

Luke 2: 41

Does anyone here have children? Were you a child once? I was thinking about Joseph and Mary....we've idealized them over the many hundreds of years that we've thought about them. How Joseph married a woman who was already pregnant. How they had to move to Egypt. The hubbub of traveling to Bethlehem for the census. They seemed to take all of this in stride. We never hear about Joseph losing his temper or Mary burning the casserole. They seemed like perfect parents.

But this morning we've seen another side of them. They left Jerusalem without their son. How could they do this? How could they leave behind the son that was born of the Holy Spirit, whose birth was foretold for a great many generations. Wouldn't they have been overly concerned with this particular child's safety?

We live in another time where the papers and news media are always reporting abductions and disappearances of children. We go to any mall and can find young children harnessed to their parents by straps and leashes. We don't let them go anywhere without meeting their boyfriend or girlfriend, their families, etc. We are very concerned with their safety because of the world we live in.

Joseph and Mary weren't concerned about Jesus. Why? Were they terrible parents? I don't think so. Part of what we must understand is that the family was different, it was broader than our understanding. Joseph and Mary went to Jerusalem with people from the village and with family to attend Jesus' Bar Mitzvah. People they knew intimately. They assumed that Jesus was with one of his friends. But at the end of the first days journey they must have been a little short tempered. "Where is that boy?" Why isn't he here helping us set up the tent, cooking and caring for the animals?"

Then they search through all the travelers and discover that Jesus isn't with anyone from Nazareth. He's missing. Where is he? Is he back in Jerusalem? They return to Jerusalem to search for their son. Three days they spend looking for him and finally find him in the Temple. He's sitting with the Rabbi's and discussing scripture and, as we are told, amazing them with his knowledge and understanding. His parents don't know where he has slept, they don't know who fed him. They were frantic, wondering where he was. They didn't sleep well, they grew more frantic the longer they looked. Where was he? Had slavers captured him and sold him?

And here he is, calmly sitting in the Temple with the Rabbi's, explaining scripture to them. And what does he utter when they ask, Where have you been? He says, didn't you know that I must be about my Father's business?

Our text for this morning, this childhood scene from Jesus' life, is another example of how he was like us. He is just twelve years old when this scene takes place. Today we have what is called a prolonged adolescence. But there was no such thing in Jesus' day. You went literally from childhood into adulthood, and the bridge was called Bar Mitzvah. A boy began his apprenticeship for a trade when he

was twelve years old. Girls were betrothed at adolescence, probably about the same age, then married at fourteen or fifteen, beginning their vocation in life as wives and mothers.

Young people today think about vocations generally at the end of adolescence, at eighteen or nineteen, or maybe a little older. There are some people in middle age who are still trying to figure out what they are going to be when they grow up. I was in my fifties before I knew what God wanted me to do.

In Jesus' time there was no such luxury. You had only one choice. In fact, it is more accurate to say you didn't have any choice. You were destined for a life according to who you were, your gender, your class. For boys, your destiny was probably to be in your father's business.

Jesus is just twelve years old. His parents take him to the Temple in Jerusalem for his Bar Mitzvah. It was a big day in the life of a Jewish family, and still is. We all have friends in the Jewish community who celebrate Bar Mitzvahs, and now Bat Mitzvahs for girls, though Bat Mitzvahs did not exist in Jesus' time. At this point in their life the child stands up in the synagogue and reads the Torah from the Hebrew. Then they are accepted into the congregation of elders. There is a big party afterwards. In our time some Bar and Bat Mitzvahs are legendary. They rent out hotels now and have a grand party.

We don't know what Jesus' parents did for the celebration of his Bar Mitzvah. Maybe they rented the Elks Club. We don't know. But we know that they did something, because the text says that relatives and friends were there for the occasion.

At any rate, after the celebration, they head back to Nazareth. They get a day's journey before they realize that Jesus isn't with them. They retrace their steps to Jerusalem, and after several days, discover him in the Temple, debating theology with the Rabbis.

He has found his vocation. Which is what you were supposed to do in that culture when you are twelve years old. Luke makes this point with this marvelous irony. Jesus says, "I must be in my Father's house." But the old King James version reads, "I must be about my Father's business." My criterion in choosing the best, most accurate translation, is to pick the one that says what you want it to say. Only in this case, they are both the same, really. Whether he is "in my Father's house," or "about my Father's business," the point is the same. At that age, boys entered into their vocations. At that age, Jesus sensed that he had a calling from God.

But then Luke says he went back to Nazareth with his parents, and "he was obedient to them," as the Jewish Law demands, "Honor your father and your mother." That means he went back to apprentice with his father. But I can't help but think, it must be different now. From that time on there must have been tension in that family. You can just imagine it, the tension between parents and son. The son obedient, attempting to fulfill his parents expectation of him, but all the while feeling he should be someplace else, doing something else.

So the first thing this text reveals to us is something about families and parenting. At the end of this Temple scene, Luke says, "Mary kept all these things in her heart." Which is another way of saying, she pondered them. At the end of the nativity scene, when the shepherds leave after announcing what they

have heard from the angels, it says, "Mary pondered these things in her heart." Here it says, "Mary kept these things in her heart," but it is really the same thing. I think "ponder" must mean, "I don't get it." Mary seemed to pondered a lot of things.

