

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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A Teachable Moment

Luke 2:41-52

At our house, we have a cute little Christmas tree that's still bringing some holiday illumination to our basement. I'm guessing it will get packed away soon. Maybe some of you still have an item or object around your place that has kept the light of Christmas 2022 burning, at least a little bit longer. Here at the church this past week, I took down the remaining Christmas cards that were posted on one of our hallway bulletin boards. As far as I can tell, these were the last outward and visible signs of our congregation's celebration of Jesus' birth.

But in today's text and sermon, which were originally planned for a couple of Sundays ago, we're not really that far removed from Luke's account of Jesus' birth. It reminds me of a story one person tells about how they were instructing the toddlers in their church during the Christmas season. As they talked about the meaning of Christ's birth, one of the children, who had a baby brother, said of Jesus, "But he was a baby last year. He must be bigger now."¹

In today's text, Mary's baby isn't a baby anymore. My, how fast they grow up. And in the case of Luke's narrative, even faster. At the end of verse 20, the shepherds had just returned from seeing the infant. By the end of the chapter, Jesus is twelve. Of course Luke does insert a summary statement acknowledging that time has passed: "And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him" (2:40). Then Luke tells us a specific story about the boy Jesus.

Actually, though in biological terms we may consider him a boy, in cultural and religious terms Jesus was on the verge of manhood. By age twelve, Jesus had received a lot of the instruction that was designed to prepare him for formal entry to the community of God's people when he was thirteen. Thus far in his life, Jesus has learned from his parents. He has learned from the teachers in the temple. In today's Scripture passage, we see him still actively engaged in the experience of instruction. "After three days, they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions" (v. 46).

Here we get a glimpse of the give and take that was involved in being trained in the word of God. Our Savior didn't show up in the world with the complete Torah preinstalled and available to anyone who wanted to tap into his knowledge base as circumstances called for it. No, Jesus spent a significant part of his early life as a learner. He was embedded in a family that was embedded within a larger religious community that drew its life and mission from the laws and commands of God. In that setting, wisdom and righteousness came from studying, meditating on, and obeying the will of the Lord. This was the context in which Jesus' sense of identity and purpose unfolded and developed.

True, Luke indicates that many of those in the temple were impressed with Jesus' knowledge and understanding. But this doesn't mean that he had so dazzled everyone with

his religious smarts that he was now teaching the teachers. I once came across a clip art depiction of this scene titled, "Jesus, the Amazing Boy Teacher." It's subtitled, "Wisdom and Understanding, Beyond His Years." It's designed to have a sort of comic book appearance, in order to appeal to youth and children. In this portrayal, Jesus stands on a platform in front of awestruck listeners, apparently those who would ordinarily be the instructors. But in this case, Jesus is actually the one doing the teaching, and with quite a flourish. He has a confident look on his face, with one hand raised to emphasize the point he's making. But what's most dazzling, literally, is the field of light, or radiance, that surrounds this twelve year old. It looks like the kind of picture you would get if the Son of God agreed to appear in a SMECO advertisement.

Though this piece of clip art overdoes it, I can still appreciate the desire to represent what makes Jesus stand out, what makes him different and unique. Maybe, though, we would be better off paying attention to the way that Luke himself does that. Instead of painting Jesus as a wonder child who comes from another planet, Luke uses dialogue to highlight the emerging tension between Jesus and his parents. As one commentator has put it, "In the Temple, Mary expects Jesus to behave a certain way and Jesus expects his mother to know why he isn't."² Jesus isn't just Joseph and Mary's son. He's most of all God's Son. The will of his parents is important. But the will of God is most important. In this case, the priority of being in the Father's house, about the Father's business, underscores Jesus' divine mission and purpose, even if that conflicts with his parents' expectations.

Not that we blame Joseph and Mary for being upset. Their worry and anxiety about Jesus' disappearance is understandable, as is their frustration with his failure to understand why they feel the way they do. Remember that Joseph and Mary's reaction is simply one part of a story that's filled with very normal, everyday kinds of human activities, relationships, and events. Practicing your religion, as a family, by gathering with God's people on a sacred occasion. Mixing and mingling with your biological and spiritual kin. Listening to your teachers in Sunday School or Children's Church, and asking questions of your own. Discovering more about what it means to be a member of your own family and a member of God's family. Getting into disagreements with your children, or your parents, as time passes and people change at different stages of life. A lot of what we see in today's text is the stuff of ordinary life, especially as it unfolds in the context of home and congregation.

Granted, the part about losing track of your child, and finding him four days later, throws an interesting twist into the situation. One woman tells about a Sunday when their pastor told the story of how Mary and Joseph left Jesus behind at the temple. Her husband wondered, "How could a parent forget a child?" That question was answered as soon as she and he arrived home in separate cars. They realized that neither of them had brought their 11-year-old daughter home.³

As intriguing as it is, we need to keep in mind that this missing Jesus moment is simply one element in Luke's larger story about Jesus' unique relationship to the Father. Jesus is growing in his understanding of that relationship and its implications for his life. And so are Joseph and Mary. In fact, Luke summarizes the story by telling us that there was still plenty of learning to be done. Just because he was on the verge of adolescence didn't mean that Jesus' domestic training was complete. So Luke says, "Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them" (v. 51a).

