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## *Meditation*

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*Luke 2:41-52; 1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26*

One of the awkward things about the Sunday after Christmas is how quickly we move from the baby in the manger to the rest of his life. In our minds – and in our liturgical calendar – Jesus goes from the baby, sweetly sleeping in the manger to an adult in the blink of an eye. This year, Jesus will even briefly age backward; next week is Epiphany, when the Magi will visit, and Jesus was most likely a toddler. At any rate, once Christmas is over, we forget entirely about Jesus' childhood – and by mid-April, we'll be at the cross.

Today's passage, then, is a good reminder that Jesus did not grow from infancy to adulthood in about four months. He did have a childhood, even if we don't know much about it. In our story from Luke, Jesus is twelve – a pre-teen. If he attended school in Minneapolis, he'd be a sixth grader – a middle schooler.

Each year, Joseph and Mary and Jesus traveled to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. This was a pilgrimage, one taken year after year. They traveled in a group; probably near-to-all of their able-bodied community traveled with them. This year, Jesus was old enough to not only go with them but to be sort of left to his own devices. He was twelve, old enough to keep up on the walk, old enough to be almost in charge of himself. The group made it to Jerusalem, no problem. Jesus had been something of a model pre-teen on this trip, one must assume, because Joseph and Mary appear to give him quite a bit of freedom once they arrive.

The summer before I was supposed to begin the sixth grade, I took a summer school course at my new middle school. I took the class mostly to get used to my new school, hopefully to make some friends. But most importantly, I took it because that fall, I would begin to make a three-and-a-half-mile trek across the city of San Francisco, every school day, on public transit, by myself. It seemed an impossible amount of freedom.

Jesus, though, was captivated by the temple, and the teachers, and the learning, and he crammed as much time there as possible. He was so interested in it that he remained behind in Jerusalem as the group gathered and their journey began.

When I was twelve, I was allowed to ride my bike about a half mile to my best friend's house.

When Jesus was twelve, he decided that rather than going home with his parents and travel group, he'd stay in Jerusalem. By himself. And just. . . not tell anyone his plans.

Jesus, you're so grounded.

I can't imagine the lurch in Mary and Joseph's stomachs when, after a day of walking, they realized that Jesus was not with them. That he wasn't anywhere in the group. That he was lost, maybe somewhere on the road - maybe all the way back in Jerusalem. So they walk back to Jerusalem, and spend three days looking for Jesus, before they find him, sitting in the temple, among the teachers, who are "amazed at his understanding and his answers."

They rush toward him with relief, and Mary says, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety."

Once, a child I was looking after went missing for approximately one minute at the zoo. When I found her again, I definitely did not have the presence of mind to say, "I have been searching for you with great anxiety." There was a hug, and a brief scold, and then several deep breaths, as I attempted to get my heart back under control. After four days, I'm surprised Mary and Joseph weren't yelling or crying, or just generally hysterical.

It's easy to imagine ourselves in Mary or Joseph's place. The 'misplaced child' is a common plot device in movies and TV shows; most parents have a story or three about turning for "just a moment". I get more than a little panicky imagining searching for a child for four whole days.

Most of us are old enough that it's a little harder to imagine ourselves in the twelve-year-old Jesus' place. But I bet we can all remember getting 'lost' once or twice. Sometimes I was actually lost - turned around and separated from my parents, or my class, or whoever was supposed to be responsible for me. Other times, my parents were the only ones who knew I was lost. I certainly wasn't lost. I knew exactly where I was and what I was doing. It was my parents who were lost, if you ask me. They would rush up with a hug and an admonishment and I was baffled. I've been right here! Why were you so worried? I wasn't lost at all.

Jesus asks his parents, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?"

In other words, he knew right where he was all along, and it seemed perfectly reasonable to him that his parents should have known that he would be exactly there. Why would he be anywhere else?

The child Samuel is also right where he belongs, also in an unexpected place. The story of Samuel begins with his mother, Hannah, married to Elkanah and barren, taunted by a fellow wife, and praying at the temple for a child. After a fairly awful

interaction with the priest Eli, Hannah and her husband conceive a child, and she is so grateful for the gift of her child, she decides that after the child is weaned, she will take him to the temple and he will be an offering to God. Her child - her gift - will grow up to serve God in the temple. So the child Samuel grows up in the temple, in Eli's care, ministering to the people.

You probably heard the similarities in the two stories. They weave together, a reminder that children can be - and often are - teachers. Just as any of us adults, they can minister to the community, dedicating themselves to God.

Jesus' story of teaching in the temple and the beginning of the prophet Samuel's story are told together because there are so many parallels. Each story offers a way into the other. Beyond this brief glimpse into their lives in these particular passages, stories about both of these men mirror each other. Both children are gifts from God, unexpected births, both Mary and Hannah sing and pray in response to the gift of a child. And both feature a young child who breaks traditional barriers of education and teachings, and does things his own way - or perhaps, does things God's way.

I invite you to pull out your bulletins and take a look at the art on the cover. The artwork for today's bulletin cover is from a project called Jesus Mafa. In the 1970s in Cameroon, French missionaries worked with Cameroonian Christians to create paintings of different New Testament passages. The community created dramatic interpretations of those passages, which were then

photographed, and those photographs were transcribed into paintings. They created scenes from throughout the New Testament, spanning the Annunciation to Mary to Pentecost. Each painting – as any biblical depiction does – offers new insights into familiar texts.

This interpretation of the story caught my attention. The bulk of the Luke text is about the search for Jesus. When I think about this story, I call it “Jesus teaching in the temple,” but what I really remember is Mary and Joseph, searching for their son. Instead, this painting instead captures verse 46 and 47: “After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers.”

Look at the faces of those who are sitting and listening to him speak. They lean forward; their faces are lit up. A man in glasses holds his arms out in amazement. Another has forgotten about the scroll he holds in his hands to listen to this astonishing child. Even the skeptical man in the back listens carefully, not sure if this child is for real, but not willing to miss a word anyway.

This! This is the miracle and the mystery and the point of the story. This child who teaches those who are four, five times his age. The adults in the scene realize that what they are seeing is astonishing.

But instead, our focus is usually on Mary and Joseph, those two small figures hurrying toward the doorway. So, look again. Let the painting reframe the story for you. Look at the faces of those listening to Jesus. Look at where the artist directs our focus: the interaction between Jesus and the teachers.

And while most of us would be astonished if the children of our churches took over our bible studies and our education hours and our preaching, asking questions, giving insightful answers, the truth is that we can learn a lot from the questions that those children ask. We adults just don't always pay attention.

Samuel was maybe four when he began to minister to the people.

Jesus was twelve when he taught the teachers.

The teachers – and the people – were as old as you or I when they learned from children.

May we remember the wonder of those teachers who sat for days, and listened to a child with wonder and amazement, and make that wonder our own.

Amen.