

The Boy Messiah

Luke 2:41-52

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After the Christmas newborn episode that we read on Thursday together, Luke's gospel goes on to say that, "The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him." And then we pick up with our text for today.

Luke 2:41-52 (NRSV)

41Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. 42And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. 43When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. 44Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. 45When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. 46After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. 47And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. 48When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." 49He said to them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" 50But they did not understand what he said to them. 51Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart. 52And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.

Mary and Joseph thought they had lost Jesus. Can you imagine? A pilgrimage to the festival of the Passover, the grand commemoration of the night God "passed over" and spared the firstborn Jews, and Mary and Joseph left their first-born twelve year old in Jerusalem. They did not notice until they had traveled for a full day, reminding us that traveling in their days was done in large groups, and child rearing was done in community. It was not uncommon for others to feed and watch out for the children near them as they traveled. So actually their entire community traveling group had dropped the ball on this one, they left without remembering to check for Jesus, the Son of God savior of the world. Oops.

When they traveled back to Jerusalem, it would appear they did not immediately figure out where he was. They journeyed a day out, a day back, and after another whole day found Jesus – when they finally looked in the temple. So the first question is why did the community leave without Jesus, and the second question is why didn't Mary and Joseph know where to find Jesus? Perhaps it was because Jesus' action, to be so moved by Passover celebration and worship, that he stayed behind in the temple to learn more, was unconscionable. Worship was compartmentalized in the lives of ancient Jews the same way it is for us, you go and then get on with the rest of life. But to stay behind in a house of worship, listening and asking questions as Jesus did for three days, who does that?

Well, the boy messiah does that, apparently, the Word of God in flesh, come to love and save the world, the way this one grew in understanding of God and his own call was by doing this. What the boy messiah embodies for us, in this brief episode, is how we respond to God's saving acts for us. For Jesus had just celebrated the Passover, his last one as a child (remember Jewish tradition was that a boy becomes a man at age thirteen), an occasion to celebrate God's salvation with gratefulness. Jesus' response to the Passover this time was one that must have been filled with awe and wonder at God's activity for the people.

The Greek writer and philosopher Nikos Kazantzakis wrote, "The highest point a human being can attain is not knowledge, or understanding, or virtue, or goodness, or victory, but something greater than all of those, more heroic than all of those. The highest point a human being can attain is sacred awe." The capacity to experience awe lifts us to the highest pinnacle. When we are reverent and humble before the greatness of

God, we are at the highest place a human being can go. This is the remarkable thing that the boy messiah was representing for Mary and Joseph and all of us who hear of it, sacred awe.

Has anything ever led you to be awestruck by God? What did you do with it? Did you savor the moment, or perhaps give thanks? Well, it would appear that Jesus used his twelve year old sacred awe as fuel to draw nearer to God, he held onto it, pursued God, by remaining in the temple, listening and asking questions. Probably, like so many of us, to reconcile his experience of awe with his experiences of hardship. I expect he asked many of the questions we carry in our hearts. If you are a mighty, loving, saving God, why do so many bad things happen to good people? How can a God of grace also be a God of judgment? If we have enough humility, enough sacred awe, to trust God enough to bless us in our wrestling, then we can, as Jesus did, grow in both knowledge and awe.

I invite you all to use your moments of sacred awe at the grace of God in your life as fuel to listen and ask questions here at church. We have bible studies on Sunday and during the week, classes after worship, opportunities to serve others (some of the best temple learning we can do is in the soup kitchen line).

I KNOW THIS CAN BE TOUGH, WITH ALL THE OTHER THINGS WE HAVE GOING ON... God's claims may stand in tension or open conflict with human desires for social acceptance, loyalty to family, economic prosperity, and other worthy ideals. The hard decisions are not those between right and wrong but those that call for us to choose between options when both represent worthy claims. In this event, Jesus was already subordinating other priorities to his sense of God's purpose for his life.

Meister Eckhart, a theologian, once said that each person has a vintage wine cellar but they seldom drink from it. We have to find the wine cellar in order to drink from it. It's like an old retired schoolteacher once said, "I was a school teacher and at Christmas the kids always brought me gifts. They brought them in different types of boxes but after a while I was pretty savvy about what the gifts were. There would be a thin handkerchief box. I knew it was a handkerchief box and so instead of opening it, I usually just put it in the closet and then when I needed a handkerchief, I went and got it and opened it up. Well, one time I needed a handkerchief and I went and opened up a thin handkerchief box but there was no handkerchief inside. Inside instead was an antique pocket watch. I had an antique pocket watch all this time but I didn't know it because it was wrapped in a handkerchief box."

Bible stories can be like these unopened handkerchief boxes, if we let them sit on a dusty shelf, and so can community events, worship songs, lessons and sermons. These things can be gifts for our lives sometimes, and by being part of the church we make a habit of opening them.

Sometimes we try so hard to follow Jesus into his life of miracles and healings and general ministry. It's okay, too, to follow Jesus the boy, the boy who spent his days in the temple, getting shaped for the life he would lead unto the cross and resurrection. What would the boy Jesus do? Come to worship. Come to Sunday school. Listen and ask questions. God works on us to take us the rest of the way.