

THE BRICK
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Scripture: Luke 2:41-52

Sometimes kids make parents do things they'd rather not but in the end must do. As a young eleven year old I remember asking my Dad to join me on a Boy Scout canoeing trip. From my perspective he happily agreed and a few weeks later we were on a river in Pennsylvania, canoeing. The trouble was, I was only eleven, and couldn't weigh the front of the canoe down so every time a gust of wind came our canoe just spun in circles. In a show of determination and grit I openly lamented this situation and made it clear I wanted to quit. My dad however, stayed the course, adjusted his weight in the canoe and led us to the end of the journey. As an adult now myself I look back on this memory and think, wow, that was very generous of you Dad, but to hear him tell it, he was simply doing what a Dad does. What a dad must do: loving and being with his son.

Perhaps it's a bit odd to think of Jesus in a similar scenario. A twelve year old boy with his Dad and Mom, Joseph and Mary, running through the streets of Nazareth, or staying up late to hear the family stories. We can speculate and envision what his childhood was like but, as Peter just informed us, this is the only account we have of Jesus as an adolescent. Luke provides us with this one story that every parent and child can find some piece with which to relate. A story of family religion and family vacation gone awry when their son disappears. So why does Luke provide us with this one story of Jesus' childhood? For a few reasons:

First, in this story Luke emphasizes Jesus' Jewish heritage. Each year Jesus' parents, Mary and Joseph, go up to Jerusalem for the Passover, a ritual Jewish feast. When they can't find Jesus during their travels home, they return to Jerusalem to search for him. He is found in the Jewish Temple sitting among the teachers. Even as a child Jesus is thoroughly Jewish because he comes from an actively Jewish family. Yet Luke also wants us to know that this is not just his parents faith but it is Jesus' own faith as well. This is the first time in Luke's narrative where Jesus claims his faith as his own rather than accepting the faith which was given to him by his parents or others. Jesus is choosing to follow where God is leading him.

Another key piece of Luke's story is the emphasis that even from a young age, there is something special about Jesus. He is merely twelve and is sitting amongst the teachers of the day, listening, asking questions, and amazing them all. Luke is saying you could tell something was special about this kid from the beginning. In his eulogy for President George H.W. Bush,

historian Jon Meacham began with these words, “The story was almost over even before it had fully begun.” Meacham proceeded to describe the future president’s brush with death when his plane was shot down in WWII and he was rescued by an allied submarine. He concluded, “The story, his story and ours, would go on by God’s grace.” Meacham placed this story at the beginning of Bush’s eulogy because it said something about the rest of his life. At this moment did Bush know he would go on to be President? Of course, not. Yet, looking back this moment is a foreshadowing indicator of Bush’s uniqueness, of his ability to persevere through challenges and trials, which would characterize his gifts to this country. When attempting to convey someone’s uniqueness, utilizing stories from their earlier years shows that the unique characteristics were there all along. Even at twelve Jesus must be found in the Temple, which is where he’ll be often as an adult.

Aside from these two rather positive points about Jesus in the story: he grows up in a religious household and embodies that religion, and there is something special about him at a young age, Luke describes the holy family as well, quite normal. Not everything goes smoothly, there are miscommunications and Jesus does something which upsets and worries his parents.

In a scene that reminds me of Home Alone, Mary and Joseph depart Jerusalem and are on the road for an entire day before they realize Jesus is not with them. In the classic Christmas film, 8-year-old Kevin McCallister, played by Macaulay Culkin, is accidentally left at home by himself while the rest of the family frantically races to the airport and departs for Paris. It is not until they are midway over the Atlantic that they realize Kevin is not with them. In order for the plot to work you have to suspend your disbelief about how this could happen. Is it really possible to forget your kid when going on a long journey and only realize it after you are halfway there? How could a parent let this happen? In particular, how could the parents of the son of God, Emmanuel, the one who has come to be with us, not make sure that he is with them?

Often, miscommunications and unexpected actions stem from different desires. Kevin desires to be understood and for his family to disappear. His parents desire to make it to the airport and catch their flight on time after a power outage causes them to over sleep. The confusion within the Holy Family centers on a difference between where the family should be, and what they must be doing, following the Passover. Mary and Joseph depart for home in Nazareth to return to the place where God told them to live. Jesus, however, remains in Jerusalem, in his Father's House.

The setting for the story is a lot like today. The major holiday has just ended, many people have departed to head home. Jerusalem returns to what it was before the Passover. Those gathered alongside Jesus in the Temple are a lot like you all gathered here today. They are the people there every week. The crowd is certainly smaller than it was just a few days ago, but the conversation is alive. Amidst all the usual people is one new face, a twelve-year-old boy from Nazareth who is at the center of the conversation. His questions, answers, and input, mark a

distinctive shift from the typical patterns, so much so that Luke says that all who heard him were amazed. Jesus' hangs back in his Father's House, the Temple, because he wants a little bit more of what he experienced during the high holiday.

