

Sunday, December 30, 2012: Luke 2:41-52

December 18, 2012

I love this story about Jesus and his parents and am astonished by the author's deep understanding of the human condition. Mary and Joseph were facing the adolescent years with a most unusual child, and yet we have only this one glimpse in scripture of that time in their lives.

Each time I read this passage, I wonder how Mary and Joseph could have left Jerusalem without their son. Yes, I understand that 12 seemed older than it does now and that Jesus, soon to be a teenager, was so focused on his conversation with the scribes he did not think to tell his parents what he was doing. We can understand his parents' hurt when they finally found him. We all know the feeling of waiting for a child to come home, thinking we will never see that child again—but if we do, we're going to give him or her a piece of our mind!

All this is part of a coming-of-age story, a drama of an adolescent going through moments we've all gone through in the treacherous waters of growing up. The story is common and primal. A young gifted boy is growing up and beginning to assert his independence against his parents.

When his parents finally found him, Jesus was sitting with the teachers in Jerusalem listening and asking questions. Those listening to him, including his parents, were filled with admiration and astonishment. But this didn't hold Mary back from her rebuke.

"Child, why have you treated us like this?"

Mary, who seldom called attention to her own feelings, spoke for all of us in her rebuke. Nothing causes distress like a lost child; finding that this one was safe led Mary to express her pain.

Yet Jesus' answer, like many of his answers throughout his ministry, is not on the same level of reality as their concern for his safety. He actually rebukes them. "Why did you seek me? Did you not know that I must be about my Father's business?" (NKJV).

The story does exactly what a coming-of-age story does: the kid defends himself by saying he has to do something to prove himself and discover who he is. Yet here we also discover that the story is about the true identity of Jesus, something Mary and Joseph and even we the readers have not understood.

Other elements in the passage suggest that something more is happening. For example, when we hear that it took *three days* to find Jesus, we remember that three days is the common number for the burial of Christ that was prefigured by Isaac and Abraham on their doleful journey, for Jonah in the whale and in many other stories in the Old Testament. A three-day presence in the temple with the scribes is a sign that we are on a different level of discourse here, that this story is about more than a lost child.

The story tips us into something else: Jesus asserts his identity by announcing that he is God's son! He is discovering and revealing this identity to us in a way that surprises and stops us even after 2,000 years. Being completely and utterly human, Jesus is also completely and utterly divine.

Of course they don't understand him. Mary was right to ponder this event, just as she pondered his birth and must have pondered the moment when Simeon pointed to her and told her a sword would pierce her heart through this little one. In her own mind, and in her son's mind, was this another birth for her son? The text gives us reason to believe that it was. This is the story of Mary and Joseph coming to understand who this child really was. In a way, he was born again in their eyes as they confronted him, and he became the one to whom they would need to cling, even as he returned home with them as their son.

Here is the part that fascinates me most: although their son was no longer lost, we receive a glimpse of a future in which Mary will again lose him.

Bach's cantata 124, "Meinen Jesus laß ich nicht," explores this meaning of the text. Like Mary and Joseph, many of us might leave our Lord behind in the temple, no matter how dear he is to us. Suddenly we'd become aware that we are lost and search frantically for our Lord. When we found him, we'd be relieved and astonished to see him. The cantata's chorale speaks of this need to cling to Jesus:

I shall not let my Jesus go,  
since he has given himself for me,  
my duty therefore demands

that I should cling like a burr to him.  
He is the light of my life;  
I shall not let my Jesus go.

The chorale reminds us that losing Jesus and then clinging to him is a good parable of the faith, rather like Mary and Joseph wandering off without Jesus and then recovering their most important treasure.

This event radiates throughout the rest of the Gospel. Mary loses Jesus several times and yet gains a greater treasure when she finds him, even if it is not what she was looking for: she was looking for her boy; he was intent on giving her life. As he says later, if you do not lose your life, you will never find it. How many of us have gone looking for something we've lost and found something of much greater value instead—a surprise, a treasure? Faith searches for this treasure and then clings to it. The surprise is that it is far more than we had imagined possible: eternal life.