**Genesis 32:22-32**

22The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. 23He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. 24Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. 25When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob’s hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. 26Then he said, ‘Let me go, for the day is breaking.’ But Jacob said, ‘I will not let you go, unless you bless me.’ 27So he said to him, ‘What is your name?’ And he said, ‘Jacob.’ 28Then the man said, ‘You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.’ 29Then Jacob asked him, ‘Please tell me your name.’ But he said, ‘Why is it that you ask my name?’ And there he blessed him. 30So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, ‘For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.’ 31The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip. 32Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the thigh muscle that is on the hip socket, because he struck Jacob on the hip socket at the thigh muscle.

**John 2:1-11**

1On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. 2Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. 3When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, ‘They have no wine.’ 4And Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.’ 5His mother said to the servants, ‘Do whatever he tells you.’ 6Now standing there were six stone water-jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. 7Jesus said to them, ‘Fill the jars with water.’ And they filled them up to the brim. 8He said to them, ‘Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.’ So they took it. 9When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom 10and said to him, ‘Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now.’ 11Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him. 12After this he went down to Capernaum with his mother, his brothers, and his disciples; and they remained there for a few days.

One: Holy Wisdom. Holy Word.

**All: Thanks be to God.**

**Prayer of Illumination**

Light of the world,

your good news is for all people.

In this day’s reading and proclamation,

attune our ears to hear your life-giving Word.

Open our hearts to receive your blessing,

that we may bear your light in our lives,

giving witness to your glory

and strength. **Amen.**

I remember it like it was yesterday – the day that I boarded the plane to head to Australia for my study abroad semester that turned into a half-year time away from home.

The elation I’d felt a mere three months earlier

when I boasted to my mom over her birthday dinner, “Happy Birthday, I’m going to Australia in the Spring!” had dissipated and I was nearly paralyzed with fear.

My then boyfriend (now spouse) placed an envelope in my hand and hugged me,

said to me “don’t read this until you’re out of the country,” and turned me over to my mom

who then almost pushed me into line at the A security gates in at Charlotte Douglass International Airport.

I was terrified to get on that airplane even though I knew I wanted to go,

and my mom, despite all the anxieties welling up inside of her to put her daughter on a plane for a semester more than 17,000 miles away from home,

pushed me because she knew that I *needed* to go.

Twenty years ago *today* I was on campus at the University of Newcastle in New South Wales, Australia.

It was my first time being “away from home,” because like many of my students at UKIRK Greensboro,

I chose to go to school right down the road from home at the University of South Carolina.

While I lived on campus and rarely saw my family members who lived 16 minutes away door to door, there was much about school that was familiar to me and it made me feel safe.

So heading to Australia was *huge* to me and my family.

I joke that I chose to go to Australia because it was the farthest away from home that I could get where English was still the primary language.

I guess I thought that being in an English-speaking country would still make me feel at home.

It was admittedly one of the Top 5-hardest-times-of-my-life, while simultaneously being a Top 8-best-time-of-my-life event.

I needed to go.

*It was time.*

We have two familiar stories as our texts this week, and yet I want us to look past the familiarity.

New Testament scholar and Preaching Professor Dr. Karoline Lewis challenges her students to look beyond the obvious.

About our John text she says,

“the miracle itself is not really what we are supposed to see, as miraculous as it is.”[[1]](#endnote-1)

So, I want us to look at these texts today through the lens of young adults.

The ones who are in our congregations, in our schools, in our workplaces, in our homes, and in our campus ministries.

In her book *iGen: Why Today’s Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy – and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood and What That means for the Rest of Us*, Dr. Jean Twenge offers for us that statistics are showing that,

“iGen teens are less likely to go out without their parents.”[[2]](#endnote-2)

“[They are] growing up slowly, taking longer to embrace the responsibilities and pleasures of adulthood.”[[3]](#endnote-3)

A similar statistic was shared in the book you’ve been reading together, *Growing Young.* In Chapter 3, “Empathize with Today’s Young People” we are told that:

“…in comparison with previous generations, today’s journey toward maturity often seems to move in slow motion…The median age for marriage is now 26.5 for women and 28.7 for men, both of which are more than five years later than 50 years ago.”

Why is that, you ask?

The authors state:

“economic uncertainty,

an increased assumption that a college degree is a universal necessity,

more young people pursuing higher education … because of that necessity for finding jobs …

and an increase in students seeking graduate degrees,

verses previous generations of young adults being plunged into the workforce right after high school.”[[4]](#endnote-4)

And yet, these same students who are starting life later, are starting life earlier, too.

They have had access to the world at their fingertips since the day they were born, and many of them have been on social media since before they were born thanks to their parents.

