

Christmas II A  
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Grace and Holy Trinity Church  
January 5, 2020  
**Luke 2:41-52**

I am grateful today I get to preach about today's gospel- because it was my go-to theology for helping develop youth ministry programs and programs for children in the Diocese of Bethlehem. I got called to help with youth groups, which had slowly declined or to help start groups that never existed before. I started conversations by engaging in a bit of the Ignatian spiritual reading of the gospel and asking where do you fit into the scene? Did they think themselves Mary or Joseph, a peer to Jesus, one of the elders of the Temple, or another witness?

Depending upon where we find ourselves, I would guide the conversation accordingly. If you are a parent- how do you feel like Mary and Joseph? When you realized that Jesus should have been somewhere and he wasn't, then this moment of reflection is for you- don't worry, I'll get to the elders and peers in a moment.

I think for Mary and Joseph, there is a strong correlation with the sadness, worry, and anxiety that comes from our expectations for our kids not matching with the reality of their experience. Even if we don't have children of our own, the hope that the next generation will take our place and do what we did is often a letdown.

The very nature of this expectation is missing a lot of information- that may be anecdotal- but is nevertheless true in my experience. Most people who are in their 20-30s need to work on weekends. The Monday through Friday workweek is quickly becoming a thing of the past. Most households require two or more incomes to maintain the cost of living. Many live far from parents and grandparents and extended families while others cohabitate with their parents well into adulthood to save money or make a dent in student loans. The world that 20 and 30s of the 21st century live in is drastically different than it was a generation or two before.

It doesn't stop us from asking the question often where are all the youth, where are all the young adults, where are all the children? Where are all the families, the people like me when I was a ten year old, a 20 year old a 30 year old? Usually, the statement that follows these kinds of questions is, "I've done my time- I chaperoned trips when I was in my 20s" I taught Sunday school when I was in my 30s when my kids were young. I did my part, but where is the next generation. I've heard a lot of you say something similar to this. Or likewise, "My child used to come to church, but they don't anymore." Some openly wonder why they aren't here. Others say they are still members but only come on special occasions; some of them have found a denomination that suits their spiritual lives better. In contrast, others have converted to other faith traditions altogether, or have pursued another form of spirituality, agnosticism, or even atheism.

I know many of you are sad and scared about the fact that your kids and grandkids aren't here, and that list of things about the reality of their lives probably doesn't do much to assuage the feelings. Just as I imagine Jesus saying to Mary and Joseph - why were you searching for me? Clearly, I was in my Father's house, didn't do much to alleviate their anxiety, anger, or sadness. But it is the truth of the situation, and it is worth being pondered. Let us consider these ideas in our hearts like Mary, who took Jesus' statement with her always.

Jesus claiming I was in my Father's house, would have sounded like an odd statement to be made by anyone who heard it, not just Mary and Joseph, Jesus' home was with his parents, in Galilee, not in Jerusalem, and not in the Temple. Jesus probably would have been hanging out with other 13-year-old boys when the family caravan arrived in Jerusalem for Passover. There would have been some version of the conversation that it was time to head back after the festival. As his

friends and family members (remember Jesus had brothers and sisters) probably would have all left one by one, the temple complex to make the return trek. Each time Jesus would have probably said I'll catch up, or I'm going to stay just a while longer, no one would have thought for an instant that a 12-year-old boy would want to debate law and question scripture for three additional days. Anyone who has spent time with a middle schooler would be able to tell you that most would instead do almost anything other than study.

Jesus' peers who saw this behavior would have thought him odd, the son of a carpenter engaging in deep theological thought, would have been strange. Yet there he was, and there he stayed. If we cast ourselves as peers to Jesus, what do we think of our peers, especially those who do not fit into the status quo? The ones who we think we know, but who have a much different or more profound spiritual need or a more unexpected way of exploring that aspect of our lives. Do we leave them alone? Do we engage with them where they are? Do we stand back and watch in quiet awe as they discern their life with God?

It can be quite awe-inspiring to see our colleagues, our peers, our fellow Christians live into the questions of faith, even if we have no idea what they are struggling with or how they are engaging the Holy. This role as a peer to the Juvenile Jesus is a precious place to be in the gospel. Let us be like this in our daily lives and work where we allow people to be who they are and where they are and don't try to make them into reflections of ourselves.

If you think of yourself as a temple elder, welcoming Jesus into the discussion. You are the people I would have wanted to be youth leaders. You are the people who need to be leading the church, this community, the diocese, the church at large because you are the people who do not see a weird little kid asking questions or a crisis which needs to be fixed, but instead you see God and welcome them into the conversation. You hear all voices as valuable, and all questions as valid. You see Jesus as a part of the community even when it is not evident that he belongs. You engage with him, and you engage with each of us where we are.

In seminary, they teach that pastoral care is mostly about just showing up and meeting people where they are. Pastorally the elders and the teachers find Jesus. This child had quite a life so far. His parents communicate with angels. He was born in a manger. He was visited by magi at three years old, who brought him gifts fit for a king-incense for blessing, oil for anointing, and gold for his purse. With these gifts came the news that Herod wanted him dead, and so he and his parents escaped to Egypt. They eventually find their way back home, after Herod's death. Talk about a kid who had the right to ask questions of the leaders of the Temple.

I know I am capable of having those conversations other than the angels and the magi; many young people I meet at VCU have similar kinds of questions. Many other folks who I talk with regularly both inside and outside the church have similar spiritual concerns. Who am I? What does God want from me? What am I supposed to do now that XYZ happened?

I hope you are capable of the same thing. That you willingly sit with people who don't match up with your expectations and enjoy their company while engaging with them where they are, whether they are here or there. If you are an elder, it has nothing to do with how old you are or how much you know about scripture or theology or anything. The openness to ask the questions and the flexibility to engage in answering them in community. In conversation and relationship is where the church becomes the church and not a school and not a courtroom and not a forum or lecture or TedTalk. The church gets its identity from the tradition of the Temple where elders and scribes and leaders gathered together to discern God's will for God's people. From generation to generation, the law and the prophets and the stories of scripture were passed down and continue to be passed down. So that every person can increase in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor as Jesus, our life long pattern did.

So come to church and lose your children here, and be a concerned parent, be a peer, be an elder, be a witness to all these things. Join in prayer questioning, living, learning, and loving God and your neighbor, pondering all these things in our hearts all the days of our life.

Amen