Mary had a hard time raising her son. She only appears in two scenes after the nativity. Here in this one, the Bar Mitzvah scene, and then when her son is grown. People tell her what her son is doing. Mary is embarrassed by her son's behavior. He is preaching, perhaps in Nazareth. A big crowd is there. She comes to take him home. Can you imagine this? He must be in his thirties now, and his mother is still looking after him.

The crowd is around Jesus. The word goes up through the crowd, "Jesus, your mother is here." Jesus points to the crowd, to strangers, and says, "Here are my mother and my brothers." It must have broken her heart, hurt her terribly. Poor Mary. You would think, when will she ever learn? Why does she keep doing these things?

She keeps doing them because she is a parent, and she behaves like a parent. She knows her son is special. She didn't need angels to tell her that. She also has an image of what her son is going to become, what she wanted him to be. The only problem is, it is her image of what she wanted him to be. "One day," she said, "he's going to be great." She knew that. She spent twelve years dreaming about what he was going to be.

One of the meanings of this scene, the Bar Mitzvah in the Temple in Jerusalem, is that it reveals to her that he's not going to be the way she wanted him to be, not the way she had planned. He has his own plans. More accurately, God has plans for him now, and at twelve, he announced it to his mother, "I must be about my Father's business." Mary said, "Why do you do this to us?" Jesus answered, "Why don't you understand me?"

All of the gospels agree that Mary never did understand her son, not until after the Resurrection. Which means, in that regard, Mary was no different than anybody else. No one understood who he really was until after the Resurrection. They all had something else in mind for him. They all wanted him to be something else, just like his mother. They wanted him to conform to the expectation, to the dreams that they had about him, what they wanted him to do for them.

So Mary is no different than anybody else. Nor is she different than any other parent, who at some point realizes, we've got a stranger living in our house. The baby is becoming an adult through the labyrinth of adolescence. You know what that means. You know when it starts, too. The door to the bedroom is closed now, and a sign over the door, saying, "Do not enter." That means, he has seceded from the union now. He has issued a declaration of independence and declared that this is sovereign territory.

That is when parents can identify with what Mary had to go through. That's when they "ponder" all these things. "Ponder" means, "What's happening to our family?" Mary is going through that same confusion.

I'd like to point out to you that the Church honors Mary, not for her great wisdom, which she didn't have. They honored her for her faith. Mary is, for us, the model of faith. But I would suggest that she is equally exemplary as a model of a parent, for the same reason the Church lifted her up as the model believer. She is the model parent, because she hung in there for her son. She stayed by her son even though she never understood him, even though he broke her heart. She stayed with him. She was there at the manger, and she was at the cross. She is the only one who can say that. She was with him from the beginning to the end, never quite understanding him. Mary is the model of a parent.

But that is a sub-text to this story. You could call it "parental bewilderment." The main theme of this story is the son's vocation. Luke says that he discovered it the same way that you and I discover it when we grow up. "Day by day, like us, he grew." Luke put it this way, "He increased in wisdom and in stature." Which means, he struggled with the developmental tasks of growing up. You all know those developmental stages, and in this scene he is in adolescence, that state where we gain self-consciousness, and ask: "What am I going to do?" "Who am I?" "What should I do with my life?" Which is when Jesus went to the Temple, and that's when it hit him. He discovered who it is that he should be.

Luke says that Jesus discovered his vocation when he was in the Temple. "I must be about my Father's business." God had a mission in mind for Jesus from the very beginning. That is what the nativity stories are all about. Christmas says that God had a mission for Jesus from the very beginning. At Jesus' birth, God had a vocation for him.

But get this. This is what I want you to see. Jesus didn't discover that mission until he visited the Temple at twelve. Which means, he discovered his vocation right on time. He discovered it when you and I discover who we are, and what we should be, during that time of self-consciousness, and self-awareness, and self-searching. He is just like us. It happened to him when we ask, "Who am I, and what am I supposed to do with my life?"

If that is true, then maybe this story is saying something about our lives as well, and something about the meaning of vocation for us. Maybe Jesus is our pattern in that God has called each one of us into a vocation, into

greatness, and is waiting for us to respond to that. Jesus was called to be the Messiah.

I want to underscore that none of you are called into that vocation. Some, I suspect, have tried it on, considering the burdens that you carry around, but that job has already been taken. You don't need to be the Messiah, nor the Savior of the World. That position has been filled as well.

The call that I am talking about is to do something significant with your life, to realize that I am placed here for a short while, and placed here to make a difference, to give and not just to consume, to have my soul fed as well as my body, to be here for something significant, not just to have a great time. That's what it means to be "about your Father's business." It means to know that you are supposed to live a significant life. Your life is supposed to make a difference. It should make a difference that you lived. You should have the courage to take the risks that will make that happen.

Here at St. Peter's that can mean a great many things. Frankly, I believe that it is to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ with the community we live in. Our vocation is to see that the community of Forestville knows whom we are and what we believe. That will draw people to Jesus and change their lives. It will draw people to St. Peter's and change our life.

Father, we ask that you continually reveal to us your calling upon our lives.

Send us the Holy Spirit who will infuse us with the strength and courage to share the name of Jesus with everyone we meet. We ask that you give us the gift of speech when we encounter those who are suffering, those who are searching and those who want a closer walk with you. Amen.