

“What Child IS This?” – Luke 2:41-52

A Sermon by the Rev. Susie Bjork, Associate Minister
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December 26, 2021 – First Sunday After Christmas

Gracious God, in this time of worship, prayer, and praise, may we continue to embrace the good news and joy of Christmas. And may we remember and trust that your love and light that was embodied in Jesus is with us still, as we seek to follow in his way. Amen.

So, here we are on the day after Christmas and we have already fast-forwarded twelve years into the future to hear this story from Luke’s gospel about the boy Jesus in the temple. But don’t worry, next week we’ll go back again to hear Matthew’s story of the visit of the magi.

I love this temple story though and it’s a good one for us to reflect upon as we move through the remaining days of the Christmas season and into a new year. It’s a unique story, in that it is the only episode from the four gospels about Jesus as a boy – no longer a baby, but not yet a grown man. In Luke’s gospel, it serves as a sort of transition story that helps shift the gospel from the narrative of Jesus’ birth to his baptism as an adult and then the beginning of his public ministry.

Mary, Joseph, Jesus, and it sounds like a pretty good-sized group of their extended family and friends, have traveled to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. We hear nothing of the festival itself. And now, Mary and Joseph have started the long trek back to Nazareth. And, after a day’s journey, they realize that they haven’t seen Jesus in a while. It’s not unlike twelve-year-old kids to wander off. But sure enough, they discover that he’s nowhere to be found among their group of fellow travelers.

In a panic, they head back to Jerusalem and search for him for three days. And finally, they find him in the temple. There he is sitting among the teachers, listening to what they have to say, asking questions, and amazing them with his understanding and wisdom.

And I love Mary’s reaction in that moment because it is such a normal parental reaction. “What were you thinking, kid? Why would you do this to us? We were so worried about you!”

And, as a normal, perhaps sometimes cheeky twelve-year-old might respond, Jesus asks, “why were searching? Didn’t you know I would be here in my Father’s house?” And, though I feel for Mary and Joseph in their parental panic, Jesus does have a point. The temple might have been the first place to check. Then again, how many twelve-year-old kids would essentially choose to go to school instead of all of the other options available to them when on their own in a big, bustling city?

At any rate, they all then head for home together. And in case we're too quick to judge how Jesus treated his poor, exasperated parents after this incident, Luke tells us that he was a good kid and was obedient to them from that point on.

"Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" Those are the first words Jesus speaks in the Gospel of Luke – at age twelve – still a child, to be sure, but on the threshold of adulthood.

Luke tells us that Mary and Joseph don't understand him when he says this. Frankly, that doesn't make much sense does it when we consider what they've been through already in Luke's gospel – the annunciation, the birth, the shepherds, the presentation in the temple. But I think part of Luke's purpose in highlighting their perplexity may be to emphasize that Jesus had his own understanding of his mission from a young age, even if others didn't always get it.

This episode in the temple illustrates Jesus' developing sense of identity, calling, and purpose. He's coming into his own and exploring his relationships with God and with his contemporaries. He claims his identity as God's child. He impresses the temple teachers with wisdom and understanding beyond his twelve years. But he also listens to them, learns from them, and is clearly engaging with them in mutual dialogue. It is the first scene in an unfolding story of how Jesus will engage the world around him.

And we might pause for a moment and imagine that we don't know the rest of the gospel story and wonder, like those in the temple that day, who this child is and what we might learn from him.

In this story, Jesus finds and articulates his identity through his relationship with God. In many ways, that's the same identity that shapes us. We are God's children too. Jesus taught us that we are all God's beloved children. So, how does this inform our sense of purpose? What is God's claim on our life? What is our sense of call?

This is an individual question. But it is also a question for us as the church and as people who seek to be in relationship with other beloved children of God.

I love that those teachers in the temple didn't brush off twelve-year-old Jesus. They respected his presence and questions. They listened to and honored his wisdom. They received what he had to offer. They model for us how to listen to young people. They model for us how to listen to anyone.

I also wonder if any of those teachers got to know Jesus better. Did they see him again? Have more conversations with him? Watch him grow up over the years? Witness him teach or heal? Were any of them still around when he returned to Jerusalem over twenty years later? Did any of them play a role in the early Christian movement that followed?

This brief story of those unnamed people in the temple invites us to consider how our lives are shaped, changed, and transformed by an encounter with Jesus.

After all, this is also a story of the search for Jesus, a search for God with us, a search for a glimpse of the Divine, the holy, the source of that Love (with a capital L) that names us and claims us a child, as beloved.

We are invited to step into Mary and Joseph's shoes as they search for Jesus. They searched as worried parents for their missing kid. But don't we all search for Jesus too? With longing hearts, we seek to find and learn to follow in the way of Jesus.

So, where do we find Jesus?

Perhaps not behind the sofa (like that refrigerator magnet says).

Perhaps, like Mary and Joseph, we find Jesus in God's house too – in the presence of our gathered community of faith, in worship, in prayer. We are here, we do this church thing, so we can find Jesus together.

Maybe we find Jesus in our own hearts too, like Mary who, as Luke tells us several times, pondered and treasured every experience and word that was shared with her about her child. The good news of Christmas, the good news of the incarnation, is that God is with us – as near to us as anything can be.

Perhaps we find Jesus when we, like those in the temple that day, engage deeply with his teachings – the stories that unfold in the gospels, the wisdom shared, the parables, the acts of healing, the example he gave us of how to live and love.

And, beyond the biblical text, we also can find Jesus in the interpretations, discussions, elaborations, musings, and wisdom of Jesus-followers over the centuries. I especially find Jesus in people like Francis and Clare of Assisi, and Julian of Norwich, and Sojourner Truth, and Martin Luther King Jr., and Oscar Romero who called their contemporaries and all of us back to the heart of Jesus' message and ministry.

Finding Jesus isn't a one-time thing.

Our search for Jesus is that life-long learning process, that growth in faith, depth, and wisdom that comes through lived experience, through the process of practicing our faith, through the process of finding meaning and purpose, and even through the tough stuff when God shows up in the middle of it.

Most importantly, we find Jesus when we find love – deep and abiding love that is expressed in the care and compassion we give and receive, in seeking greater love in the world – love on both a personal and public level. The love that is made possible by the Love of God.

The Jesus I have come to know in my life is flexible and fluid and shows up in all sorts of ways. I've found Jesus in hearts that have been broken open, in compassion that meets us in struggle, in that creative impulse that won't give up hope even in the face of uphill battles, in

communities that stick together and support one another, in the strength and courage of those who struggle for more love, and peace, and justice in this world.

Perhaps the good and glorious conclusion we come to when we've been searching for Jesus for long enough is that Jesus is, in fact, everywhere.

We just need to open our eyes to see, open our hearts to receive, and open our hands to serve.

Who is Jesus? What child IS this? The one who shows us what God's love looks like in the flesh. The one who teaches us to see our own identity and that of our neighbor as God's beloved. The one who calls us into loving relationship and service. The one who's message, ministry, and purpose is as needed now as it ever was. The one who called us to follow.

Christmas was only the beginning.

And so, I'll leave you with this wonderful reminder from the great theologian and Civil Rights leader, Howard Thurman:

"When the song of the angels is stilled, when the star in the sky is gone, when the kings and princes are home, when the shepherds are back with their flocks, the work of Christmas begins: to find the lost, to heal the broken, to feed the hungry, to release the prisoner, to rebuild the nations, to bring peace among the people, to make music in the heart."

May it be so.

Amen.