From there things go silent. Luke doesn't give us any more detailed descriptions or accounts of Jesus' continued growth and development. Nearly two decades will pass before Jesus appears in Luke 3 and 4, where he gets baptized by John, tempted by the devil, and

launches his public ministry. Otherwise, all Luke says is, "And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men" (v. 52).

But notice that in between the first half of verse 51 and the beginning of verse 52, Luke has included a summary of how Mary handled all this. "But his mother treasured all these things in her heart" (v. 51b). If that kind of terminology sounds familiar to you, it's because Luke said something similar about Mary in the story of Jesus' birth. The shepherds hurried to Bethlehem, saw the baby, then hurried to spread the word about his birth. "But Mary," says Luke, "treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart" (2:19).

Throughout the stories of Jesus' infancy and childhood, Mary comes across as the kind of person who's willing to take the time to reflect, carefully and deeply, about things that have happened, things that she has experienced, things that she has seen and heard. She's good at recognizing when she's on the student side of a teachable moment. She never misses an opportunity to slow down and ponder what these things mean, for her, for her family, and for the world. Simply knowing that something has happened isn't enough. These happenings need to be digested. So Mary takes them and meditates on them, wrestles with them, turns them over in her mind.

A story once appeared in the *New York Times* about David Storch, a music teacher, who borrowed a copy of Handel's "Messiah" from the Brooklyn Public Library. However, due to a clerical error, the transaction wasn't recorded. There were many others who requested the score, and the library staff, unaware that it had been checked out, spent hours searching in vain for it. Eventually Storch returned it. When he placed it on the circulation desk, he was astonished to hear the librarian spontaneously, joyfully, and loudly shout, "The 'Messiah' is here! The 'Messiah' is back!" Every head in the library turned toward the voice. But alas, as the newspaper reported, "A few minutes later everyone went back to work."⁴

For many of us, Christmas is like this episode in the library. A loud burst of excitement that the Messiah has come, and then an unspectacular return to the ordinariness of the everyday. I mentioned the Christmas tree in our basement. There are still some Christmas cards I want to look at one last time, to reminisce about family and friends. We even have a box or two of holiday chocolates that need to be polished off. But overall, it's time to resume the predictable rhythms of daily life. And yet, the message of Christmas is still just as true. Even if we've stopped singing the carols, the "tidings of comfort and joy" are still just as comforting and just as joyful—if we're willing to treasure up all these things and ponder them in our hearts.

There's a prayer that was composed by Archbishop of Canterbury Donald Coggan. I try to say it and reflect on it each day of my ministry, and especially early in the week as I begin my sermon preparation. It says:

Lord, still me.
 Let my mind be enquiring, searching.
 Let my heart be open.
 Save me from mental rust.
 Deliver me from spiritual decay.
 Keep me *alive* and alert.
 Teach me, that I may teach them.

Coggan goes on to comment on that last petition, especially from the perspective of a preacher. But what he says is appropriate to all of us in our continual need for further instruction in the good news of Jesus Christ. Coggan writes: "The ocean of your truth, Lord, is so big, and my bucket is so small. Whatever my age, I'm only a beginner. Teach me; go

on teaching me. Make me an avid learner, that I may share the many-splendoured thing which is the Gospel, with those whom you have given me."⁵

If we want to continue being faithful followers of Jesus this year, we need to remain in Mary mode. That means maintaining the mindset of a learner, open to the Lord's instruction about his will and his way for you. No matter that the holidays are now in the rear-view mirror, you never stop being responsible for what you do with what you've heard and what you've seen of the gospel. You can't just hear about who Jesus is and why he has come, and somehow remain neutral. You have to consider your own commitment to him. You have to evaluate your own obedience to the news of God's reign. You have to take to heart Jesus' claims about himself, and no matter how many times you've heard it before, once again consider what this means for you, and for the shape and direction of your life.

There may be truths about Jesus and experiences of God's presence that you've stored up over time, and as this year unfolds you can pull out those treasures and let them give you insight into what you should do now, at this particular point in your spiritual development. At the same time, you can count on there being an abundance of teachable moments where Jesus opens your eyes and ears to fresh truths about himself. There will be new things that our Lord wants to reveal to you about who he is, who you are, and what it means to stay with him on the way of the cross. In all these situations and circumstances, you need to stay in the posture of a learner, ready to listen, ready to ask questions, ready to engage with the Lord in all the ways he's trying to teach you.

¹ In the comments section, replying to Craig A. Satterlee, Commentary on Luke 2:41-52. Working Preacher website. Accessed January 9, 2019 <https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1524>.

² Satterlee, Commentary on Luke 2:41-52.

³ Esther Zufall, "Heart to Heart." *Today's Christian Woman*.

⁴ Thomas G. Long, *Shepherds and Bathrobes* (Lima: CSS, 1987) 47.

⁵ Donald Coggan, "A Preacher Talks It Over with God." *The Living Pulpit* (January -March 1996) 1.