

Advent Lutheran Church
Missing Jesus
December 29, 2024
Luke 2:41-52

They say children grow up fast and it is true. This week, it feels too fast for comfort. Just a few days ago we gathered to celebrate Jesus' birth and now we are hearing about his antics as a tween. This morning's Gospel reading is the one and only story from Jesus' childhood found in the Bible.

If you wonder what happened over those first twelve years, you'll just need to be comfortable with knowing we don't know or with reading apocryphal material with wild stories like the Infancy Gospel of Thomas. In this extra-biblical text, we find stories of Jesus childhood from age five through twelve.

Some of his supposed boyhood miracles include breathing life into birds made of clay on the Sabbath, resurrecting a man who died in a construction accident, and curing a man bit by a viper by blowing on him.

And, then there is more mischievous behavior that sounds nothing like the Jesus we know, including cursing a boy who then dies and turning his parents blind only to later change course and resurrect the boy and return sight to his parents.¹

You don't have to be a biblical scholar to understand why this late second century or early third century text was not included in our Bible. It is, however, interesting to think of boy Jesus and to wonder what he was like from age five to age twelve. Did he perform any miracles? Did he struggle to control his temper? Did he understand himself to be both human and divine?

Frankly, I'd rather stick with what we do know. So, let's focus on the only biblical account of Jesus as a boy or more specifically as a preteen.

¹ Infancy Gospel of Thomas. Available at www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/infancythomas.html

Over the last 25 years I have led more than my fair share of youth group retreats, mission trips, and outings of all sorts that involve travel with tweens and young teens. And before I offer a confession, I want you to know that the same number of young people who started each trip returned from it. There may, however, have been a couple of occasions when I temporarily lost a young person or two.

When you travel with groups of tweens and teens you get really good at counting. The larger the group the more of your time you spend counting – making sure you did not lose someone’s child before getting back on a bus, boarding a plane, or hopping on a train. With groups small enough to fit into a single 15-passenger van keeping up with the counting is much easier. Larger groups are more challenging – some much, much more challenging. And this is when things happen.

Did you know that there are young people who are oblivious to what time it is and others who prefer a chose your own adventure experience to what has been scheduled at any given time? Did you know that we would do everything in our power to choose any word to describe a temporarily missing child besides the word lost? Did you know that it is one thing to a child for a few minutes and another all together to lose one for three days?

Yes, Mary and Joseph we are looking at you! They didn’t lose someone else’s child; they lost their own son. Admittedly, they were traveling in a large group and in a different time and culture that didn’t require parents or others to continually count children. They trusted that everyone was keeping an eye on everyone else’s children as had been the case on these trips every year for Passover in years. For days they simply didn’t know that they needed to be looking for him.

The moment you become aware someone isn’t present your perspective changes. Your initial reaction is to start searching, which brings us back to Jesus in the temple at age 12.

I don't think its an accident that Jesus is portrayed as a child only once in the Bible or that it happens when he is 12 years old. This was a special time in a boy's life. He was getting ready for his Bar Mitzvah – a religious rite of passage much like Confirmation. To be approaching this milestone, Jesus would have experienced significant preparation.

When Jesus is missing, he was not simply oblivious to the end of Passover nor was he choosing his own adventure by creating alternative programming for himself. Instead, Jesus was being Jesus. He was clarifying his identity.

In the key verse in this morning's lesson, Jesus' parents have returned to the Temple and found their son. They ask him why he would behave this way and he answers:

Why were you searching for me?" . . . "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?"² Or, as another translation renders it, "Why were you looking for me? Didn't you know that I had to be here, dealing with the things of my Father?"³

Jesus is looking his earthly Dad in the face and saying, "Look Mom and Dad, by now you should be recognizing who I am. And, you should know that it is my purpose in life to do the will of my heavenly Father."

Instead of finding their son and being relieved, Mary and Joseph are perplexed and could not figure out what he was talking about. It would take years for them to really grasp what he had told them that day.

For all of the parents here today this story is not intended as a guilt trip inviting you to recall the time or times you temporarily lost your children. I also don't think this is a passage that suggests Mary and Joseph were bad parents nor do I think they literally were separated from their son for three days.

² Luke 2:49, NIV.

³ Luke 2:49, Message.

The number three is used frequently in the Bible to communicate. It most often signals completeness. Jonah spent three days inside the big fish. Jesus prayed three times in Gethsemane, was crucified at the third hour, and rose again three days later. Luke wants us to know that Mary and Joseph had completely lost their son – they didn't know where he was and even after finding him didn't really understand what he was doing.

Today is Sunday, December 29. This is not confirmation Sunday. It is not the day when any of us are moving from childhood to adulthood. It is, however, a time when we are all thinking about a different life transition as we prepare to move from 2024 to 2025.

As you get ready for 2025 perhaps you are reflecting on the year gone by and then making resolutions for the year to come. I wonder if part of this process includes thinking about where you might be missing Jesus.

Yes, you are in church today. And, yes, Jesus was found in the Temple at age 12 and can be found in church today. But if we think that we can fully experience Jesus only within the walls of a church then we are as clueless about who Jesus is as his parents were when they found him in the Temple.

Our Gospel lesson ends with Jesus maturing – growing in to his identity. It is my hope and prayer that each of us will grow into our identity as followers of the Way of Jesus in the year ahead.

Amen.