

Sermon for Sunday, January 5, 2025

Luke 2:41-52

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Today's Scripture reading is a story that is only told in the gospel of Luke. That fact brings up two questions that I wish to address today.

1. What point is Luke trying to make when he tells this story? Why does he choose to include it in his gospel?
2. What do we learn about Jesus because, after all, the point of every gospel is to tell us the story of Jesus?

Luke, the author of the gospel, is a master storyteller. He includes this story to provide more pieces of evidence that Jesus is being raised within a family that observes Jewish religious rituals. This family practices their faith. Last week we were told that Jesus was circumcised on the eighth day as prescribed in Jewish law AND that he and his family went to the Temple to offer a sacrifice about a month after his birth; once again according to Jewish practice.

The very first sentence of today's reading says that his parents went "every year to the festival in Jerusalem." This is the festival of the Passover. While we are not told if Jesus went with them every year, this year when he is 12, he does accompany his family to Jerusalem for the Passover. Now Passover is a REALLY important festival, perhaps THE most important one in the Jewish religious year. The city will be packed with people. It's easy to imagine Jesus absorbing all of the sights and sounds of this big holiday.

Therefore, it is safe to say that one of Luke's purposes for including this story is to provide his readers (and us) with pieces of evidence demonstrating that Jesus is steeped in Jewish religious practice. Now we also know that as an adult Jesus saw reform of the traditions as important. We can view Jesus' words and actions as someone who is acting as an insider, who knows and has practiced Jewish rituals all of his life. We will see in two weeks when we read Luke 4:16 "When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, *as was his custom.*"

Returning to my original question: One way to think about this story is that it is one small portion of a much larger portrait of Jesus that Luke is crafting/painting. It's a piece of the puzzle.

The second question that this lesson raises is, "What do we learn about Jesus?" Luke wants us to have a richer understanding of this young man. We learn that Jesus is curious. He recognizes the value of "Bible study" and enjoys conversation with learned teachers, the rabbis. He is found "sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking questions." There is no indication that he comes bursting into their conversation and acting like an expert. No, he listens. He wonders. He asks questions in an attempt to gain understanding.

Speaking as a teacher, there have been times when a unique student with special gifts for learning has entered my classroom. This student is curious, asks questions, grasps concepts quickly, and their thoughts clearly go far beyond the typical students in the room. When a teacher comes across a student like that they often predict that this student is going to go far, have an interesting (perhaps even world changing) career, and make a difference. Seeing the potential gives the teachers inspiration while also challenging them as they strive to feed the intellectual hunger of that student.

Jesus is one of those special students as evidenced in verse 47 where it says, "All who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers." Almost certainly there were other students gathered around who desired to learn from the rabbis. It's a curiosity to me that Jesus was allowed into the circle of teaching. He is, after all, only 12. He would have to work his way into the circle—squeezing between this one and that one so as to get close enough to see and hear.

Alas, three days is all that Jesus gets because mom and dad show up. Jesus' learning opportunity is over. When they chide him, he responds by reminding them of something important. "I must be in my Father's house." In saying this he is reminding them of that which they had been told 12 years before: that this child is special, unique. This child is the Son of God sent to earth to live among people. Jesus is claiming his identity as God's Son aloud for the first time.

Having said that Jesus is also their son. Mary reminds him of this and rather than arguing over the matter he turns back to his family and his responsibilities to them. This is an important point because we have no stories of what Jesus does for the next 15 or so years. Our best guess is that Jesus was about 30 when he began his ministry. We have almost no reports of what he was doing for these in between years. We can make some guesses: we are pretty certain that Joseph was dead when Jesus' ministry occurred. There is no mention of Joseph, only of Mary during the 3 years of Jesus' earthly ministry. Therefore it is possible that Jesus, as the eldest son, had responsibilities to support his mother and siblings after Joseph died and that's what he was "doing" for the 15-18 year gap—in part waiting for his siblings to grow up and become self-sufficient for themselves.

What do we learn about Jesus? We learn that he was curious and asked questions. We learn that when he was given an opportunity to learn from Jewish teachers, he took the time to do so. We learn that he knows who his true father is: God. We also learn that while this moment was worthy of being recorded in the gospel, he recognized his obligations to his family and readily returned to his family and the work of day-to-day life in Nazareth until the time when those responsibilities were lifted.

Often at this point in my sermon I will ask, "How does this story make a difference in our day to day lives?" I don't have a concise answer to that question because this story is a bridge story; one that takes us from infancy to adulthood. This is what the story does:

- It reinforces the fact that Jesus was raised as a practicing Jew...a religious Jew and not just an ethnic one.
- It reminds us that as an "insider" he loves and cares deeply about the religious Jews surrounding him in his world.
- This story tells us that Jesus lived within two realities. The first was that he was God's Son and would at some point have obligations to do the work that he had been sent to earth to perform. The second reality was that he was also part of an earthly family and community. He could perhaps abandon that family and community but instead pivots to remain within it. The time was not yet right for him. (Who knows, maybe his parents made allowances for him to spend time with the rabbis and teachers every year during Passover?)

In conclusion then, I wasn't able to find a spiritual take away to give to you today. Perhaps the best tidbit I can provide is to remind myself and encourage y'all to emulate the teachers in the Temple. To recognize that there is always another generation following us and that we have an obligation to open up the circle so that new, curious, younglings have the space to grow in faith and ask questions, just as we once did.

I leave you with something I came across in my Saturday morning devotional reading. Contemporary American author Frederick Buechner has written, "A Christian is one who points at Christ and says, 'I can't prove a thing, but there's something about his eyes and his voice. There's something about the way he carries his head, his hands, the way he carries his cross—the way he carries me.'"