

A Sermon for the Second Sunday after Christmas Luke 2:41-52

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*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. When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. Assuming 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. When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. 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." He said to them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" But they did not understand what he said to them. Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor. Luke 2:41-52*

In these days of Christmas there is a lot going on in our lectionary readings. We are still in the twelve days of Christmas, and this past week we have observed holy days for St. Thomas, St. John, the Holy Innocents, and the Feast of the Holy Name. While New Year's Day is not a holy day, we are surely hoping and praying that 2021 will be a better year than 2020.

Wednesday is the Feast of the Epiphany, when we will hear the story from Matthew's Gospel of the magi finally arriving with gifts for Jesus. Matthew also recounts the disturbing story of King Herod ordering that all infant boys be killed, because one of them was prophesied to be the Messiah, the new king who would replace him. Because his ego could not allow that; Herod destroyed innocent lives, and the Holy Family fled to Egypt for the safety of the Christ child.

There is so much to hear in all of the readings for the week, and this morning we hear one that gives us a glimpse of Jesus as a boy transitioning to adulthood. This story is often overlooked, maybe because it's not as exciting as the others, but it's an especially important one for us to hear this year.

When Jesus was twelve he went with his parents to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. The scripture tells us that his parents did this every year, which means Jesus was brought up in the Jewish tradition, or as we say in my family, he was raised right. Jesus learned Torah from parents who were dedicated to his religious upbringing. This is evident in the way he interacted with the teachers, who were amazed at his understanding and his answers; answers he gave only after listening and asking questions.

When Mary and Joseph finally find Jesus, after searching for three days, we see what happens in every family system, in any institutional system, when one person in the system does not conform to the expectations of the others. We don't have to know much about family systems to see what is going on here, because we've all been there. We've all been children trying to grow up and many of us have been parents of children trying to grow up.

Mary and Joseph were good parents. They did what was expected of them as faithful Jews. Our translation says they went up to Jerusalem as usual for the festival. The NIV translation says, "as was their custom." We are familiar with this phrase "as was their custom." In the south it's often heard like this, "this is how we do things around here." And in the church it sounds like, "We've always done it that way." And heaven help anyone who chooses not to conform.

This work of self-differentiation, of becoming our own best self, is never easy. Whenever we grow and change, whenever we do things differently, we shatter so many assumptions and expectations. We may anger those who are already unhappy or disappoint those who love us. It seems easier to keep things as they are, safe and familiar, according to custom. We want our children to be like us, to fulfill our hopes for them. We want our church to always be the warm, comforting place it's always been, and we assume that means things have to stay the same. Most of all, we want Jesus to be the holy infant in the manger, the sweet innocent child who grows up to be a carpenter, just like dad, and who has the heart of his mother, Mary meek and mild. At least we think this about Mary until she sings the Magnificat, and we see that she too becomes her best self in God's eyes.

Children are always calling their parents into new ways of seeing and relating. They challenge their parents' hopes, needs, dreams, and expectations with their own. Children sometimes trigger fears, doubts, and insecurities in their parents, even as their growing up changes the parents' lives. This has happened to all of us, and in today's gospel it's happening to Mary and Joseph. In this story we see the first glimmers of how Jesus is going to challenge and change us as individuals, as parents, and as the Church.

After the year we have been through, we know perhaps more than ever that our assumptions and expectations are really just that. We know that life has changed and will continue to change because that is part of the process of life, and if a system is not changing then it is dying.

As followers of Jesus, we can count on change. We can assume and expect that we will be asked to let go of our own preferences and desires so that God's plans will come to fulfillment. It can be unsettling, it's why all the angels say "fear not," and it requires trust and hope.

Jesus asked his parents, "Why were you searching for me?" I believe Jesus asks that same question of us. Why are we searching for Jesus? Do we understand what it means to be with Jesus, to be in the Father's house, or as it's more accurately translated, to be about the business of the Father? Are we ready to be a part of that work? Are we ready to embrace the changes needed to continue the work of God's kingdom in the year ahead?

Life is moving forward, ever changing, filled with challenges. Our memories and past experiences can be a foundation for us, though not all foundations are sound ones. The building of the kingdom does not stop at the foundation, even when it is a strong one. Mary and Joseph had to allow Jesus to grow up. The degree to which we grow in wisdom and in years, in divine and human favor, is directly influenced by the degree to which we spend time with Jesus, listening to and learning from Jesus.

In this new year, may we be more like Jesus; may we be more intentional about listening and learning and asking questions. May we trust that God is calling us and will be with us as we step out in faith to be the Church in new ways in the year to come. Being in the Father's house is so much more than being in a building; it is a way of life.

Time with Jesus will challenge and change us. It will change our church. It will change the world. In this new year, may this be our resolution – a deeper relationship with Jesus. Amen.