

[Scripture Luke 2:41-52 NRSV]

The Boy Jesus in the Temple

⁴¹ Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. ⁴² And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. ⁴³ When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it.

⁴⁴ Assuming 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. ⁴⁵ When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. ⁴⁶ After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. ⁴⁷ And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. ⁴⁸ When 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." ⁴⁹ He said to them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" ⁵⁰ But they did not understand what he said to them. ⁵¹ Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart.

⁵² And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.

[Prayer, Psalm 19:14 NRSV]

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. **Amen.**

This week is the first week after Christmas, so we get to read a story about Jesus' childhood. I don't know if you knew that's the pattern, but it is. There are three years in the lectionary cycle, and there happen to be three stories in Scripture of Jesus as a child. Next year on this day we'll read about the holy family fleeing to Egypt from the second chapter of Matthew. The year after that we'll read the story we read last year on this day, of Jesus parents taking him to be presented at the temple, and their encounters with the righteous man Simeon and the prophet Anna. This year we get this story of the annual Pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Three stories for three years of readings.

I like to look at them together, but even looking at the two stories here in the book of Luke we see this idea of doing what the law requires, and of going to the temple, the holy place, throughout Jesus childhood.

Mary and Joseph are doing what is required of them. They take Jesus, their firstborn son, to the temple to be presented as holy to the Lord because the law requires it. Jesus is circumcised and he's given his name on his eighth day of life because the law requires it. They go to the temple for purification because the law requires it. They offer a sacrifice because the law requires it. And although the story about celebrating Passover isn't quite as explicit about why they are going, Luke's Jewish audience would know that Mary, Joseph, and Jesus weren't just travelling several day's journey to the temple all just for "funsies." Passover is one of the three Pilgrimage Festivals where all Jewish men were to be together in the presence of the Lord in the temple in Jerusalem, because in the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy -you guessed it- the law required it. God's law required it.

When you look at the lectionary calendar these scriptures take us from Christmas Eve to Christmas to Epiphany. When you look at these stories themselves they take us from Jesus' birth to his presentation to the wise men to Egypt, back from Egypt, to staying at the temple to heading home. We're spanning over a decade of Jesus' life in the one or two Sundays from Christmas to Epiphany each year. And in all of those years of his life, we see his family doing what's expected of them all this time.

They are doing what is expected of them under the law. They're doing what their friends and family expect of them. What their culture expects of them. What God expects of them. And they're living this out in front of their son. They are teaching Jesus from birth how to be Jewish. Which is a little humorous. Like, "Hey there, baby God. Jesus, the Word. Who was in the beginning, and was the Word, and was with God and was God. And I'm going to teach you how to live what the Word says." It's funny that that's what they get to do. But they do. As we'd say here in the South, "They're good churchgoin' people." So God the Son learns how to be Jewish from people who seem like they ought to have no business even trying to teach **him**. But they teach him. And he learns. Verse 52 says he grew in wisdom, which brings up all kinds of

questions, but there it is, young Jesus is learning the ways his family honors God in their home and in the temple.

He learns it by doing, because here we are in Luke chapter 2 with not just his parents, but with Jesus himself doing what's expected of him. He goes with his family to the temple. To the holy place. As the law requires. He celebrates Passover, the holy festival in the holy city. He's there to be in the presence of God. And he's not just along for the ride because his dad is required to be there. He's twelve. He's an adult in Jewish culture now, and being male, he's required to be there. He has learned through his childhood these holy habits, when to go to the holy place, and what holy things to do there, how to worship God, how to be in awe of God in his presence. And Jesus is obedient to the Father in this way.

So obedient that his parents think he's being disobedient to them.

We learn how to go to the holy place too. Raise your hand if you were an acolyte in elementary and middle school. A lot of us. We *need* acolytes in a traditional service. We *need* somebody to bring in the light, to light the candles on the altar which symbolize the light of Christ. I've heard more than one pastor say "If I start coughing in the middle of my sermon, I need the acolyte to bring me a glass of water. That's who I'm looking at." We need the acolytes. But I think it's super cool that we also *get* to teach younger believers through being acolytes what to do when they go to worship. We *get* to learn when we're young what to do in this holy place.

When I was in elementary and middle school, my holy places were Berkmar UMC in Lilburn, Georgia and St. Paul's UMC in Clarksdale, Mississippi. And I learned how to be an acolyte in those places. In both of those churches we had the layers of acolyte robes, the black and white, the cassock and surplice and the wooden pectoral cross we had to wear. Half of acolyte training was how to put on all that stuff, and half of it was how not to trip on it all as you went down the aisle. But I still remember that stuff. I remember learning the parts of the service and when to pick up the plates and where to take them after the offering. I remember what we were supposed to do if we walked too fast and our candle blew out before we made it to the chancel.

