

Year C, Christmas 1 12/30/12
Hope Central Church
Courtney Jones
“Unexpected Places”

Luke 2:41-52

Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. Assuming that he was in the group of travellers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, 'Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.' He said to them, 'Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?' But they did not understand what he said to them. Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart.

And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favour.

Merry Christmas, Beloved! We have been through the waiting of Advent, connecting our journey to the creative process. We have arrived at the birth of Jesus, God's Created One. On Christmas Eve, we traveled to Bethlehem at the unrehearsed Christmas pageant—were you there? It was a sight to behold, shepherds, wise persons, animals of all sorts, and the most gorgeous little newborn baby Jesus. We heard again the old story of a child wrapped in bands of cloth, of angels appearing to shepherds, of the star over the stable. Next week, on Epiphany, we will greet the magi, the kings from the East.

But for today, we are jumping ahead in the story just a bit. In today's Scripture, the child of the manger is twelve, close to the age Mary was when he was born. He went to Jerusalem with his family for the festival of Passover. When his family left, the young Jesus stayed behind. By the time Mary and Joseph

noticed he wasn't with them, they went back to Jerusalem to find him, and they searched high and low for three days. Can you imagine the fear, as Mary and Joseph searched in the crowds? I imagine it like the black Friday crowds: people pressed in everywhere, trying to move in all directions. The idea of losing a child—trying to *find* a child—in such pandemonium sounds terrifying. After all the chaos, a calm scene awaited Jesus' parents when they found him at last. When they finally stumble upon him, he is with the teachers in the temple, listening, asking questions, and the leaders are indulging his curiosity.

The past few weeks have called us to pay closer attention to our children, to listen a little better, to watch a little more closely, to hold them a little tighter. As a congregation, a community, a country, we have spent more time noticing the children, our children, these little beloved ones who dressed so beautifully for our pageant as cows and magi and angels, even a zebra and a lizard (or was he a dinosaur?). In today's Scripture, we have a rare glimpse of Jesus as a child, a student rather than a teacher. We have to assume, since we know what a prolific teacher the adult Jesus becomes, that the basis of his understanding came from his own religious education. Even as a child, Jesus' teachers are impressed and inspired by his ability to reflect, to ask astute questions that indicate a high level of understanding. It must have been a delightful surprise for those religious leaders to have a young person interested in learning, willing to sit and listen, to engage their faith as a boy who was becoming a man.

We are impressed by bright and gifted children. Having worked with youth and children for many years and in many contexts, I understand the joy of watching our kids, our young people, learn and grow. Over the course of five summers in college and grad school, I worked at a summer program for rising high school seniors, a program I once attended myself. The residential program, where I was in charge of a dorm of over 100 16-year-old girls, was exhilarating because I watched the students learn, grow, and change dramatically in the intense six weeks of the program. They honed their skills in math, science, language, and the arts...and they engaged a holistic approach to learning both in and outside their classrooms. I watched these transformations and felt honored to bear witness to the final products, the productions, concerts, projects: the earnestness of a young poet who finds her voice and creates something brilliant and intuitive beyond her years, the depth of expression by the actors onstage, the presentations on math that

were way over my head. Each summer, the students blossomed before our eyes as we, the adults who provided space for their growth, looked on, amazed. We took such joy from watching their progress, and we were reminded how blissful learning can be. Maybe that's something like what the religious leaders felt as they watched Jesus engage his religious tradition, the history, the faith.

When Mary finds Jesus, she pulls him aside and confronts him: "Why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." I am so curious about the tone with which Jesus responds, "Why have you been searching for me? Did you not know I'd be here?" Was he earnest and genuine? Or was he more like my teenage cousins, who, though well-meaning, sometimes get a little too grown up and talk back just a little? Maybe Mary and Joseph should have thought to look there first. Maybe they were relieved to know he was in the company of religious leaders, where he was safe. But either way, Jesus' response seems surprising and out-of-character. After all, we know how much Jesus loved and cared for his mother. And I wonder what Mary's response was that persuaded him to be so obedient as they traveled home to Nazareth. The child, who so impressed his teachers in the temple, who even taught them a few things, was still a child.

The last line of the passage, right after Jesus talks back and then leaves with them, is "His mother treasured all these things in her heart." The other place we hear this line is in the birth narrative that we read on Christmas Eve, the scene where the shepherds arrive and tell the unbelievable story about how they found the Holy Family in that stable. Luke's narrative says, "all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart." Here, in today's passage, after her twelve-year-old, who is quickly growing into a man, gives her a real scare and then gives her sass about it, we see Mary treasuring this moment just as she did at his birth. Without angels and shepherds, without magi, animals, mangers, or the rest, still Mary treasures the miracle that is her very typical pre-teen son. Mary knew the thing that I so often forget, that we must treasure the mundane.

All the adults in this story pay close attention to Jesus, delight in this young man, find inspiration in the unusual ways he responded to them. It seems appropriate, normal even, that Jesus would be inspired by his education in the

temple, that the religious education he received would influence his future ministry. What is unusual about this story is that the adults around him gleaned inspiration, something to treasure, from an unlikely place: a boy, a pre-teen who stayed behind instead of leaving with his parents, who sought his own education, who gave his mother a little pushback.

We talk about the wisdom of our elders, and to be sure, they have so much wisdom to offer us. And we talk about paying attention to our children, to watching them and loving them as deeply as they deserve. What if we begin to focus also on the wisdom of our children? Their creativity, the way they are attuned to their own divine spark, the way they revel in play—we could learn a great deal from them. We could be reminded to cultivate our divine spark through creation, through music, through laughter. In what other places might we find wisdom and inspiration? Poets? Musicians? Pets? Astronomy? We pay attention to the realities of adulthood, to bills and commutes and groceries. Maybe we can spend a little more time taking a cue from our young ones, paying attention to our delight, finding inspiration in both expected and unexpected places.

We wait for weeks in Advent, preparing our hearts for Christ anew...and preparing ourselves or our homes for spending time with family or friends. We string lights, decorate the tree, wrap gifts, and experience the whirlwind of holiday preparation. When the trappings of Christmas are stripped away—the tree is down, the cookies have all been eaten, and the lights no longer twinkle in the long nights of winter—what remains? Today's Scripture reminds us that there are still things worth celebrating even when the streets are dark, when the tree is on the curb, when routines resume. There is wonder and joy, something to ponder and treasure, a flicker of inspiration, even in the ordinary. As Laura Ruth said last week, we each have a spark of the Divine in us. We are each called to cultivate that spark, to create new futures with God. And as part of that process, we are called to pay attention. To ourselves, to our lives, to the moments we can treasure. We can follow the examples of our children. The excitement and wonder with which a newborn discovers his feet and promptly sticks them in his mouth! The joy of children waving streamers, bringing an offering to the altar—or dipping the bread into the juice with abandon. May we find such delight for ourselves. Amen.