

IN OUR FATHER'S HOUSE

Colossians 3:12-17
Luke 2:41-52

David B. Keller
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TEXT: Luke 2:46 "After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking questions."

PURPOSE: To honor the questions, and the insights, of young people, in matters of faith, and to recognize God challenging the church to deeper faithfulness through them.

Here we are, two days after we celebrated the birth of Jesus, already meeting him as a twelve year old. Maybe this is another indication of divine favor visited on the holy family. They were allowed to avoid ear infections, potty training, and teething. I assume the parents of the Son of God were spared the "terrible two's." But parents know the truth: if the divine favor was for real, it would have allowed the pleasures of early childhood and exempted Joseph and Mary from the terrors of their child's adolescence. And this story gives us a taste of Jesus as an early adolescent, doing just what people those age do: going off on their own, and letting their parents know how dumb they are: "Couldn't you figure out that I'd be right here in my Father's house?" To which Joseph, if he was a self-respecting father of a young teenager, would likely respond, "You bet you'll be in your father's house! You're grounded for a month!"

The story of young Jesus found in the temple generally gets explored from the perspective of his family life. But it is, after all, a story about Jesus being in the temple, which he called his Father's house, and it is from that point of view that I want to explore it this morning.

In the Jewish practice of Jesus' day, Passover was a pilgrimage festival. Devout Jews were expected to celebrate Passover in Jerusalem. Many houses had guest rooms to accommodate pilgrims, and much of the economy depended on pilgrim shekels. To this day, in Jewish households around the world, the Passover Seder ends with the acclamation, "Next year in Jerusalem!" So, as things are with us in the days after Christmas, I imagine they were in Jerusalem after Passover. I suppose there were a lot of after-Passover sales in the market places. I imagine the temple personnel getting a few days off after all the ritual sacrifices of lambs for the feast and all the tourist traffic clogging up the temple precincts. As the pilgrim bands, such as the one including Mary and Joseph, made their way back home, Jerusalem's streets seemed strangely empty, and the

temple was regaining its echo and its quiet grandeur. If the teachers of the law in those days were anything like the preachers of the gospel are in these days, they were worn out from all the holiday extras. Maybe they pulled an old sermon out of the barrel for the Sabbath after Passover.

So here comes this kid, at first, lurking around a small knot of religious officials as they were rehashing the craziness of the holiday season. Maybe the teachers can be excused for being a little jaded at this point. For them, the celebration had become more of an imposition on their generally casual routine, than what it was supposed to be: an inspirational re-living of Israel's defining event, their liberation from slavery in Egypt. The text says that Jesus' parents found him "sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking questions." So after he listened for a while, maybe he asked something about whether God was still interested in liberating the chosen people from oppression. After all, the Jewish people in his day lived under Roman domination. And after all, Jesus was a twelve-year-old boy, who would naturally be interested in idealistic battles in which good won out over evil.

The teachers of the law knew better than to discuss such radical possibilities. They had embraced the safe way of accommodation to the way things were. The old story stirred the sensibilities, to be sure, but it was best kept as an old story, safely historic, not as a tale defining God as the One, in the words Mary sang when she realized who the child was whom she was carrying in her womb: who "has shown strength with his arm, has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly." (Luke 1:51f) Perhaps Mary had sung that song to Jesus as a lullaby, and now, as one who is "bar mitzvah," a 'son of the law,' he wanted to official religious teachers to tell him if the old story and his mother's song were true in their time.

The religious leaders of Jesus' day were frightened by the activities of radical groups within Judaism who were using violent means to rid Judea of Roman domination. Speaking of liberation suggested that they sympathized with those groups and their methods. So I imagine Jesus reminding them that God liberated Israel from Pharaoh not by sword and spear and chariot, but by God's outstretched hand and mighty arm, by signs and wonders. And I imagine those teachers allowing themselves to entertain the possibility that God was for real in

their time, that God was aware of their cruel oppression under Rome, and that God might have a new Exodus, and maybe even a new Moses, in mind. They would not have imagined that they were talking to that new Moses, and that the Exodus God was undertaking went far beyond liberation from Rome to liberation from the power of sin and death.

Fast forward now to the present, to us here on the Sunday after Christmas, as the story of Jesus' stable birth is eclipsed by holiday socializing and a tree dropping needles on unwrapped presents left under it. Put yourself into the mindset of a young teen who came here Christmas Eve, one old enough to be relieved that someone younger than her actually wanted to play Mary in the pageant. The Christmas story, as far as she is concerned, is burdened by too many tellings, but that doesn't change the stirrings inside her for something real, for something bigger than the texts passing back and forth between her and her friends on Christmas morning.

What would she be listening to if she heard the adult church people talking? Would our conversations suggest anything that would dig deeper into her soul than the news from her facebook friends and the videos on You-tube? Would we be talking in ways which suggest that we believe the news of a Savior born in a stable remains life-changing for us and for our world? I wonder what she would have to ask us. This much I have found, when I have allowed myself to be vulnerable enough for young people to trust me with their questions: they want to know if I believe that the stuff in the Bible is true. They want to know why God allows people to hurt each other. They want to know if there can be real justice asserted into the injustices they experience in their homes, in their relationships, in their run-ins with the authorities, and sometimes, in the world they see as too messed up to be worth an investment of their energy.

The story of Jesus in the temple says that "all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his questions." My experience is that something quite similar is true with the young people who are associated with this church. They do not make it easy for those of us who might want to connect with them. If we do the small talk thing with them, they will give us enough to allow them to escape. They are listening to us, listening to find out if there's something about this Christian faith which deserves their attention. They are asking some

incredibly important questions which go right to the heart of what it means to be a person of faith in today's rather frightening and not too hope-filled world. And they are developing some powerful insights which look for God still being God, still coming to change the world in which they live. I will never forget how a rather insistent second-grader who now is a young lady with a driver's license came to me a year before we opened our cold weather shelter with a diagram explaining the things the church could do to help people who are homeless. There was insight and urgency in her request, and more: there was sincere belief that such things were what the church should be about.

So it is a good thing, as the hubbub of Christmas winds down and as we look to keep the Spirit of Christmas vibrant after the season come to a close that we get to meet Jesus as a twelve year old in the temple. His questions challenge us to ask ourselves whether we really believe this stuff—this coming of God into the world, this preference God has for the poor and the lowly, this humble way of saving the world from itself. His youthful presence reminds us to keep an eye out for the young people hanging out at the edges of our conversations.

In our sister church in Zimbabwe, the children are always introduced as “the future of our church.” Jesus in the temple says that the future is now, that our own young people's ideas of what makes for faithfulness, and justice, and community might be just what we need to be hearing as we seek to be the church of Jesus Christ in our time. If God is still speaking, as we in the United Church of Christ say God is, then I would be willing to suspect that God might prefer speaking through twelve year olds asking the hard questions, revealing the surprising insights, calling the grown ups to live the story that we love to tell. May God give us grace to listen, and to listen well.