

Jesus Gets Lost

A Reflection for Morning Worship on the Star Words: *Faithfulness & Intelligence*
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
Sunday, January 16, 2022
Text: Luke 2:42-52

This story about Jesus getting lost, at least as far as his parents Mary and Joseph are concerned, is truly the story that is every parents' worst nightmare. Whether it's losing track of your three year old at the beach, or your eight year old at the grocery store or your teenager out with friends past curfew, every parent who truly loves a child lives with the constant fear of that child becoming lost. That's what makes it so hard to drop them off at Pre-School the first time, to send them off to middle school or high school, to sleep-away camp or even that first sleep-over at a friend's house. That's why helping them get that driver's license just so you can watch them drive away, off into the sunset, makes your stomach sink as you worry that you might not ever see your baby again. Because, let's face it, it's not your competent, intelligent and capable 16 year old behind the wheel. It's your four year old with the curls and the popsicle stained shirt. Just like it's not your 18 year old you leave behind at college to sleep in a strange room with people you don't know. It's the six year old sniffing as you leave them for that first full day at school. That's why your heart is breaking at all those moments when as a parent your most important job is to say goodbye to that child, that precious sticky-fingered kid with the sneakers that refuse to stay tied. Saying goodbye and trusting they will be okay when you can't see them – for a few hours or a few weeks or months on end – this is the most important thing we do for and with our kids. It's important because these goodbyes hold the seeds of their future and they will only bloom if we can make ourselves get out of the way. And that is painfully difficult to do.

That's why I love this story about the child Jesus which only appears in Luke. It's usually included in the Christmas readings rotation, reserved for the Sunday after Christmas in the "C" cycle of Lectionary readings. That's why it's not always a story we're familiar with. And yet it paints a portrait of Jesus' childhood that is both universally in line with the experiences of parents, and totally unique in how it ends. In this story we find the infant Jesus is no more, a precocious 12 year old now takes center stage. The story itself presents a storyline that is one we can immediately connect with – parents who can't locate their child – and yet it raises even more questions than it answers. Why did Mary & Joseph just assume Jesus was with other friends or family members in the caravan returning to Nazareth? Why was Jesus surprised that his parents didn't think to look for him in the Temple first? I also find myself wondering if this was the first and only time Jesus did something like this, or if was something that happened again and again as Jesus felt called to be "about his Father's business?"

One thing we know from the first line in this text is that this was not the family's first trip to Jerusalem because Luke tells us right up front that "every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover." So, this was not Jesus' first opportunity to stay behind at the Temple. Why this year? I also try to visualize how Jesus began that conversation with the teachers in the Temple who by the time Mary and Joseph arrive three days later are sitting with this boy, deep in conversation. Did he just walk up to the circle of teachers and sit down? Did he linger at the edges of conversation for a while and then ask a question so intelligent, so faith-filled, that the teachers invited him to come into their circle? And what were his questions? Could they be answered by scripture and verse from the Torah or

from the Talmud or the other sacred stories the study of which was the teachers' life work? Or was he asking them questions about the nature of God and God's intentions for the humans created with so much love and hope and expectation? We just don't know. All we have is the image Luke paints for us in his words of this young boy in the midst of a circle of aging men whose gaze and attention was riveted on him. It is onto this scene that the frantic Mary and Joseph appear, Mary chiding him for giving them so little thought and causing them so much worry.

One thing surprised me as I read through various commentaries on this text was how scholars disagreed over what Mary's tone of voice with Jesus must have been. After all, Luke only says, "Mary *said*." Not Mary screamed. Not Mary whispered. Not Mary whined. Not Mary cried. Nope. Luke says, "Mary *said*." So, we are left to ponder how she said it. Was she angry, furious even, her voice high pitched and strained? Or was she genuinely surprised at Jesus, her gentle son, being so uncharacteristically thoughtless, her voice soft and burnished with her pain and confusion? That's another thing about this story, and so many others in the bible. How we imagine the story unfolding is always embedded deeply in our own context, our own experiences at the moment. A mother reading this after a knock-down drag-out with an eye-rolling teenager will hear Mary's angry voice as a justification for her own loss of patience with her child.

On the other hand, a mother reading this when another holiday passes with no word from a grown child now absent from her life might hear in Mary's voice the same anguish her own would hold if the phone rang in that moment of feeling forgotten. Again, how did Mary sound to herself? To Jesus? To the teachers? To us? We don't know, and that's probably a good thing.

Biblical scholar Karoline Lewis sees in this part of the story an important invitation from Mary to each of us, an invitation to join her in pondering, in reflecting “because none of what God is ever up to should be easy to get or at once understood.”¹ She argues that we all would benefit from thinking more, holding silence for reflection more, and talking off the cuff much, much less. She notes, we hold “viewpoints and beliefs that have too swiftly jumped to conclusions and that have allowed assumptions to take over. We are quick to respond, quick to answer, quick to interject without adequate thoughtfulness ... [or] appropriate interpretation of what has been and where things might be going.”

