

Luke 2: 41-52 “Growing Up” Rev. Janet Chapman 1/2/22

After all the sweetness of the birth of baby Jesus, the joyful praise and magical moments of angels and shepherds, the baby dedication in the temple with elders Anna and Simeon embracing the one to redeem Jerusalem, our Gospel author Luke gives us this story about the boy Jesus in the temple. The story is summed up in verse 52 which says, as you heard, Jesus increased in wisdom and in years and in divine and human favor. This is a fancy way to say Jesus grew up. We know nothing of Jesus’ childhood except for this one episode, which at first glance may explain the bumper sticker I once saw: “We are only young once... because it is all society can take!” There are certainly other fanciful stories of Jesus’ youth which are told outside the Bible, but this is the only one which made the cut. We can’t help but be curious about those early years – did Jesus help out Joseph in his carpenter’s shop? Did he sometimes accompany Mary on her trips to market? Did Jesus have a best friend or a crush on the girl next door or ever get grounded? The only thing we know is that Jesus stayed behind in the temple with biblical scholars while his family headed home and it scared the daylights out of them.

It is hard for me not to hear this story and think about the movie “Home Alone,” especially in this season. Some of you have probably seen the movie and now there is even a TV commercial featuring comedian Kevin Hart, where once more the mom screams out in panic looking for her son, “Kevin!” In case you may be one of the culturally disadvantaged who haven’t seen the movie, I’ll give you a thumbnail sketch. Around Christmastime, a large family, the McCallisters, are preparing to leave for a vacation in Europe. They plan to get up early in the morning to catch their flight. Unfortunately, during the night the electricity in the neighborhood gets knocked out. Consequently, the alarm clock goes off late. That part of the story is so ingrained in my psyche that to this day, I have several alarms set the night before catching a plane. The McCallister household breaks into chaos as they frantically dress, pack, load up and dash off to the airport to make their flight. Please note that this was not just before 9/11 flight restrictions, it was well before cell phones; so once the plane is in the air, the mother has this haunting feeling she has forgotten to do something. Were all the doors locked? Yes. Was the garage closed? Yes. Was newspaper delivery cancelled? Yes.

With an explosion of realization, one of my favorite actresses, Catherine O'Hara, cries out "Kevin!" In the rush and jumble of leaving, Kevin, their youngest, was left behind. The rest of the movie deals with his antics as he copes with being alone and as he foils the efforts of two bungling burglars from robbing his house. Kevin, who began the movie as a little boy who can't tie his own shoes or pack his suitcase, quickly learns to be independent.

As a child, the movie is great fun; for a parent, it can be our worst nightmare. Like Kevin's family, Jesus' family is knee deep in travel plans as they get ready to depart Jerusalem. They have been to Passover, a joyous celebration where families travel from all over to come together for feasts, music, worship, and holy traditions. Passover was a time to take a breather from the regular routines of daily life and reorient their souls to God; it was a time to remember and celebrate God's miraculous works. It was family time where so many cousins, aunts, and uncles would be together that Mary and Joseph easily assumed Jesus was simply hanging out with the others. On the first night, when everyone gathered at the campsite, they discover Jesus is missing. They return to Jerusalem and search for him for 3 very long days – 3 days not knowing where he is or if he is ok, 3 days of anguish, tears and guilt. Craig Watts invites us to listen in to what they may be thinking, "We should have been paying more attention. We should have been absolutely certain he was with us. How could we have left him there? What rotten parents everyone must think we are." Three agonizing days, a premonition of 3 agonizing days which Mary will endure 20 years later in Jerusalem. But after 3 days of frantic searching, they draw near to the great Temple, turn a corner and there he is. He wasn't crying or worried; he didn't blame his parents for neglecting him. Instead, Jesus is sitting with the teachers asking questions and listening. His parents are more appalled than impressed; like most of us would be, Mary and Joseph are greatly relieved to find out Jesus is all right. Then they don't know what to do first – hug him or yell at him, grounding him for the rest of his life.

I'll never forget the time Mikayla went missing after school in the 6th grade. When she didn't arrive home at her usual time, I first called the school. She wasn't in the office nor could the office reach anyone in the classroom. The secretary indicated that she probably just went home with a friend. I called her friends' homes but no one had seen her. I got in

the car and started retracing her route but she was nowhere to be seen. About an hour after frantic searching, I headed to the school to walk around the campus. There I found her in the cafeteria working with her teacher and a couple students on a project. I couldn't decide who I was madder at – her or the teacher who didn't think to encourage the students to call home before staying late. Both ended up suffering my wrath. So in the heat of the moment, Mary says to Jesus, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." In other words, "Jesus, we've been worried sick about you – you should be ashamed of yourself for making us go through this." I don't know why Mary didn't confront the religious leaders of the temple? After all, where had Jesus slept those past 3 days, how did he eat? Someone must have noticed he was misplaced, out of place, with nowhere to go at the end of the day? So many questions spring from this story. Scott Barton wrote a somewhat whimsical tale about this story, prompting us to stretch our imagination a bit more. He says, "I have many questions about this odd text; Where the soon-to-be teenager's parents were vexed; By the child who went off and then worried them sick, And they scratched their heads, saying, "What makes this boy tick?" Oh, why did they travel e'en just for a day, While they thought with the neighbors he'd be on the way? And I wonder just where for three days did he stay? And why such obedience back at the house? Was he loud, in high spirits, or quiet as a mouse? Most of all, I ask why in God's favor he grew? And then how in God's name was this something Luke knew? Like Mary, I treasure these things in my heart, While the text, in another way, mystery imparts."

It is a text of mystery which invites us to wonder and question. It is not a coincidence that two of the Christmas carols we sing today are based on questions composers have about this mysterious child – "What Child is This" and "I Wonder as I Wander." We have so little information about not just the child but about the parents, the adult mentors, who nurtured Jesus in his early years. But one thing is certain, God works within them to cultivate maturity and wisdom. The religious legend and social activist Archbishop Desmond Tutu, whose death we mourned this past week, once said, "You can't choose your family. They are God's gift to you, as you are to them." For some, that truth is easily understood but for others, the family fights and disappointments scar children for the rest of their lives. Finding the places where

family is God's gift can take a lifetime to redeem and accept. Gratefully, it doesn't seem that Jesus had that sort of family. Somehow knowing the wisdom and depth of faith his family held, Jesus responds to his mother's question with another question, a practice he will become quite adept at. He asks, "Why did you seek for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" With that, Jesus begins to broaden the understanding of family and priorities. Whereas it is easy to proclaim the importance of children, parents, and families, Jesus is naming that the living, loving knowledge of God is more important. Without nurturing that connection with God above all else, families will struggle to become the best they can be, they will stumble and often lose sight of their role in relationship to one another and to the Divine found around them. Jesus' response is an invitation to understand better who he is, as mysterious as that may seem to his parents at the time. Hans Kung, great theologian, once wrote, "Understanding someone properly involves learning from them, and learning from someone involves changing one's self."

Questions abound within the mysteries of Jesus' life from beginning to end. But in Jesus' life, like our own, are the unmistakable patterns of God's care and favor, as well as a means towards understanding. If we will but take the time and make the effort to understand someone properly, even this Someone who will become the Prince of Peace, we will learn; we will grow up in wisdom and stature, we will model for our families the way to live in divine and human favor. And ultimately, through understanding and learning from the family of God, we too will embrace with grace and love the response, "Did you not know that I must be in my Heavenly Parent's house?" Amen.