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When our story begins, Jesus is about twelve years old. He is still a child, but he is not the young boy of his infancy. Up until this point, every story about Jesus has as its main character, someone talking about Jesus; Mary, an angel, or a shepherd. This is the first time Jesus is the center of the narrative in his own right. For many modern readers, we can get stuck in the part about Mary and Joseph losing him for a day as they journeyed home. By today’s parenting standards, that is madness. In context, however, whole communities would travel together and it would have been normal for your child to spend time with relatives and friends on the caravan home. We aren't supposed to notice Mary and Joseph, but instead are supposed to focus on Jesus.

This is the only story we have of Jesus' adolescent life we have. It reminds us that Jesus was fundamentally a person first. He was not the first, nor the last adolescent to break rules and terrify his parents. Judging from Jesus’ adult ministry, I’m going to guess that breaking the rules, being defiant, and questioning his elders was probably part of who Jesus was. Many people want to tame Jesus and his ministry and in this story, they want to turn him into an obedient child who just happen to care more for his heavenly parent than his earth ones. But, if you smooth those edges, you miss that Jesus is doing here what teenagers have always done, he is bending the rules, talking back, being a little bit snotty. He is also being God Among Us, but he is doing it the way teenagers have always done it, with attitude. Isn't it just like God to make us see the holiness in teenage attitude?

When Mary and Joseph realize their wayward child is missing they head back to Jerusalem, likely very cross and probably frightened. It takes another couple of days to find him and when they do, he is in the temple. Mary is angry, as any mother would be. “Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety!” Jesus offers a cheeky response, “Didn’t you know you would find me in my Father’s house?” I can’t help but hear the sarcastic whine of a teenager in his response. Like teenagers everywhere, while it might be obnoxious, it might also contain a bit of truth. Jesus is telling the truth to his mom and dad about who he is.

So much of Western literature is consumed with the coming of age story. Often the focus of that narrative is the young boy on an adventure that will define him. Think of stories and movies like, “Stand by Me,” or “Star Wars.” You have an imperfect protagonist who needs to figure out what his life is about, what it all means. Western literature didn’t invent this trope and this is the bible’s version of that story. Jesus sneaks away from family and friends to go find his place in the city.

Do you remember the first time you claimed something as your own because you were choosing it and not because Mom and Dad gave it to you? The first time you knew the thing that was yours because it deeply fit you in some way? For many of us, our teenage years are about finding the things we love and are especially committed to. It is a time of refining and developing our loves. For many of us, those first passions persist and still make us who we are today. I like to think that Jesus here is doing that important work of growing up. He is finding the people and the community that is his and claiming it on his own terms.

In this #MeToo moment, we are rightly concerned about consent. While it is a little silly to put it in these terms, this story is about Jesus saying yes to the life he was born into. Or as Fred Craddock said, “Jesus now claims for himself that special relation to God which was the real meaning of his dedication as an infant. To this point, all signs of Jesus’ special nature of mission have been to or through others; ... but now he claims it for himself.” He is moving from the child to whom all things are given, to the adult who will shape and control his own understanding. He is doing the work of growing up and growing into himself.

Our scripture tells us that, “They did not understand what he said to them.” This should also not be a surprise. How many times in the history of the world have parents watched their child in wonder, questioning, who is this child? Is this my kid? Mary and Joseph do not yet know who Jesus is, not fully. They know him as the child announced by angels, but not who or what he will become. And often Mom and Dad are the last to come around to seeing their child in a new way. So, it makes sense that they do not understand what he has said to them. But, do we? We who have the benefit of knowing the rest of the Jesus story. Even so, do we know who he is? Do we understand?

I’ve been in ministry for 15 years now and I think every year, I learn a little bit more about who Jesus was and what he means for the world and for me. When his parents greet him in the temple, angry and sacred Jesus responds, “Didn’t you know I would be in my Father’s house?” it is both a cheeky reply and also the first claiming of his own destiny and sense of self. Here I am, mom and dad, and this faith is mine and I am right where I am supposed to be. The elders sat surrounding him, answering his questions and listening to him answer theirs. They are amazed at his answers. Did they understand who Jesus was? Do you understand who he is, now, thousands of years later? The divine mystery continues to unfold and just as then, we continue to be amazed by this child, almost adult, who claims for himself a faith and a teaching that have shaped our world.

And he is still a child, and that is notable. He isn't the fully formed Jesus with a ministry to the poor and marginal. He is a boy. He has not yet fully inherited the wisdom of his community. Like all kids, he still sees things through unformed eyes. And like our children, that gives him the power to ask the real questions to which we have become innured. Kids have the ability to get right to the heart of the human condition, to ask questions of God and of humanity, that adults have learned to gloss over.

Recently, at bedtime with my five year old, we were talking about something she was scared of. I told her she could talk to God when she is scared and that God can help give her courage. We have said prayers before bed her entire life, but she just looked me straight in the eyes and said in the most patronizing tone possible, "Mommy, you can't talk to God. God isn't in the room! Do you see God in here?" She is a Pastors kid, for goodness sake. So, then we spent a good bit of time talking about the Holy Spirit and how God can talk to us, just not using voices and lots of good theology was shared with her. And it was mostly ineffective.

I mean, she is right, God doesn't speak back in any normal way of thinking about speaking. God isn't a guy or lady standing in this room. The abstractions that are meaningful to me, God is in each of us, God speaks through the movement of the Spirit, those aren't meaningful to her yet and so her questions stand. And they are real and they force me again to ask what is this incarnation all about? This Christ child, grown into a teenager, what does he mean for me? For the world? How do we know that God is with us when we can't see or hear or touch God? I can give you all the right answers to those questions. I have two degrees in theology. But none of that is helpful when dealing with the real longings of the soul. Those answers need to be pondered.

My favorite part of this scripture passage is the ending, “his mother treasured all of these things in her heart.” One of the marvelous gifts of the Christian tradition is that our scriptures put before us this impossible-to-answer question, “Who is Jesus?” “Who do you say that I am?” And the people surrounding Jesus don’t understand and they don’t know. The best that any of them can ever really ever do is ponder the question deeply in their hearts. We know this child to be the one who came to us as God, in the form of vulnerable human baby. We know he is of utmost power and strength, and that he will die as a petty criminal on a cross. We know him as the obedient son of God and also as the snotty adolescent defying his parents. We come to know him and see him in his father’s home, even as we have to admit, we don’t really know what that means. Throughout Luke, Mary ponders things in her heart. This pondering seems to be a wondering, a wrestling to understand. Just as any mother wonders at her child.

This is a strange story to include in our gospels. It doesn't come with a neat wrap up at the end. The point isn't obvious. But then again, isn't that exactly who and what God is, a mystery? We know that Jesus came to us as a person, to be with us as persons. We know that his humanity makes our own frail, limited humanity that much more sacred and holy. God became man and what a mystery that is to ponder in our hearts just as Mary did. Just as we all do each day of our lives. So there are no neat bows. Instead, an invitation to sit at the feet of the Christ child, amazed at his understanding and his answers and to ponder it all in your heart. Amen.