“At 15, young people carry more access to the world via the mobile devices in their pockets than their parents {and I’ll add, grandparents} could ever fathom as teenagers. And yet, at 25, they still rely on those same parents to fund the mobile plan that gives them that constant access to the world. Fifteen is the new 25. Twenty-five is the new 15. Yes, it is that complicated.”[[5]](#endnote-5)

This access to the world only exacerbates the three ultimate questions of every young person:

Who am I?

Where do I fit?

What difference do I make?

The students who are leaving our churches and our homes after high school, and entering the world of adulthood, college, and the workforce, are decidedly in no hurry to grow up,

but they *are* in increasing demand of feeling like they are safe and belong and make a difference.

Twinge notes that 29% of this generation doesn’t affiliate with a religion and 86% of them worry about finding a job.

They “have no patience for inequality based on gender, race, or sexual orientation.”

And they are “at the forefront of the worst mental health crisis in decades, with rates of teen depression and suicide skyrocketing since 2011.”[[6]](#endnote-6)

(Please note, this was written *before* the COVID-19 pandemic, which has only seen the numbers worsen on college campuses nationwide.)

Even right here in our backyard in Greensboro.

Today’s emerging adults are running a longer race to adulthood than any generation before, and in that race they are bumping into potholes filled with:

Pervasive stress, invasive digital technology, sexual experimentation, adult abandonment and disappointment, jaded realism, cultural pluralism in a society fighting against it, and faith on the periphery.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Twinge notes that in 2017,

22% of 12th graders said they never attended religious services, which is a very low bar…

Attending a service once a year still counts as going.[[8]](#endnote-8)

These young people,

the ones who feel safest on outings with friends and parents all together in one group,

are the same ones who feel left out and lonely,

often battling FOMO (fear of missing out).

Our society, our churches even, have not been kind to them as they navigate all of it.

As I sat in my library this week penning this sermon,

surrounded by priceless photography that I brought home with me from Australia,

I realized again that I am ever grateful for the opportunity I had to be an exchange student.

My “down under” was life-altering in so many ways.

I think the most prominent alteration for me was where and how I attended church.

For the *first time* in my life, I learned how to worship with a community that was more than four walls and a steeple.

Maybe it’s time for us to realize this, too.

Let’s all think for a moment:

Have you ever *regularly* worshipped in a church that didn’t meet in a building that looks like the one we’re in today?

Maybe it was a gym, or a school cafeteria, or a lecture hall on campus…

As part of her research, Twenge interviewed a number of college students who grew up in a church but parted ways due to their faith divides.

Sometimes it was over sexual orientation, sometimes it was over skin color, sometimes it was as simple as the times of day the services were held.

One student offered,

“it’s very important to me that my relationship with God and my relationship with religion is sound in my own mind instead of trying to find fulfillment through the church.”[[9]](#endnote-9)

I love the sass that Jesus gives to his mom in our text today – it reminds me again that he was human!

When the wine runs out at the week-long wedding festivities, Mary encourages Jesus to do something about it,

and Jesus responds with what seems like the biblical version of an eye roll.

*“Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.’ 5His mother said to the servants,*

*‘Do whatever he tells you.’”*

Jesus is not ready to claim his ministry,

but Mary recognizes in him that it’s now.

His debut can’t wait any longer.

Whether it’s a gentle encouragement or a dramatic push,

Mary sees that Jesus needs to take action.

He needs to claim his identity for himself.

*It’s time,* she believes.

Studies are showing that even today’s religious teens are adhering to a more individualistic version of faith.

This view of religion embraces a belief in God, but also focuses on the importance of happiness, feeling good about oneself, and relying on God for fixing problems.

Today, people are noticing a disconnect between their church and what they experience outside of church in the world, including in science, politics, and pop culture.

If ever there’s a time for us to be sharing the stories of faith, it’s *now*.

Not being from Greensboro, my children’s friends like to remind us that we’ve lived in a lot of houses since we came here.

Renting, right?

When we finally bought our house, we began unpacking the boxes we didn’t open when we were in our “temporary housing.”

And what happens when you do that?

You find things you’ve not seen in years.

One afternoon when unpacking boxes of books, I stumbled across the journal that I kept during my time in Australia.

It was a gift from my dear friend and sorority big sister, Katie.

I had to sit down and read it because – break from unpacking – but also because I had never before, and I have not ever again sense, kept a journal.

I am not a journal-er.

If you’ll indulge me, I’d like to share with you a few things that I wrote during my time away from everything I knew at age 20.