Mary and Joseph, though, begin their journey home. Their loyalty and obedience is to God, their family and community in Nazareth. Joseph has to return to his carpentry, Mary has to see to caring for Jesus and his siblings. As faithful Jews they made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the Passover but now it is time to return to the home which God has given them. When Mary and Joseph realize Jesus is not with them they return immediately to Jerusalem to look for him. It is not a question of "if" they will return but rather they "must" return. They must go and look for their child that was given to them by God.

Such an impulse is not hard for us to conceive. Everyone here can probably think of some memory of a lost child, whether it was yours, a friend's, or you yourself were the one who ventured away. I can recall my parents telling how one year during our annual vacation to the beach, my brother wandered down the beach without their noticing. They were focused on my sister and I, most likely ensuring we weren't getting carried out to sea, when suddenly Brent was nowhere to be found. They quickly looked up and down the beach, but amidst the crowds and umbrellas, a young boy was hard to spot. A few minutes later, amidst their frantic search, they turned and saw a stranger leading Brent by the arm back to them. Had my brother never wandered off, this day at the beach would have been just like any other, absent any radical momentous occasion. As it was though, it is one of the stories told about our childhood. The time we were simply at the beach, before urgently searching for my lost brother. It's a story worth including in our family narrative because it says something about our obediences and loyalties as a family.

While it took my parents only a few minutes to be reunited with my brother, it takes three days of searching before Mary and Joseph find Jesus. When they finally find him they are astonished. This word for astonished could also be translated, "struck with panic" or "shocked." They are anxious, and nervous, and worried, and obviously had no idea where Jesus would be since it took them three days to find him. Mary questions him how I'd guess any parent would, "Child," she says, "why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." Jesus' response is perhaps less than a parent's dream. He says, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" In other words, wasn't it obvious where I'd be? We don't know what Mary said in return but we do know that her and Joseph were unsure what to make of his words, so perhaps she said something like, "yeah, ok, we'll talk about that when we get home," and then left the Temple with him clutched in her hand to begin the journey home once again.

Reverend Stephen Bauman, the pastor just down Park Avenue at Christ Church NYC, says that throughout this story a sense of “agitated imperative” prevails. Jesus is missing: filled with anxiety his parents must return to find him. When they discover Jesus, he seems shocked they did not know where he was. They must look for him, and he must be within his Father’s house. This tells us something about the nature of Jesus’ identity, as well as that of his parents. They each do what they must.

They each do what they must. Mary and Joseph are parents and they must care for their boy, Jesus. For his part, Jesus already is aware of his uniqueness and must set about being in his Father’s House, learning and growing. It is tempting to see one of these options as better but I do not believe that is Luke’s goal. Rather, both Jesus and his parents are acting out of the divine identities that were given to them and therefore doing what they must.

Our identities always lead to the things we must do. Whether that identity is divinely given or humanly crafted, however, makes all the difference. A humanly crafted identity will necessarily lead to misdirected things we must do and must believe. An identity swamped in security or ambition or uselessness leads to musts of fear, perpetual inadequacy, and resignation. When we believe only as far as we can see or create, we necessarily grow weary and burdened. A divinely crafted identity is different though. Rooted in Christ, a divine identity leads to behaviors and musts like those we’ve learned about throughout this advent season: things like hope, peace, joy, and love. These can be manifested everywhere, from being a loving parent to a just business owner to a faithful seeker of God.

But how can we change identities you might be asking? How can we change those things we “must” do in such a way that we give up those things which hurt us and instead take on the behaviors prescribed by Christ? Jesus’ example in our story gives us direction. The scripture ends by saying, “then he, Jesus, went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them.” Sometimes the best thing that can happen to our identity and our “musts” is that they are overruled by obedience. Obedience though, isn’t seen as a good thing in our world today, especially in a culture built on freedom and independence. As Kathleen Norris in her novel *The Cloister Walk* quipped, obedience is “desirable in dogs, but suspect in people.” Yet, obedience to God, even when it seems outside what we think we must do, leads to our betterment. When we can’t imagine how we will ever change, when our identity feels too filled with anger and fear, that is when we need to put down the “musts” and simply obey, trusting that God can give us a radical new identity even and especially when we can do nothing to achieve it ourselves. We need not do just what we think we must but rather we should follow the musts given to us by Christ himself. Like a faithful, Jewish boy, Jesus followed the fifth commandment and was obedient to God by being obedient to his parents, Mary and Joseph. Like a faithful follower of Christ, we can emulate his actions by being obedient to God’s desire for us to believe that hope,

joy, peace, and love, are possible, and then doing actions that embody those things in our daily life.

In hindsight we know the rest of Jesus' story. We know why he must be in his Father's house because that is where so much of his adult life took place. We know that he grew up, preached liberty to the captives, gave sight to the blind, defeated death, and rose again from the dead. While this cannot be fully known from his childhood, this one glimpse into Jesus' adolescent years shows that his identity was rooted in the radical truth that he is the Son of God. But we also know that Jesus was genuinely a twelve year old boy and therefore must be obedient to his parents. This Christmas God is calling each of us to follow the boy-Christ in obedience and in doing so receive the identity of Christ. Then, when we do what we must, it will produce the behavior embedded in this Christmas season: hope, peace, joy, and love.

May it be so.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.