

Are you—like me—wondering what the Holy Family had been “up to” since we last “saw” Jesus in a manger in Bethlehem? What Luke’s gospel tells us is this:

- On the 8th day, the baby was circumcised and formally given the name “Jesus,” as the angel had told Mary before the child had even been conceived. The offering they gave was the one prescribed for poor people.
- On the 40th day of Jesus’ life, Mary and Joseph brought the baby to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord, as was required for first-born sons. This is where Mary and Joseph met a holy man named Simeon and a holy, 84-year-old prophet named Anna, each of whom recognized the baby as the Messiah and foretold much about the child. Luke reports (2:33) that “the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him.”
- Then, Luke says, the Holy Family returned to Nazareth (2:39).

At this point, are you—like me—wondering “What about the wise men from the East that Matthew tells us about who visited the Holy Family?” (2:1-12) Let me **assure** you that there is a way that all the events of Jesus’ birth can fit together; let me **reassure** you that I won’t be preaching about THAT in any detail today. Instead, I just want to say that Jesus would have been about a year old when the magi found him in a “house” (scripture says) in Bethlehem and worshiped him (Matt. 2:11) The Holy Family then fled to Egypt for a year before hearing about King Herod’s death and subsequently returning to Nazareth.

Which brings us to today’s gospel lesson, a lesson that reveals **all** we are told about Jesus’ childhood:

- The family went to Jerusalem every year for Passover, more than the minimum requirement. This tells us that the family was very devout. Travel from Nazareth to Jerusalem would have been about a four-day trip each way, and the Feast of Passover was seven days long—so, a two-week trip every year.
- This event in today’s gospel lesson was when Jesus was “in his 12th year,” in other words, he was between his 11th and 12th birthday. In Jesus’ time, as today, Jewish males were expected to become accountable to God’s Law on their 13th birthday. In the year before—as Jesus was in today’s gospel lesson—Jewish boys were expected to orally interpret the scripture they had spent the past six or seven years memorizing.

Perhaps you have heard other—apocryphal—stories about Jesus as a child. We want to **KNOW** what Jesus was like as a child. And the verse in Luke’s gospel just prior to today’s gospel lesson tells us **all**

that we need to know, “The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom, and the favor of God was upon him.” (2:40).

Keep in mind that Luke is narrating Mary’s reminiscences about Jesus’ birth. Only Mary could have known, for instance, about the annunciation of Jesus’ birth to her. Only Mary could have known the things that Luke says Mary “pondered” or “treasured in her heart.”

Today’s gospel lesson isn’t really about Jesus’ childhood, though, is it? Rather, what we get is a glimpse of Jesus as a preteen who is beginning to distinguish his own identity from his mother and from Joseph. This is a transitional moment, a turning point, in Jesus’ early life, when he turns from his family of birth—particularly, from his step-father—toward his heavenly Father. Jesus knows who he IS and what he must DO in life.

You just heard the story, how Mary and Joseph were at least a day’s journey toward home when they discovered that Jesus wasn’t anywhere among their entourage. This speaks of their trust in Jesus, their trust in his near coming of age.

Of course they returned to Jerusalem to search for their missing son. I’ve often wondered where they looked for Jesus before they found him in the Temple, engaged in theological discourse with the learned rabbis there. Our lesson today says that “all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers.”

Can you imagine what a privilege it would have been for elite rabbis who studied and taught scripture in the Jerusalem Temple to be in conversation about scripture with the “author of scripture,” albeit in the flesh of a tweenager? Jesus must not have acted superior about his understanding, otherwise the rabbis would have been more threatened than amazed. It would be decades before teachers in the Temple would become threatened by the adult Jesus’ life and teaching.

What I’m hoping to share with you today is how settled this near man-child Jesus was in his own “skin,” in his own self. He was where he felt he was supposed to be, in the Temple, which he would tell his mother in their coming reunion was “his Father’s house.” This doesn’t feel snarky or the kind of coming-of-age rebellion with which we may be more familiar with from our own lives or the lives of our children. This feels like someone, albeit a person young in years, who knows exactly who he is and what he must do in this life.

Jesus tells his mother this when she and Joseph found him in the Temple. He said, “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house? Notice the word “must,” as in, “I **MUST** be in my Father’s house.”

There's another way to translate this statement. Dr. Meda Stamper, a Presbyterian minister and commentator caught the preaching world's attention last week with her observation that (and this is a long quote from Dr. Stamper), "The phrase 'in my Father's house' is not easy to translate because the Greek text does not specify to what it refers but says something like 'in the undefined-plural-somethings of my Father.' This has been understood as a place (which, here, is the temple) or as a group of people (in this instance, the teachers) or as an activity (the business or affairs of the Father). But it is perhaps most helpful (although not workable in a written translation!) to leave it open, to think of it as all the **somethings**—places, people, doings—that advance the purposes of God's love for the world."

UNQUOTE.

So, notice here the ambiguity of Jesus' response concerning the Temple. Even then, even as he embraced its learning and discourse, he sensed that there were other purposes God had in store for him—and for us—outside the Temple. No wonder Jesus' earthly parents didn't understand what he was saying!

Notice here, too, is that these are the very first words that Jesus himself has spoken in Luke's gospel account. Up to now, everyone is talking ABOUT Jesus. Now we hear directly from the Messiah himself, and he in essence declares his identity as God's son. This is every bit as much as a call story as one that any seminarian would share with us. Don't be fooled by his physical age; this is an amazingly mature soul in such a young body. He knows who he is and what he must do, even though (as we later hear at a wedding in Cana) his "hour has not yet come."

I wonder what Joseph thought when he heard his wife's son declare the Temple to be his "Father's house" and his Father's "things" to be the things that he MUST do. Did he understand that, like all children, they do not "belong" to their parents, but are given to them only for a little while to nurture into doing the purpose they are born to do? We have all the pieces of the puzzle, laid out so clearly in scripture. The only pieces of this child-Messiah puzzle that Joseph and Mary had were the words given to them by angels and held in wonderment in their hearts, and the reality of this remarkable child named Jesus, which means, "Yahweh saves," or "The Lord is salvation."

Why am I telling you all this today? I wonder what of God's **undefined-plural-somethings** you MUST be "about" this year.