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**January 6, 2019**

**Where Else Would He Be**

**Luke 2:41-52**

41Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. 42And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. 43When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it.44Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. 45When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. 46After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. 47And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers.48When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." 49He said to them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" 50But they did not understand what he said to them.51Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart. 52And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.

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I'm fascinated by what stories people choose to tell. In my family, when anyone brings a new significant other to a family gathering for the first time, you know there's going to be some old tales pulled out and dusted off. "Hey Bill, did Rachel tell you about that time when she..." We try to bring humor and a playfulness into the moment, to help the newcomer feel a little more comfortable, and maybe make the family member feel a little embarrassment as their old stories are shared.

That's a little bit how our scripture feels this morning... this tale of Jesus as a 12-year-old being left behind in Jerusalem as the family travels back home after the Passover festival. We don't hear much about Jesus from his childhood... in fact, this is just about the only story we DO hear about him in between his birth and baptism into ministry as an adult, and Luke's gospel is the only one to tell it. The rest is left up to the imagination... We're left wondering whether he was a well behaved child or whether he threw temper tantrums. What was his

favorite game as a kid? Did he make mistakes like everyone else? Did he ever struggle with whether to do right or wrong, or did he just know?

While most of this is left up to our imaginations – not to mention our theological persuasion – we are given this gem of a story... one that gives us a glimpse into the life of Jesus as a young boy... or at least the way Luke tells it! We are painted a picture of a devout Jewish family that makes the annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem with their extended family and friends in order to celebrate the Passover feast. This 4-5 day trek (each way) once a year, was a significant time and financial commitment, but one that mattered to them... one that became part of their family tradition. Jesus might not have grown up in Jerusalem, in the central hub of Jewish religion and culture, but it was certainly a place that he was accustomed to... almost like my summer camp - Camp Aldersgate - would have been for me as a child.

Now, we could get into some of the details of this story... playing the blame game as we wonder how Mary and Joseph could have possibly traveled a whole DAY without realizing their son was not with them! It feels a little like the holiday movie, "Home Alone," where Macaulay Culkin stars as the young boy left sleeping in the attic while his family scrambles to make their early morning flight to Paris... only to realize mid-flight that they forgot their son at home. While the drama that ensues from the three day search for young Jesus could tug at our own heartstrings as we imagine ourselves in Mary and Joseph's shoes... at how distraught WE would feel if we lost our child, if only for a few minutes... let alone a few days!

But I'll leave those reflections for another day, because what I really think Luke is trying to get us to focus on here in this story is Jesus – this child, mid-way between his infant story and his baptismal launch into ministry. This extraordinary man who would one day be called the Son of God --- wrestling with his own sense of identity and place in this world.

Isn't this, after all, one of the major developmental tasks of childhood, teenage, and young adult years: discovering and affirming one's identity? Coming to grips with who we are... as we push away from our parents, trying to discover who we are apart from them, as well as in relation with our peers and the world around us? That's what makes these tender years so challenging, and so important at the same time!

Every time I fuss about my girls in their terrible threes and fours... yes, it goes well beyond terrible twos!... people who've been parenting much longer than I have try to comfort me by saying, "Oh, just wait until they're teenagers!" I'm not sure what kind of comfort that is, but it certainly reminds me of what is yet to come... the years when they will come into their own... their own identity, their own sense of self... and pushing away from parents and parental authority goes hand in hand with this process!

I find it so interesting that Luke leaves us guessing as to whether Jesus intentionally stayed back in Jerusalem as his family and traveling companions headed home, or if like Macaulay Culkin, he was forgotten in the midst of the chaos of packing up and heading

out. By Jesus' response to his mother's question when they finally found him in the Temple, it doesn't sound like he's too remorseful though... It almost sounds like he stayed back on purpose... "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?"

In this vein, it's as if our movie analogy switches from *Home Alone* to *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, as Jesus finds himself, like Ferris, alone in the big city, a young man in the world of adults, left to fend for himself and make his own choices for once. There is a defining scene for Ferris when he and his friends (Cameron and Sloane) find themselves in the midst of a downtown street parade in the middle of Chicago. In the confusion of the crowd, Ferris slips away from his friends, and in his absence they ask the question, "What do you think Ferris is going to do?" What kind of mischief will he get himself into next? But also in a bigger sense, what will this remarkable young man do with the rest of his life? Who will he become? The question is the same for Ferris as it is for Jesus... Will he live into his potential, embracing the title Son of God, or will he be conformed to this world and its ways?

These big questions don't just apply to Ferris, or Jesus... but they apply to us as well! Who are we becoming? Our identity, who we choose to be and what we believe we can become, develops most powerfully in our younger years, but it is a continual process that we journey through our whole lives long. We never ARRIVE, but are constantly becoming. What defines someone's identity? Is it their family ties, a religious experience, a sense of vocation or calling, a personal creed/motto/or belief, or one's dreams and ideals? Through Luke's masterful storytelling, we come to see that Jesus found his identity by affirming his relationship to God. "Did you not know that I MUST be in my Father's house?" Of all the places this young man could have gone, he plants himself down in the midst of the teachers in the Temple.

We know how the story goes... who Jesus would grow up to become... We wouldn't be gathered here today if we didn't. What this story leaves me wondering about though is OUR OWN identities. No matter how young we are, or how many decades we have under our belts, we are constantly in a state of developing who and whose we are – and living out the purposes that we are called to. In this new year, I invite you to reflect on who you are becoming. To look critically at your life and the decisions you are making for the next stage. Are you spending your time in the places that foster healthy growth and development? Are you listening for where God is calling you to grow and stretch, to use your unique gifts and personality to serve others? I pray this new year might be a time of blessing for you as you continue to identify who and whose you are, and live as a blessing to the world around you. Amen.