An excerpt from February 22, 2003 –

“In the last few days I have: visited the campus doctor for an infection, cried at a bar, planned a bible study, hopefully figured out classes, worked out three times, cooked dinner with “the girls,” and been very homesick.”

These words hit me, but it was the words from February 23, 2003 that took my breath away:

“Newcastle – Day 7. Not much really happened today. We all gathered at Barra this morning and decided upon a day of shopping. It has been raining a lot lately, so the beach was out of the question. Maybe another day?

Tonight, Erin, Reed, and I went to UniChurch and met a lot of other Christians here on campus. Rather than choosing to partake in Punch Bowl, I went to partake in a worship service that spoke to me. The topic was: What is a Christian? from 1 John 1. Greg, the pastor, spoke about God’s character and then helped us to analyze our own character. After the service we had time to speak with Greg and other NCS (Newcastle Christian Students) about Christian Life on campus. It felt wonderful to be around these people.

Although not much happened today, all-in-all it was a good day. I think I am finally starting to feel more comfortable about who I am among all of these new people.

Praise God!”

It was during my time with UniChurch where I learned to become myself as a child of God.

And no, it’s not lost on me that our denomination’s name for campus ministry is UKirk, meaning… University Church.

Ministry to college students both in our congregations and beyond the walls of our churches is a lot like Jacob receiving a blessing from the one with whom he wrestled all night long.

Our students leave our walls after their senior youth Sunday and they wrestle with God.

They learn to become who they are made by their Creator to be.

They ask themselves what *they* believe about their faith, and struggle when it may seem different from what they were taught as a child.

It’s in college ministry that students often claim new identities for themselves, much like Jacob when he receives his new name.

“The whole struggling, questioning, name-changing encounter can be read as a blessing, albeit a bruising one.”[[10]](#endnote-10)

Rev. Dr. Wil Gafney reminds us that Jacob “wrestles with one whose blessing matters.”

Our students are doing the same.

It takes a big leap of faith for our children to leave the nest, whether it’s to travel abroad for a semester, or move down the road into an apartment or dorm room.

Knowing that we have a generation of students who are more connected to home than ever,

which often means being more connected to home congregations (or lack thereof) than ever,

it’s monumental for students to find a faith community that they call their own,

that has little to no ties to their families, and that blesses them with the space to grow as they are willing and able.

Rev. Dr. Lewis notes that “in the sign that is water into wine, perhaps we might even experience something that we need to know about ourselves.”

At UKirk we strive to offer the space for students to receive the abundant grace that is Christ turning ordinary water into the most delicious wine.

We do this through monthly worship with communion.

We do this through studying God’s Word together and working to serve others alongside one another.

We do this through nights of supper and silly games.

And, we look to finally return to doing this through their favorite time – our Wednesday lunches.

Our community says that they most feel the abundant grace of God in the homemade meals that our Salem Presbytery churches bring to our ministry house so that they can gather around the table *as themselves* *but in community* to feast together.

I ended up having one of the hardest, significant, life-altering, and best times of my life once my plane landed in Sydney and I made it through customs.

For the next six months I would come into my own, I would learn a lot about myself and about my relationship with God, and I would learn that I could do the hard things, even when they seemed scary.

I learned that I needed to take the leap of faith, meet the people I met, learn about new cultures, and travel to the places I traveled – even when the savings account was dangerously low. I learned that needed God to transform me.

Jesus needed his mom to push him and for the disciples to listen to her first, because he wasn’t ready to do what he needed to do.

Jacob needs a blessing so desperately that he won’t give up.

Jacob limps away from the site of his transformation.

He will never be the same again.

Each step he takes is now marked by divine touch.[[11]](#endnote-11)

The next generation is leaving the nest, learning about who they are, becoming comfortable with being adults apart from the adults that raised, and they’re willing to do this all with or without the church being involved.

So, *we* need to be forever changed, Church, because we need the blessing of our youngest members.

We are not the same without them, and we are not the same *because* of them.

Together, let us experience what grace

tastes like,

looks like,

smells like,

sounds like,

and feels like.

Let every step we take as children of God,

caring for children of God,

be marked by the touch of the divine.

*It’s time.*

TGBTG, Amen.

1. “Commentary on John 2:1-11” by Dr. Karoline Lewis in Working Preacher, January 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Twenge, Jean M. *iGen* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster), 2017, p 19. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. ibid, p 18. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Powell, Kara. *Growing Young* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books), 2016, p.97. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. ibid, p 99. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. ibid, p 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Powell, p [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. ibid, p 123 [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. ibid, p 126. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. “Commentary on Genesis 32:22-31” by Dr. Wil Gafney in Working Preacher, July 2011. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Gafney, 2011. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)