

Too Young to Take the Reins

Bible Reading: Luke 2:41-52

Message: Luke 2:49, "Too young to take the reins"

The story of the boy Jesus in the temple give rise to many questions, like:

- Why did Joseph and Mary search three days before even thinking of going to the temple to find Jesus?
- Did Jesus deserve to be rebuked by his mom – that is, had he done something wrong or disrespectful to his parents?
- But the most important question is: Why did he – as he himself said - have to be in his father's house?

This last is the key question and when we understand this, many of the questions fall away.

The story turns on Jesus' decision to stay behind in Jerusalem. The family had come down from Bethlehem to Jerusalem – about 150 kms. Perhaps at a fast pace a family could do it in four days. They had spent some days there and then set off home. The pattern was so familiar that Joseph and Mary presumed Jesus was with them.

But they were wrong. Jesus had stayed behind. To me, that seems to be irresponsible. I have children –five of them. My wife and I have lost track of them occasionally among friends and relatives – though never overnight. If they had, and not arranged it beforehand with us, we would have been very upset with them.

Joseph and Mary were good parents otherwise the Father wouldn't entrust his son to them. They discovered Jesus' absence at the end of a whole day of travel. They must have been frantic. They spent most of the next day travelling back to the city, and then another day searching everywhere. On the third day they went to the temple. And there he was. Jesus was sitting there among the religious leaders, completely absorbed, as though he had no other concerns, like family and frantic parents. If that was one of my boys, I would surely have been angry – like Mary was. Of course, Joseph doesn't say anything. He's level on the level – always calm and even tempered.

Jesus had not stayed behind by accident. When night fell, he had to search for his own food and provide for his own bed. He had been away from his parents for two nights already. He would have known that they were worried. But he did it anyway. Mary says, "Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you."

I can understand Mary saying that. It seemed he needed to be rebuked.

But then, perhaps not. In verse 50 we read that Jesus answered, "Didn't you know that I had to be in my father's house", and Luke adds: they did not understand this. Verse 51 adds: "his mother treasured all these things in her heart". She treasured this memory. You don't treasure bad experiences. You remember them, of course, but you don't treasure them. You treasure things that make you happy or that fill you with wonder – like what Luke writes in chapter 1 when, on the eve of the birth of her first son, Mary and Joseph were visited by shepherds who spoke of fantastic things. Mary, we read there, treasured all this in her heart. Of course she was upset, but when she held her boy and led him homeward, and her heart stopped pounding and she thought more about what Jesus said and where she found him – then she treasured this.

What exactly did she treasure in her heart? Well, she had seen Jesus sitting among the teachers listening to their teachings and asking them questions. These were the most trusted religious figures in the land. That's why they were in Jerusalem in the temple. These were the very men who 20 years later would grumble about the teachings of the rabbi from Nazareth, and criticise his failure to uphold the traditions of the elders. They would engage Jesus in debate again and they would find his language blasphemous and in the end, they would condemn him to death. These are the men who either had seats at the Sanhedrin or exercised great influence upon it. They were very good at swaying people to their will, but they never found that they could influence Jesus'.

In verse 47 we read that they were amazed at his understanding and his answers. They were asking the child questions. That is not usual. Normally the child asks the teacher questions, seeking further information and understanding. But this child knew the information and had his own understanding of the force of scriptures. They were amazed – not just that he had so much knowledge in his head. That alone cannot explain their reaction. The word Luke uses here for “amazed” often carries with it the sense of alarm. They were amazed and alarmed, upset with his answers. He didn't just know the bible well with his mind, but with his heart he had an understanding that already now, challenged their whole system, threatened their values and traditions and compromised their leadership. And he was only a child. A child's understanding is less biased by experiences. It can be purer, simpler, more direct. What Jesus said rang true and what they were replying seemed like a lot of backpedaling. If this is how the child thinks, what sort opponent will he become when he is a man?

There could be no other result than that they should be amazed – even alarmed and upset. God's grace and human legalism cannot rest side by side. The one will rise and the other fall.

Remember that Jesus had come to Jerusalem for the Passover. It was the celebration of how the angel of death had passed over the land of Egypt, killing a child in every home, the oldest. But the homes of the Israelites were protected by the blood of the lamb. God gave them that protection not because they were such good people, not because they were better than the Egyptians. God is very direct about this in Deuteronomy 11: “You were not better than any of the other peoples. You were a stubborn and stiff-necked people.”

God delivered Israel simply because he wanted to. His love was free. God's love for you and me is completely free. God does not love us because we are better than other people. If there is anything good in me, it is all a gift for Jesus sake.

The religious leaders were, however, legalists. They said that Israel deserved God's deliverance because they were good people. And they were still good people, better than anyone else. They deserved to have God save them. The angel of death did not go into the houses of some because they were better than the Egyptians.

You see, Jesus had to be in his Father's house because he had to protect his Father's reputation. He could not allow false teachers to go unopposed. For he is the Passover Lamb. He would give his life and shed his blood to save my life and your life. He was doing what he must or he would have no ministry, no people to save. It was zeal for his father's grace and for the salvation of his people that he sat there asking questions and giving answers instead of going home with his father and his mother. They were frantic with worry, but what is that compared to you and I spending eternity in agony? What is that compared to his Father being misrepresented by the leaders of his people?

But he was only 12 years old. Too young to begin his ministry yet. He must wait till he is called by the Father and ordained by the Holy Spirit. Then he may begin to show the meaning of grace and lead us back into the love of God.

But for now, his mother is right. He was zealous for our salvation but he was obedient to his mother and father. He was only 12 years old. And he walked back with them to Nazareth.

But soon he would be a man and he would begin his ministry. It is written down for our instruction lest we empty the gospel of its power by thinking ourselves better than others. This is the most important matter for which Jesus came. Let us humble ourselves and learn to live by Christ's goodness and grace and not by our own. If we do, then this place Jesus spoke about, the house of his father, will be your house and you will live there forever.