

January 2, 2021 – Luke 2:40-52

When I was a child, I liked to play a game. You see, after school, my mother would often go shopping. She was a single mother, my sisters were older and often off doing their own things. Which meant that I had to tag along to the store.

And I hated it. It was boring. Yeah, there was the toy aisle. But we didn't have much money. I knew there was no point in even asking most of the time. Staring at toys you could never have got real old, real fast.

So I would I always end up looking for some other way to occupy the time. And, of course, being a child and being rather mischievous, I often decided to try and hide from my mother. I don't know why exactly. Looking back, it seems like a good way to make a long shopping trip take even longer.

But I would look around for some place she couldn't see me. And my favorite was the middle of clothing racks. You know the round ones with hanging clothes on them. I would crawl underneath into that little cavity in the middle. My own little cave.

And I would wait there. For an eternity, it felt like, I would wait there. Until I was sure she was frantically looking for me. Sometimes I would even wait so long, I would scare myself. And start thinking, "Did she leave without me?" Either way, at some point I would crawl out and look for her.

Not once did she even care that I was gone. Which actually made me a little frustrated. Because I was being horribly disobedient. And I wanted my misbehavior to be noticed. Such is a child's mind.

Today, in our Gospel lesson, we have a similar circumstance. Except in this case, everything has kind of been reversed. Mary and Joseph are going to Jerusalem to the Passover. That they do this every year is actually kind of impressive. Many Jews living in Galilee celebrated the Passover in their local synagogue, rather than at the Temple itself.

And Nazareth to Jerusalem is not a short trip. About 70 miles, all of it on foot most likely. It probably took at least three days to do it. But we knew from the moment Mary and Joseph were first introduced to us in Luke 1 and Matthew 1 that they were devout, faithful Jews, so I guess this isn't too surprising.

For the first twelve years of Jesus' life, it sounds as if they leave him behind in Nazareth, probably with family or friends. He's just too little. It's a long, hard trip. And he's really too young to participate in much of it. He's not even allowed into much of the Temple at that age.

But when he turns twelve years old, like Jews today, he has a bar mitzvah. He's now a man, according to Jewish custom. And he's welcome to participate in all of the Passover activities. He's welcome into the inner courtyard of the Temple with all of the other men.

So they take him along this time. And they go through the Passover sacrifices. The Passover services. The Passover meal. All of which take place over several days. And then they head home.

And here's, of course, where things start to fall apart. Mary and Joseph think Jesus is with them. They've obviously been traveling in a caravan with other friends and family. They think Jesus is with one of them. But he's not and they quickly realize that fact.

They run back to Jerusalem. They've already been traveling for a day. It'll be another day before they can get back. And another day after that before they finally find him. Three days, their son has been homeless and alone in city of a quarter million people.

And they have got to be half scared out of their wits and half furious with Jesus for running off and getting himself lost. Of course, he wasn't ever really lost. Nor was ever really homeless or alone. Obviously he was taken care of by the priests and teachers there. Who have been having a wonderful theological discussion with him. Teaching him everything they know as he absorbs every bit of it like a sponge. And then listening to his wonderfully insightful opinions on what they just said.

All of this, according to Jesus, because he had to be in his Father's house. Or, at least, that's how the ESV translates it. It's not a bad translation. But, I actually think the old King James is a little more precise. He had to be about his Father's business. He had to be in his Father's things, to translate it literally. His Father's house. His Father's word. His Father's priests and teachers. His Father's very presence.

You see, I ran away trying to be disobedient and for that my mother pretty much ignored me. Jesus ran away trying to be obedient and for that his parents tore the city Jerusalem apart looking for him. I have to wonder whether maybe it was because this was so out of character for their otherwise perfect son.

Whatever the case, there's actually a lot we can learn from this little incident. Both about Jesus and about ourselves. For one thing, we see Jesus exemplifying what Peter would say to the Sanhedrin after Pentecost. They tried to arrest Peter and the apostles. To silence them. They ordered them to stop preaching.

And Peter doesn't want to disobey them. He knows that these are authorities put there by God himself. That he has a responsibility to be obedient to them. But he also knows that what they say cannot stop the spread of the Gospel. And he tells them point blank, "We must obey God rather than men."

I imagine a similar encounter occurred with the Magi. This coming Thursday is Epiphany. The day we celebrate the coming of the wisemen to Bethlehem. But I have to wonder what that was like for them. These are Eastern astrologers, after all. Probably from Persia or Babylon. They are priests of a pagan religion. Leaders of a foreign country.

Yet they leave it all behind for the sake of worshipping the one true God and the one true king of all the earth. Their friends and family and colleagues must have thought they were crazy. Even heretics and traitors. But they must obey God rather than men.

Jesus too must obey God rather than men. Even his own parents. And his example places a heavy burden on us for how we prioritize our own lives. Because there are many things to compete for our time. Lots of busyness that can take us away from our Father's business. Even many people and ideas that can draw us away from immersing ourselves in God's Word.

In fact, there's even a hint of Jesus chiding his own mother on this point. He says to her, "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" Now, partly that's an explanation for why he's still there. Why he didn't leave with them. But I also wonder if he's very gently scolding her.

Why did I have to disobey you? Why weren't you encouraging me to be here? Why weren't you here with me? I, as a child of God and as your son, must be about my Father's business. You come to the Temple every year out tradition and ritual. But are you actually about your Heavenly Father's business? And are you making that business the business of your children as well? It's not just a question for Mary. It's a question for us too.

And yet, there's good news here as well. Yes, Jesus has a heavy message for his parents and for us. And yet there's hope in these words too. Because just as this passage is really quite critical of Mary and Joseph's imperfect humanity, and by extension ours too. It's quite clear in emphasizing Jesus' perfect humanity.

Jesus was not some apparition who came down from heaven looking like a man and sounding like a man, but really was just a spirit and an illusion. There's actually a whole Christian heresy that believes that. It's called docetism. Look it up.

No, Jesus was really and truly a human being. Born of a woman, born under the Law, to redeem those under the Law. He was born in a Bethlehem stable by a normal human birth. He grew as a normal human child. He even learned as a normal human child. It's easy to think that Jesus was born knowing everything there is to know about God and the universe. But this passage suggests otherwise.

Jesus learned God's Word, just as we are supposed to. Jesus obeyed God's Law, just as we are supposed to. Jesus was tempted by sin, just as we are every day. Jesus felt hunger and thirst. He felt fatigue and frustration. He felt joy and sadness.

And at the end of his life, he felt pain and death. For you. He felt it so that when you are at the end of your life, and you feel pain and death approaching. And you starting thinking back to all of the times you were not about your Father's business. All of the missed opportunities to worship in God's house. All of the times you weren't in his Word. All of the sin and disobedience that filled your life.

You can look back on all of it and think about Jesus in the temple. The perfect Son of God and son of Mary. Doing all of the learning you never did. All of the worshipping you never did. All of the things of God you never did.

You can look back on it all and say, "I wish I would have done it myself. But thanks be to God, He did it for me." Because ultimately, that's why Jesus came. To do for us the things of God we don't do for ourselves. We can't do for ourselves. And asking nothing in return. For that really is the business of God. Amen.