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I like this notion of Mary inviting us to join her in her ponderings. And Luke is clear she is always pondering, always paying attention to what’s happening as her life unfolds as the mother of this child who would become Savior. I like the assumption that Mary is both faithful and intelligent since for far too long Mary has been shoved into the background, more prop than person. Or, worse, put up on a pedestal as the perfect model for womanhood – silent, obedient and passive. The Mary we see confronting the 12 year old Jesus in the Temple is none of these things. She is a worried mother, surprised at her own child’s actions. And as she leaves once more for Nazareth, her tween-ager son in tow, she knows her life and his have changed forever. For the first time he has voiced that he is about his “Father’s business” and that she and Joseph should have known that would be the case. I’m pretty sure Mary didn’t have another restful night after that trip since she now knew that Jesus knew who he was and what he was supposed to do with his life. That

¹ Karoline Lewis, “Keeping Company with Mary,” [Dear Working Preacher](http://www.workingpreacher.org), December 23, 2018, www.workingpreacher.org

² Ibid.

can't have been an easy moment for anyone. Yet, Luke is clear that Jesus did return to Nazareth with them and "was obedient to them." Years passed and as they did, "Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor." So, this is clearly another one of those already/not yet moments in the Scriptures. God's plan is starting to become visible but it's not clear yet.

Since it is my intent in my sermons over the next few Sundays during this season of Epiphany to encourage us to reflect more deeply on some of the Star Words we celebrate on Epiphany Sunday, it only makes sense for me to ask two more questions of this oh so human story about Joseph, Mary, and Jesus. The first question is, who displays faithfulness in this story and how do they do it? The second, who exhibits intelligence in this story and how do they do that? Of course, these questions fit right in with the notion of accepting Mary's invitation to ponder things more deeply in our hearts that Karoline Lewis finds in this story. If we were all together in the sanctuary, I would ask you to turn to someone sitting next to you and talk about this notion of who is displaying faithfulness. But, we're not all together and waiting for comments in the Chat, while an option, is really not a practical one. So, I am left with the next best thing which is to invite you to have that conversation with anyone you might be watching worship with. Or, have that conversation with yourself!

In any event, let me share just a few of my observations for your consideration. Who displays faithfulness in this story? Everyone! From start to finish. Mary and Joseph have faith in the friends and relatives with whom they are traveling that Jesus will have found safe travels with them. When they discover this is not the case, they have faith God will help them find Jesus, so they return to Jerusalem and search. They do find him, eventually, and they have faith he will understand how much he has worried

them and are surprised to find out from him that he didn't give that a thought. Jesus, for his part, had faith his parents, who knew his birth story, would know where he was and why he was there. They didn't until he explained it to them. The teachers had faith that this extraordinary child was worth all the time and energy they were investing in him, that surely this was a unique and special boy that God had big plans for. Finally, Luke had faith as he wrote this story that Jesus, Mary and Joseph would find a way to live as a family again as he continued to grow up and apparently they did. We don't know much about Joseph's faithfulness but I would argue his steadfast presence at Mary's side through everything that happened could only be as a result of faithfulness that few possess.

And now for that second question: who exhibits intelligence in this story? This one is a little trickier. Yes, of course, the boy Jesus astonishes the teachers in the Temple with his knowledge of the sacred texts and the thoughtful questions he asks. But who else is intelligent in this story? I would argue Mary certainly is since she has the good sense to "treasure all these things in her heart." She knew from before Jesus was born that he was destined for incredible things, and yet he was still her baby boy. She knew she had to keep all these memories in her heart, pondering them, turning them over and over, since some day that is all she would have. So too, Joseph displays a unique intelligence grounded in deep faith to let this incredible situation unfold as God intended. Joseph was wise enough to know that God had a plan and that he was right in the middle of it, as the earthly father of the Messiah. We don't know much about Joseph, but we do know he understood exactly what God needed him to do and he did it. No questions asked. No complaining. He just did it. Would that more people were able to do that.

Jesus gets lost and we are left with so many rich notions to ponder! Jesus gets lost and gives us the opportunity to rediscover ourselves as we dare to dig deeper into this story about a precocious boy embarking on a journey of self-discovery that would eventually change the world. Jesus gets lost and Mary ponders, and invites us to ponder with her, all the big questions of life like how it is that parents and children are intertwined and yet distinct, joined together in fundamental ways even as life pulls everyone in different directions. Where is God in the midst of all this chaotic craziness we call life? Blessed with God's gifts of faithfulness and intelligence, how is God inviting us to be part of the solutions for healing our fragile broken world? May we find the time and the courage, the faithfulness and intelligence, to sit with Mary and ponder all these things in our hearts, for it is there we will find God and the truth we seek. Amen.