

Boy in the Temple

Luke 2:41-52

Sunday, January 5, 2025

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Another Christmas has come and gone. The parties have been celebrated, the gifts exchanged, and if you're really on the ball, the tree has been taken down and the ornaments packed away. We're on to a new year. And like many Americans, this year we might get serious about eating better, getting a little more exercise, and maybe even losing a few pounds in the process. Am I right?

This is where we in the church slow down just a little. We have twelve days of Christmas, after all. It runs from December 25 to January 6, the traditional day of Epiphany and the coming of the Magi. We take some of our cues from the early chapters of Luke. After an angel announces the birth of a special baby, Mary is perplexed and asks: "How can this be since I am a virgin?" After the shepherds come to visit the newborn, Mary takes time to ponder the swirling turn of events. Clearly, nothing happening in the Christmas story is getting past Mary's attention.

And so, even as the surrounding culture rushes ahead to 2025, Mary invites us into a contemplative space, to do some pondering of our own. For instance, why is Christmas so important to us anyway? And what might Jesus' early years have to tell us about who he was and why he had come?

The stories of Jesus' early years remind me of a recent letter from Bishop Regina Hassanally of the SEMN Synod. Bishop Regina shared that her six-year-old son sometimes struggles to fall asleep at night. Frightening thoughts come into his mind. His mother checks on him. Before she leaves, he grabs her hand and whispers, "Mom, will you stay?" Bishop Regina says, "Never once has he asked me to do anything other than to stay. Perhaps he knows that staying is the best I can do." Like Mary, Bishop Regina ponders, "In a season when the darkness falls over us, I am struck by the hope held in the hand of my six-year-old son as he whispers in the night, 'Stay with me, Mom.'"

Luke mentions a few things about which Mary may have pondered. Jesus was being raised in a religious household. Picture them giving thanks before meals and saying prayers at bedtime. Last week we heard of Jesus' circumcision on the eighth day. And at six weeks, he was brought to the temple, as a first-born son, to be dedicated to the Lord. As Jesus was getting older, I can imagine him

having nights when he too needed his mother close, close enough where he could take her hand and say, “Stay with me, Mom.”

The years passed. In a Jewish household, it was the father’s job – not the rabbi’s – to teach the children the Torah. At age 12, Jesus would have had a bar mitzvah. Much like our rite of confirmation, he would have studied the basics of the faith laid out in the law of Moses.

As you probably know, the law required an annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem for Passover. It was common for families to travel caravan style, both to encourage each other and to provide protection along the way. The caravan likely included extended family – aunts, uncles, and cousins - which meant Jesus would have had more freedom to venture away from his parents. As an emerging young adult, he would have had a chance to explore the Jerusalem marketplace, the city streets, and the temple. No doubt that felt good to him. He was growing up, after all, and spreading his wings.

After the week-long Passover celebration, Mary and Joseph somehow lost track of their boy as the caravan started back to Nazareth. It’s easy to focus on their lapse in judgment. But what’s more interesting, I think, is what happened when they realized their son was missing. After finally locating him in the temple, Mary chided him, “Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.” Clearly, they were expecting him to act like their son – an all-too-human boy ready to explore the world, but sometimes getting a bit carried away in the process.

Yet Jesus’ response shows that he was separating himself from them – just a little – and also acting like God’s son: “Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house.” Jesus was soaking up conversation with the religious leaders, even hinting that the temple, which was the house of God, might have felt like a home away from home for him.

For all we know, this may have been Mary and Joseph’s first glimpse that the long-ago promises made about their son were beginning to come to pass, that God really did have plans for Jesus that they could not understand. Perhaps Mary was pondering that in her heart, that any dreams she had for her boy – marriage, settling down to raise a family, working side by side with his father in the family business – any dreams she had for his future were not necessarily hers to dream.

What Mary and Joseph experienced that anxious day in the temple was not unlike what parents everywhere go through: the realization that their children were growing up, becoming their own persons with their own paths, and like it or not, separating from their parents one step at a time. Someday Mary and Joseph would need to let Jesus go, to give him back to God, so he could do what he was meant to do. In fact, perhaps at the core of any parent's fulfillment is realizing that we don't simply belong to each other. Ultimately, we belong to God.

In a sense, baptism – much like the dedication of Jesus in the temple when he was 6 weeks old – is the time when we begin to give a child back to God, and as we do, to let go just a little. It's where we begin to change our expectations that we can somehow control how our children will think and feel and act. And in a larger sense, it's when we choose to trust that God is truly at work in them.

Cathy was a woman in a former congregation of mine in Bloomington. She understood this better than most. Cathy was raising two children. At the time, her older child, a son, was not quite 12, but he definitely had the pre-teen thing going. He was loud, full of energy, and was quite sure he knew just about everything. Cathy took it in stride.

One day, a pastoral colleague of mine asked her – tactfully – how she handled being a mom without going crazy. Cathy responded that when she and her husband were getting their son baptized, the pastor told them, “This is not your child. This is God's child. God has made him just the way he's supposed to be. You are the people whom God has chosen to help him discover who that is.”

Cathy admitted that that was hard to hear. But the longer she and her husband lived with it, the more freeing it became. She added, “He definitely drives me crazy sometimes. But I'm holding God to the promise that he has created the kid that *he* wants, not the kid that *I* want. And it's going to be fun – at least on the better days – to see what God has in mind.” More often than not, the pastor's words gave Cathy the ability to let go of some of her expectations, and to simply appreciate who her son was becoming.

Luke lets us know that after the scolding from his mother, Jesus went home to Nazareth and was obedient to his parents. Over time he increased in wisdom, and in divine and human favor. Young adults being young adults, however, I'm sure there were further opportunities to explore, ask questions, and push

boundaries; times for this emerging young man to develop thoughts of his own. And no doubt, Mary had plenty of things to ponder about her boy along the way.

As Jesus grew and developed, he was about his Heavenly Father's business too, and increasingly so. He learned things about loving and accepting others; about caring for the poor, the hungry, and those who are hurting; about loving God with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength, and loving his neighbor as himself.

The beautiful thing, I think, is to realize that Jesus didn't arrive on the scene a ready-made adult. No, he was born a fragile baby in a cattle shed. He lived among us, was taught the faith as a child, and experienced many of the same growing pains that we do. When he was afraid, he reached out for the hand of his mother. And when he didn't quite live up to his parents' expectations, he sometimes got scolded.

One step at a time, Jesus began to live the life he was meant to live. His parents, like all parents, had to learn – ever so slowly – to let him go. And as they did, he more and more came to realize that ultimately he belonged to God. Amen.