

“What Child is This?”

Luke 2:41-52

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The First Sunday after Christmas

Prayer: In the aftermath of it all, we gather in the quiet splendor of this place on this frozen morning, wondering what we are to do now. Christ the Savior has indeed been born. Through the reading of scripture, the singing of familiar carols and the offering of our prayers, may Christ be born in each of us just a little more this day. We ask this in his name and for his sake. Amen.

“But his parents did not understand what he said to them.”

Twelve years of age is perhaps a little early for that to start happening. Usually the child has to be in the mid teens before parents start failing to understand their children—before the parents begin to think that that maybe someone else is occupying the heads and bodies of these people who otherwise resemble your children in every way. Because whoever they are or are becoming, there are times when as a parent, you just don’t understand them.

Life used to be so much simpler when you made their decisions for them and told them what to do. You thought long and hard about their futures and knew what would be best for them, and you did that as a parent because you love them and what only what’s best for them. And then one day you realize that when you weren’t paying attention, someone changed the rules on you and now you’re playing a new and different kind of game that requires learning a whole new set of rules.

In part it happens because kids have a way of growing up too fast. One day you are teaching them to read and the next day they are reading things that make your hair curl. And it seems as if Jesus was growing up too fast as well, especially based on today’s text.

Like it’s true that parents always have a lot more photos and video highlights of the first born children than they have of the children who came later, there are definitely some missing gaps in the story of Jesus’ childhood.

We go from a baby in a manger to Jesus at twelve years of age and this scene of a lost Jesus being discovered by his parents in the temple. And it’s odd, really, given our fascination with the backgrounds and childhoods of famous, powerful people. Where’d they come from? What influences in their life caused them to turn out the way they did? But given our fascination with that and our curiosity perhaps, with the childhood of Jesus, the four gospels give us this one single story about Jesus being found by his parents in the temple. And after this one strange story, there will be an 18 year silence as Jesus continues to grow in wisdom, years, and in divine and human favor, as the text says.

The apocryphal gospels attempted to supplement this silence about Jesus' childhood by supplying some rather astonishing stories that never made their way into our Bible. Stories about Jesus as a young boy making sparrows out of clay and then breathing life into them and watching them fly away. Or there's the one about a young playmate who is getting on Jesus' nerves and so he strikes him dead, only to resurrect him in time to go home for supper, I suppose.

Now, if this single story we have in Luke seems a bit mild compared to those apocryphal tales, this story at least shares their intention of demonstrating that from the very beginning, there was something unique and different about this child. Even his parents seem bewildered by him.

We do know that Jesus was raised in a religious household. The text says they had gone to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, something they did every year. And you can imagine the fun of those annual visits as you traveled with other families and with relatives, aunts and uncles and cousins—the laughter and the games that got played along the way. Then the excitement of the crowded big city.

But when Jesus was twelve, he apparently decided to stay behind in Jerusalem and presumably in the temple where he could learn about his religion. So when everyone else in his traveling party set out for home, Jesus quietly remained behind. And when Mary and Joseph finally discovered that he was not with their traveling companions, you can only imagine how they must have felt. One can only imagine the sheer panic that must have set in as they searched everywhere and tried to retrace their steps. Would they ever find him or had something terrible or unthinkable happened to him? And sometimes it's the not knowing and the uncertainty that is the worst.

So Mary and Joseph returned to Jerusalem and for three days, searched the city. Finally, they made their way to the temple, perhaps to pray for his safety or maybe because they suspected he'd be there? And when they arrive, they discover him there, surrounded by the teachers, listening to them and asking questions. They were astonished, the text says. But that sounds like a nice polite way of saying that after finally laying eyes on him after he'd been missing for four days, they most likely experienced that strange combination of relief, joy and yet absolute rage for what he'd put them through.

Mary breaks into the tutorial that is taking place and says to him, "Why have you treated us this way? Your father and I have been searching for you with great anxiety!" And Jesus responds to them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my father's house?"

And his parents did not understand what he was saying to them. Who would understand that? What parent would be satisfied with that answer coming from their child?

I suppose the way in which we view this story depends upon the lens through which it's seen. If taken from Jesus' point of view, he has divine work to do in his life. He needs to

prepare himself for his life's mission and work. And his reference to "needing to be in [his] father's house," while a little vague, does imply that his commitment to God is so great and all encompassing, that even his relationship with his parents takes a backseat to his relationship with God. Nothing and no one is more important to Jesus than is God, which is admirable.

If the story is seen through the human eyes of his parents, however, the story becomes a whole lot more troubling. In addition to Jesus' wisdom and total devotion to God, another theme emerges here and it will be seen throughout Jesus' life, namely that no one will ever fully understand what his life and mission and message are all about. Not those he encounters along the way, not even those he heals, not the Twelve, and not even Mary, his mother, understands her son or what his life is going to be about.

The old carol somehow captures the essence of it.

*Sweet little Jesus boy
They made you be born in a manger
Sweet little holy child
We didn't know who you were.*

*Didn't know you'd come to save us Lord
To take our sins away
Our eyes were blind, we could not see
We didn't know who you were.*

Well, at 12, Jesus wasn't a total smart aleck. He obediently went with his parents and headed for home. We can only wonder what the conversation was like on the journey home. A lot of long, awkward silences I imagine. But Jesus is in that strange place where parents and children eventually arrive at the same time, namely negotiating the delicate dance between childhood and adulthood—between knowing when you are still dependent on your parents and when you are mature enough to do things on your own.

And for parents it's the same struggle between knowing when the child is mature enough to be trusted on their own and when the child still needs your guidance and input. It's the challenge of knowing how to be a good parent when the rules of the game have been changed on you and your child now needs you in different ways.

The text says that Mary "treasured" all these things in her heart, which is more than a bit confusing. After all, she was filled with great anxiety and now mixed emotions after finding him and feeling like he'd treated both of them poorly. The use of the word treasure, however, does not imply that she valued as special memories those four awful days of frantic searching and sleepless nights, or the indifferent way in which Jesus treated them when they found him. What is implied in the term treasured, is that she kept these things in her heart. She kept them in her heart where she would think about them from time to time. She'd revisit those days as they would surely haunt her for the next 21 years and then beyond.

Because as his mother, as the one who gave him birth and who fed him at her breast and held him in her arms—as the one who sang to him as a baby and played with him and taught him so many things, she had mothered him in ways that only a mother can understand. She loved him so much.

Like everyone else, however, Mary and Joseph must wait to see what will happen to him—who their son will become—how his life will unfold. Will he experience good fortune or will tragedy come upon him?

And like all parents everywhere, Mary and Joseph will have to wait and watch and pray, trusting that the lessons and values and the love they instilled in him as he increased in wisdom throughout his growing up years, will serve him well when the difficult times come and he needs extra strength for the journey.

It's really all any parent can do for their children as we watch them make their way in an uncertain and unknown the world.

Amen.