I remember, twenty-one years later, that first Sunday when my name came up in the acolyte rotation. I remember standing in the narthex and I remember staring really hard at that candle and walking really slowly down the aisle. And I remember before the service started and my mom went to sit down front how she looked me in the eye and said "Don't set the church on fire." Which is something else funny, since now that I work in a church building 40 hours a week I stand in the narthex each Sunday and say to the acolytes "It's okay if you set the church fire."

I love that we get to teach newer believers what to do in the holy place.

And I love that in our scripture Jesus' twelve-year-old self is amazing the teachers with his questions. I love that he's doing that now. He might officially be an adult, but still, even those rabbis know, dude's *twelve*. They're in awe of him.

So they're thinking "what is he gonna do next?" Well *we* know the answer to that. Because we're out of all the childhood Jesus stories we have now. After another week we'll skip to adult Jesus beginning his official ministry. We know he leaves the holy places and the holy people and takes his own holiness out to the wilderness, to the communities, to the fishermen and the tax collectors and the lepers and the prostitutes. He takes his questions, and his wonder and awe of God, and what he's learned. He takes the holy place with him.

I keep talking about holy places in the sense of our temples, like Jesus family would have thought of *the* Temple as their holy place. Someplace specifically set aside, what my friend Allen would call a well-prayed space. But what are your well-prayed spaces outside of this building? The Beach? The mountains? Someplace unexpected? One of mine is the ballroom of the Ramada Inn in Nags Head, North Carolina, because of an annual retreat I got to be a part of for 17 years. Another one is El Refugio.

Many of you know that I've spend a big chunk of my adult life in Ecuador as a missionary working with local churches there and with short-term teams that come from the US and Canada. Hacienda El Refugio is a retreat property owned by the missions organization I used to

work for, and it's in Calacalí, Ecuador, just north of Quito. It is a 300-acre property up on the mountain, and if you or I walked onto the property we'd look around and go "Oh, this is camp." They do retreats and team-building, and they have a challenge course and high ropes and low ropes and a zipline and climbing wall and llamas and horses and fire pits and hiking trails and it looks like camp. But in Ecuador that's super cutting edge and not something most people there have experienced, and so it's this amazing ministry tool. Because it's outside the city and away from the 24/7 barking dogs and car alarms in Quito, it's also the place we take our short-term teams to have some sabbath time while they're on the ground.

My partner Caroline and I have hosted the same team for the last five, going on six years and this group tends to be pretty outdoorsy, so when we take them to El Refugio, we give them two or three hours of solo time. They can read, they can journal, they can sit, they can hike, they just have to be silent with God. And during that time I always go on a hike. We have this clearing at the top of the mountain where they've set up a cross. So I hike up there, and it takes me a while because it's a pretty serious elevation change, and I'm generally not adjusted to the altitude yet when I'm there. Somebody throughout the years planted a bunch of eucalyptus along that path, and so by the time I get up to the top I'm tired and sweating and sucking in eucalyptus-scented air, but then I sit on the bench in front of the cross and I look out over the valley and I watch the fog roll down the mountains and I feel then, that's when I can have my quiet time.

But I love El Refugio not just because it's beautiful, but because it's a place where quite often I've needed that quiet time. Caroline and I take a bet now when we're on the way out there over which one of us is going to wind up crying first. Between the two of us we've been there for job changes and moves. She was there as she was trying to figure out what her call to a ministry job was going to look like for her then-boyfriend, now husband John. We've both wrestled with moving to and from Ecuador from there. I was there a few years ago asking God lots of questions after one of my best friends died at twenty-six. And I was there in March 2018 wrestling with where I felt called to be, having no idea I'd be back in Atlanta in a few weeks getting a call from some pastor in Raleigh named Laura Stern. El Refugio has become a Holy

Place for me because I have wrestled with questions there. And I don't always come away with answers. But I do come away in awe of the Father.

And that's how we're supposed to come away from our holy places, whether they're a mountain on the equator or a building at 12837 Norwood Road. We worship and we rest and we're refreshed, and we come away in awe and maybe with some reminders. Jesus comes away from his holy place increasing in wisdom. Mary comes away treasuring her memories. I'm wearing a bracelet that says "Ecuador" and a tie with the Ecuadorian coat of arms this morning to remind me of some of my holy places. And we teach our acolytes in this place that the most important thing they do is what happens right at the end of the service. We don't just leave the candles burning after worship, and we don't stop at snuffing them out. We take the light of Christ from this place out into the world.

Each and every week we begin the work of Christmas:

to find the lost,
to heal the broken,
to feed the hungry,
to release the prisoner,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among the brothers,
to make music in the heart.

May you find the holy places. May you take the holy places with you.