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Luke 2:41-52
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“Mother and Child”

It is puzzling and unsettling for me that the gospels totally ignore Jesus' childhood. The Early Church limited the life of Jesus to four gospels. In contrast, the apocryphal writings, for example, the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, include a wide range of stories in which the child Jesus does all sorts of fanciful miracles and vindictive acts.

To share a few, Jesus fashioned 12 birds out of clay on the Sabbath. When reprimanded for dishonoring the Sabbath, Jesus brought them to life and the 12 birds chirped and flew away. Joseph took Jesus to a teacher named Zacchaeus for instruction. After listening to Jesus, Zacchaeus returned to Joseph and Mary. “Woe is me. I desired to get a pupil, and I have found I have a teacher. This son of yours has no need of instruction.” Other apocryphal stories show Jesus' healing power. A man was hurt with an axe while cutting wood. Jesus held the foot in his hand and the wound healed. His brother James was bitten by a viper. Jesus blew on his bite to cool it. The hand was healed and the viper died. A child got sick and died. Jesus touched him and commanded him to live. The child looked up, laughed, and went back to playing. And then there are disturbing stories, such as Jesus causing someone's death with his uncontrolled angry words. There is probably a reason these stories were excluded in our biblical canon.

I have always thought of Jesus as a normal boy who grew up gradually recognizing himself as God's son, with a special mission. But these apocryphal stories do raise some interesting questions. When did Jesus know he was more than human? When did his healing powers begin? Did Jesus have to learn to control his power for good? Did he behave like a typical kid or was he all goodness and light? We'll have to put these questions on the shelf for now as we study the facts we have.

Luke says “Every year Jesus’ parents traveled to Jerusalem for the Feast of Passover.” Jesus was familiar with the routine. But, this year was different. One commentary explains, “During a Jewish boy’s twelfth year he was prepared for his induction as a full member of the religious community which took place when he was 13 . . . Next year, as a man, Jesus will be required to attend Passover; this year he is learning what is involved.” That puts an interesting spin on the story. If he is being trained to become a full member of the religious community, his interest in learning all he could from the temple teachers makes a lot of sense. It also makes the reaction of the apocryphal teacher Zacchaeus plausible, because Luke says, “The teachers were all quite taken with him, impressed with the sharpness of his answers.”

Then we move to the story of his parents’ panic over a lost child. For any mother who has momentarily lost a child, this angst rings true! For example:

- There’s the two-year old who runs down the hallway at the mall, giggling as he looks back to see if mom is following. The small boy is fast, and the mother panics as the toddler’s head bobs out of sight. What if . . . ?
- There’s the six-year-old shopping with grandma for fairy garden treasures. Grandma warns, “Stay where I can see you” as the girl runs off to see what she can find. As Grandma searches one aisle after another, panic sets in. What if . . . ?

A father accompanied his daughter on a school field trip. He noted that the teacher counted her students as they headed out and again before returning to school. That detailed count was important, because what if after arriving back at school, the children climbed off the bus. Eager parents were waiting to hug their kid and hear about the trip. But one set of parents waited alone -- where was *their* daughter? When they asked the teacher, she said, “Well, what do you expect? I got 99 percent of them home. What’s the big deal?”

I wonder if Jesus’ parents had a “what if” moment when they discovered Jesus was missing. They trusted Jesus to know the protocol of this journey. But when they stopped for the night, they couldn’t find him among their friends and family. In a panic, they retraced their steps to Jerusalem. There he was in the temple, lost in conversation with the temple leaders, oblivious of his parent’s concerns.

Go back to the panicked parents in the shopping mall. Their concern is personal. "I'm responsible. What if my child isn't safe?" But once we see the child and know he's safe, our concern turns tables. Now the responsibility lies on the child. Like Mary, we say "Why have you done this to me? Your father and I have been half out of our minds looking for you!"

Jesus responded, "Why didn't you know I'd be here, finding out about my Father's business?" They had no idea what he meant. They didn't understand his disregard for their concern, any more than he could comprehend their angst for him.

