, one side is taking all of the responsibility with none of the reward and the other is getting all of the reward without having earned it. It is selfish to claim the benefits of growing up without doing the work that it takes to earn those benefits. Additionally, it means those children never really grow up. I'm not saying don't care for your children but I am saying, don't buy into the argument that they are full-fledge adults entitled to full adult respect if they haven't put away childish thing.

It's the same in the church. When only a few are doing the work of the church, they are over-burdened and they will never get the true benefit of growing in their faith—an ever deepening relationship with God—mostly because they will be too busy and too tired. But growing in our faith is exactly what we are supposed to do.

And in 1 Timothy 4, followers of Jesus are urged to, "Train yourself in godliness,⁸ for, while physical training is of some value, godliness is valuable in every way, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come." We are to grow, to become adults, in our faith, just as we are in life. And that maturity does not necessarily correlate to age. Jesus was to be about his father's work when he was 12—when he stayed in the temple to learn all he could. 1 Timothy goes on to say: ¹²Let no one despise your youth, but set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity. ¹³Until I arrive, give attention to the public reading of scripture, ^[e] to exhorting, to teaching."

It isn't about age—it's about maturity. It's always about maturity. As Christians we are called to grow in our maturity, just as Jesus grew in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor. Because there is a lot of work to do. We are to

be kingdom builders. We are to be followers of the one whose entry in ministry was symbolized with the dove—peace makers, justice bringers, care givers. This is the work, not of a few, but of all Christians as we mature and enter into Christian adulthood. At the end of the Christmas services I ended with this blessing: When the song of the angels is stilled, when the star in the sky is gone, when the kings and princes are home, when the shepherds are back with their flocks, then the work of Christmas begins:

to find the lost,

to heal the broken,

to feed the hungry,

to release the prisoner,

to rebuild the nations,

to bring peace among all peoples,

to make music in the heart.

To follow Jesus is to grow, to take on, willingly, joyfully, more responsibility, to awaken within that deep relationship of mutual love and pleasure, to join in **God's peace movement today**—an adventure of protest, hope, and creative, nonviolent world-transforming change.