

“Focus on the [Divine] Family”
1st Sunday after Christmas: 11:00—26 December 2021
SUMC, Salado, Texas, 76571
Sermon Text: Luke 2:41-52

“Happy families are all alike;
every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way”

--Leo Tolstoy (1828 - 1910, *Anna Karenina*).

O almighty God, by the birth of your holy child Jesus
you gave us a great light to dawn on our darkness.
Grant that in his light we may see light.
Bestow upon us that most excellent Christmas gift of love to all people,
so that the likeness of your Son may be formed in us,
and that we may have the ever brightening hope of everlasting life;
through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen (*THE BOOK OF WORSHIP 1965, ALT.*).

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Luke’s story is about identity and vocation. It is a story that calls us to name and join in life’s rare moments when children, youth, and adults clarify and realize a large sense of family, call, and mission to ministry.

Today we could ask questions in conjunction with this text from Luke. This is the story of Jesus in the temple. Thus, in one day Jesus has gone in our readings from a baby in a manger to a near teenager in the temple!

How do adults react when children declare a sense of vocation and call? Their call sometimes comes in ways that fracture our sense of control and confuse our hopes for them. How do congregations nurture and nourish vital Christian identity in its younger members’ lives? What vivid understandings might emerge if we set verses 48 and 49 of this passage up against Luke 8:20-21? (Who are my mother and brother and sister?) Hear the gospel lesson for the Sunday after Christmas, Luke 2:41-52:

[41] Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. [42] And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. [43] When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. [44] 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. [45]

When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him.

[46] After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. [47] And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. [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." [49] He said to them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" [50] But they did not understand what he said to them. [51] Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart.

[52] And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor (Luke 2:41-52).

This is the only passage in the Bible that tells of Jesus' boyhood. At the time of the "festival of the Passover," Jews celebrated both Israel's deliverance from Egypt and the festival of unleavened bread, a symbol of the start of a new year. Ritual law expected Jews to make three pilgrimages to Jerusalem each year: Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles.¹ Rabbis debated whether women and children should participate. For those who lived far from Jerusalem, Rabbis excused these from the pilgrimages at Pentecost and Tabernacles.

¹ Verse 41: "Passover." The regulations for Passover are in Exodus 23:17; 34:23; Leviticus 23:4-14. Leaven (yeast) people associated with fermentation and thus corruption (1 Corinthians 5:8). The Festival of Unleavened Bread, seven days in length, originally followed the one-day Passover celebration. Ritual law forbade Leavened bread during this festival to mark the beginning of the grain harvest. In their haste to leave Egypt, the Israelites could not wait for the dough to rise (Exodus 12:14-20; 34:39). By Jesus' time, the Jews had combined the two festivals. (See also Luke 22:1).

Jesus is now “twelve years old.” In only another year, he will officially become an adult man (celebrated by Jews at the bar mitzvah). After the eight days of the festival, the “group” (v. 44, probably Mary’s and Joseph’s whole village) begin their journey back to Nazareth. Somehow Joseph thinks Jesus was with Mary and the women, while Mary assumes that Jesus is traveling with the men. When large groups traveled together, the entourage might stretch out for great distances, perhaps even a mile, depending on the group’s extent. As the village camps for the night, the parents discover that neither of them has Jesus. In fact, Jesus has disappeared. Frantic with worry, they begin their search.

Joseph and Mary find Jesus in the outer court of the Temple “among the teachers,” experts in Jewish law. Respectful of the law, Jesus not only listens and asks questions, but also answers the scholars’ questions. Verse 49 records a turning point in Luke’s Gospel. Here we have the first words of Jesus. The text now designates Jesus’ father as “the Father.” Until this point in Luke’s story, we understand Joseph as Jesus’ father. Note the term “must.” It suggests that the relationship between Jesus and his heavenly Father requires utter obedience.

Do parents ever reach a point where they completely understand their children? Luke tells us that Mary and Joseph simply cannot comprehend that Jesus relationship with God, even at his early age, takes precedence over his relationship to them. Yet, when they return to Nazareth, Jesus obeys his parents in everyday life. Despite not understanding, Luke tells us that Mary “treasured” (v. 51 or pondered) what Jesus says. Jesus continues to grow in understanding. This growth prepares Jesus for the mission which will comprise Luke’s Gospel (v. 52).

From this story, however intricate, we can boil down the content to three essential points Luke wants to make:

- 1) Jesus' family nurtures him in the context of an obediently faithful and worship-observant household.
- 2) When Jesus was twelve years old, he began to understand his own uniqueness.
- 3) Jesus' movement toward God signaled tensions within his own family.

I want to conclude by noting a gospel theme that is probably more pronounced in Mark than it is in Luke. Yet, Luke also tells us that even those who were closest to Jesus, his disciples and parents, can scarcely grasp Jesus' nature. Although they spend day after day with Jesus, his mission and message seem bigger than they can take in.

In the last few decades, our young people have worn popular wristbands and necklaces that have the letters "WWJD" stitched or engraved upon them. These letters are simply a reminder that when faced with a difficult question or situation, the person wearing the letters may refer to the four letters and simply ask: "What would Jesus do?" I suggest that after reading the Gospels, and especially this story from Luke, "WWJD" remains a very good, but pesky, question. Amen.

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