One might argue that Mary and Joseph were responsible to see that their son was with group headed back to Galilee. But all ended well. Scripture says, "Jesus went back to Nazareth and lived obediently with them. Mary held these things dearly, deep within herself. And Jesus matured, growing up in both body and spirit, blessed by both God and people."

I sympathize with Mary. The angel's message that the Messiah was to be born to her took on additional meanings as the years went on. First the angels and shepherds and wise men declared the wonder of Jesus' birth. Then at Jesus' circumcision Simeon and Anna prophesied that in the course of Jesus' life, a sword would pierce Mary's own soul.

Mary never got the memo of what that motherhood would entail. How do you mother a child who was to be the Messiah of the people? Mary had to grasp step by step what her son was becoming. And now Jesus talked about learning his Father's business. Mary wondered what that meant. Baffled and confused, she treasured these things and pondered them in her heart, watching and discovering the meaning of things after the fact.

For Jesus, this temple experience was a turning point in his life. Joseph, his earthly father, stood right there beside him when Jesus referred to "my Father's business." He was not calling Joseph his father. The commentary says, "The tension Jesus is facing is whether he should obey his heavenly Father or his earthly father. Now at age 12, Jesus is feeling a necessity, a compulsion, to do the Father's will . . . The call was there, but it was not yet time to fulfill it. He must wait, learn, grow and prepare himself for that time when he will enter into his ministry." What was he to do to prepare himself for that calling?

From the temple incident to the beginning of Jesus' ministry was a span of about 18 years. Luke says "Jesus matured, growing up in both body and spirit, blessed by both God and people." Unlike his cousin John, whose rough manner wasn't particularly attractive, Jesus gained favor with people. People liked him. They were attracted to him. But Jesus also was favored by God, his Father."

There are several observations to make about Jesus that also apply to us.

- 1. Jesus learned that growth takes time.** He had to wait, learn and grow just like we do. We hear parents say, "She's twelve going on twenty." Children are often in a hurry to get on with life. But God is not in a hurry, because both spiritual development and physical growth are processes that we learn in God's time.
- 2. Jesus experienced a tension between his responsibilities to God and to people.** Sometimes the two conflicted and he chose to follow God. He made it clear to us that we, too, must chose to serve God rather than people when the two collide.
- 3. Jesus often had to defer to adults less wise, less in tune with his mission.** Even his parents had no real grasp of who he was and what he was called to do. Yet obeying them was God's plan for the present.
- 4. Jesus could go far on his native, God-given abilities. But to succeed in the Kingdom he sought God's favor, God's anointing.** Moses understood this when he once prayed, "If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?" (Exodus 33:15-16).

We can also learn from Mary's experiences. The NRSV says, "Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart." The Message says, "His mother held these things dearly, deep within herself. " Good advice to us when something seems important but we don't comprehend the intent. Ponder, hold dearly, reflecting deep within.

Merriam-Webster defines ponder this way: It implies a (1) **careful weighing** of a problem; (2) **prolonged inconclusive thinking** about a matter; (3) a **definite focusing** of one's thoughts on something so as to understand it deeply.

In short, weigh its meaning, ruminate, live with the questions, not jumping to conclusions too quickly. The latter may surprise us. But Mary continued to ponder every day of Jesus' life, because his mission unfolded one miracle at a time. Do you suppose Mary finally understood what Jesus was all about after the resurrection? Or maybe never.

Pondering can keep us connected and open to surprises in our relationship with God. Like Mary, we don't know or understand all that God is, and we should treasure the fact that God remains forever new. We limit ourselves and God if we assume that what we know about God is the complete story. Paul explains that "now we see through a glass darkly." Our lens is human, not divine.

Learning to know God takes a lifetime. So live the journey. Ponder what God is doing within and around you. Maybe even put "pondering" on your New Year's list of intentions!

God bless us as we continue to ponder the many facets of our divine God.