

What You Must Do
A Sermon on Luke 2:41-52 by the Rev. Philip Major
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A few weeks ago, I mentioned that Luke is the Gospel that often seems to provide just a bit more of the story about Jesus. Today's story of Mary and Joseph taking their children to Jerusalem for the Festival of the Passover is a good example of this. It's not found in any of the other Gospels, and it provides the only New Testament description of Jesus' life between his infant years and his adult years. This story is unique and rich, so I hope you don't mind if I just jump in with some observations about the details of the story.

The parents of Jesus went to Jerusalem every year for the festival of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. Let's remember that Mary and Joseph were not Christians; they were highly engaged members of their Jewish religious community. I think of them as being like many of you, people who are always showing up to lend a hand or participate.

This was not a two or three day commitment for Mary's family. The festival itself was one week long, and it was a four or five day journey from Nazareth, which is way up in northern Israel, down to Jerusalem. Each year, Mary's family spent more than two weeks for this event: travelling, talking with friends, pitching their tents in the usual places along with a bunch of other families, and then participating in all of the Passover activities in the big city. This was like an extended vacation with friends. We know the group must have been very large, because Mary and Joseph didn't even notice Jesus was missing until they had travelled an entire day back home. They assumed Jesus was running around, playing and talking with friends, like all the other kids. As is true for us at St. Paul's, being part of a religious community is a mixture of solemn religious devotion, joyful friendships and social gatherings.

This story is simplified in order to be told in just a few minutes. For instance, we know that Jesus had at least one younger brother, by the name of James. What happened to Mary and Joseph's other children during the time when they were searching for Jesus? I doubt they returned to Jerusalem at top speed with all their children. Perhaps they asked friends and relatives to look after Jesus' brothers and sisters. Life is complicated for us, and life was complicated for Mary and Joseph.

Let's notice something important in verse 48: *When 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."* The mother is the person who is speaking. Mary is speaking for herself and for her husband. Mary is saying what many of us are thinking and feeling. It is not part of our Biblical tradition for women to be deferential to their husbands.

Let's also notice that the passage concludes with this sentence: *And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.* As Jesus grew and became a teenager he was increasingly in God's favor. This reminds me of another teenager in Luke's Gospel. Back in chapter one, the angel Gabriel told Jesus' mother, likely a teenager at the time, "Do not be afraid Mary, for you have found favor with God." Jesus is following in the footsteps of his mother. In our tradition, grown women are often role models, including for their sons.

Most people in Jesus' time could not read or write. This meant that Luke's Gospel wasn't read by the first generations of disciples. They heard the Gospel read to them. It was probably read to them in one sitting or perhaps in three large sections, over three days. When we tell and hear long stories we use patterns of ideas to help people make connections between the different parts of the story.

In today's passage we notice Jesus' parents were separated from him, and were distressed, for three days. If we were listening to the entire Gospel of Luke, we would likely remember this detail at the end of the story, when the disciples were separated from Jesus, and were distressed, for three days after his death until they were reunited with him on the road to Emmaus.

For me, these details help the story come alive. But there is much more. Threaded through this story are several themes that seem especially relevant for our lives.

The story helps us see that we have many expectations for life, but our expectations are often broken. Sometimes it is important and helpful for our expectations to be broken. This story is the first time we see Jesus taking action. He is only twelve years old, but he does not act according to expectations. And his actions might be more important than following the expectations his parents have for him. The theme of the overturning of expectations will continue throughout the Gospel of Luke. Sometimes we show our faithfulness by challenging the expectations our parents and others have for us.

In the words and actions of Mary and Joseph, we see ourselves. They are speaking and acting in response to their experiences of distress and suffering. In many situations, we find ourselves speaking and acting in response to our own experiences of distress and suffering. In our translation Mary exclaims, *Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.* I'd suggest that the word 'anxiety' might be a underplaying the reality. They were really scared. They don't know where he is. There is suffering for Mary and Joseph.

It's the same way for you and me. We are often speaking and acting in ways that might not make sense to other people. Sometimes this is the result of the pain we have experienced. We are like Mary and Joseph. It's not that we are anxious about things we don't need to be anxious about; we have suffered, and our suffering has a direct effect on our words and our actions. We show our faithfulness by acknowledging and coming to terms with our pain and suffering so we can interact in healthy ways with others.

Let's notice that, though Mary and Joseph are highly intent on understanding the meaning of Jesus' words and actions, they still do not understand. It's the same way for us; in spite of our best efforts, there are many things we do not understand. Our awareness of our lack of understanding is a mark of our engagement with God's work and God's truth.

At the end of today's story our translation says, *His mother treasured all these things in her heart.* Amy Jill Levine suggests that the word 'treasured' isn't the best translation and leads us away from the big point. Mary puzzled over all these events in her heart. Mary understood that she did not really understand.

If we are truly engaged with God's work there will be times when we admit, "I don't understand." I don't understand how this work is going to get done. I don't understand what to do next. I don't understand how I'm supposed to love this person. When we are able to say these words to ourselves, then we know we are on the right track.

Let's notice that all of the characters in this story are changing in front of our eyes. The characters are growing. We trust that Jesus' parents learned something through the events of this story. Jesus is growing in wisdom. Jesus was *sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers.* This process of seeking understanding, asking questions, meeting together as a group is sacred. If we are faithful we embrace the idea that, like Jesus, we are constantly learning new things.

The final theme is my favorite theme of this story. Did you notice that Jesus used this expression *I must be about my Father's work.* In the Gospel of Luke Jesus keeps on saying sentences that begin with the words, "I must". There are six examples of these imperative formulations in Luke, and most of them are not found anywhere else in the Gospels. In chapter nine Jesus says, *The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected.* In chapter four

Jesus says, *I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God*. In today's story Jesus says to his parents, *I must be about my Father's work*. This is one of the central ideas of Luke's Gospel. There are certain things that are imperative for Jesus to do.

Likewise, there are certain imperatives God has given us who are following Jesus. They are shared imperatives to act with justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God. But God has also given you, specifically, some imperatives for your life. These God-given imperatives are in accordance with our universal imperatives as followers of Jesus, but they are unique for you.

So I finish with a question. What is imperative for you in your life? What are the things you must be doing? Jesus said, *I must be about my Father's work*. What are the tasks God has given you?