

Sunday December 27th, 2020
Christmas I

Luke 2:41-52
“Was Jesus a Bad Boy?”

A few years ago, I attended the funeral of Rev. John Caswell, in my home church in Brantford. John was a wonderful man, having served several churches as pastor or interim minister. I had known John for about 50 years, ever since I was a preschooler. His boys, Ken and Chris, and my brother Ian and I, grew up together in the Sunday School at Queensway Baptist. Now John did many wonderful things in his life, and he loved Jesus, but I am amazed he went into ministry after it was fully tested in the early seventies.

You see, among many things, before he was a pastor, John was one of my Sunday School teachers. In the grades of 4-6, John undertook, very bravely, to teach a class of about 8 restless boys. There were no girls in our class, because frankly, we scared them off. How he ever survived this experience is beyond me. On more than one occasion, a word was passed onto my parents that I, and or my brother, had not behaved as we should.

I confess that on more than one Sunday afternoon, I found it difficult for a few hours to sit comfortably. It just goes to show you that even a mischievous little boy can grow up and be called by God to serve him. So, as I thought of my own Sunday School experience while back in my home church, I began to wonder what Jesus is up to in this passage from Luke. We all know Darrell was, and can be bad, but what about Jesus?

Our sermon title today is a bit of a trick question, but one with an underlying point. When we think of Jesus, we most assuredly think of the fact that Jesus was without sin. We then naturally assume that this sinless state includes his time as a child, and the intervening years between today's passage, and the beginning of his ministry, which would be about 20 years in duration.

Mary and Joseph's reaction when they eventually find Jesus, might lead us to wonder if Jesus was really as sinless as we think he was. In the Ten Commandments we are told we must honour our fathers and mothers. Did the worry Jesus caused Mary and Joseph in today's passage, show a level of dishonor, and therefore a violation of the law or commandments, or as we might already suspect, is something else going on here?

Let me first state that for a short little story, there is a great deal going on here. Luke assumes his readers know the intricate details of the Jewish culture of the time, but we are so far removed from it, we need a brief anthropology course to catch up. So, I will try, as best I can, to take you all back to first century Palestine, and set the stage for what transpires. I assure you that when you see the bigger picture, you will also see the intricate beauty of what is going on.

To begin, this event is set in the time of the Jewish Passover, and it was part of the Jewish faith in those days, that every able body man, was to make an annual pilgrimage to the temple to worship on the Passover. Joseph, being a devout man, took this responsibility seriously, so he likely made the trek from Nazareth to Jerusalem, every year.

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However, as we read, Joseph was not alone. It was not a requirement that women make the pilgrimage, but Luke tells us Mary also went every year. This demonstrates further the depth of her faith. It was also a very common experience that many women and children made the journey to celebrate the Passover. For a lack of a better comparison, we can think of it as kind of annual vacation or holiday.

Luke is very clear on a critical element of this story which we might simply skip over. Luke mentions that on this particular trip, Jesus is twelve years old. This is a very special time in a Jewish boy's life, and in his father's life. From about the age of eleven, until age 13, a man was expected to teach his son as much about the law of Moses as he could. This was to prepare the boy for his thirteenth year, when in Jewish practice, a boy became of age. He became a man, and was responsible for his own adherence to the law.

It was often called the "Son of the Covenant" ceremony. Today our Jewish friends celebrate this occasion with a Bar Mitzvah, but the use of this title is a much later addition. The story of Jesus is truly special, because not only does Joseph take this preparation in the law seriously, Jesus himself seems to understand its importance. This story is sometimes called "Jesus and the doctors". Doctors meaning, those who have advanced knowledge of the subject; in this case the law. Like today's PhD.

The Passover, would have drawn thousands of people to the city, but also many experts in the law. The Passover became a kind of conference for scholars. The temple would be filled with learned men, from all over the Mediterranean, who came not just to worship, but to talk about the law and how to apply it to certain circumstances. Jesus, in his special preparation year, would have seen the opportunity to learn from these great men of knowledge.

I need to be clear here, that this is a picture of respectful dialogue between Jesus and these doctors of the law. The men themselves would have welcomed the opportunity to dialogue with a young man like Jesus. Their whole lives were built on knowing the law and teaching the law, and Jesus provided a great opportunity. These learned men immediately saw in Jesus a keen interest, and a strong aptitude for the subject of their life's work. In true rabbinical fashion, Jesus would not have disrespected these teachers by lecturing them, or telling them what they had wrong.

Instead, he soaked up their knowledge, and would ask questions of clarification and explanation. Most boys his age would have done their religious duty, and hauled off to play with friends or get into mischief, but not Jesus. I cannot help but smile as I think back to my Sunday School class with John Caswell. John tried so hard to teach us. He certainly knew more about Jesus than a group of 9- and 10-year-olds.

We tried to sit still, but as soon as the class was over, we bolted, like our pants were on fire. For us this time of learning was something to simply endure, as I am sure it was with most of Jesus' contemporaries. However, for Jesus, this was simply too valuable an opportunity to miss. Meanwhile, as Jesus is learning in the temple, Mary and Joseph are beginning their journey home to Nazareth.

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The passage reminds us that pilgrims would often travel in large groups, both to and from Jerusalem. People would travel in kinship groups, or with neighbours and friends. The journey to Jerusalem would have been about three days in length, and people enjoyed the time sharing and celebrating with each other. During the day, men would often walk together in one group, and women and children in another, and they would rejoin each other as evening fell.

As they drew closer to the city of Jerusalem the number of pilgrims would increase with each passing hour. It was on that first evening on the way home that Mary and Joseph realized Jesus wasn't among the pilgrims. Remember men and women traveled in separate groups, so Mary and Joseph assumed Jesus was with the other parent, or among friends. We also should remember that Jesus was in that in-between time of his life.

Not yet a man, but coming to the end of his time as a boy. He could have traveled with the women and other children, or he could have been with the other men. I am sure that when Jesus did not appear to bed down for the night, Mary and Joseph were frantic. They would have searched among the many travelers, asking if anyone had seen Jesus. When they could not find him among the pilgrims, they headed back to Jerusalem, and this is important; they searched for him for three days.

Now ask yourself why it took three days to find him. First of all, we need to admit that if this had been any other 12-year-old boy, what are the odds he was still in the temple? If my dad and mom had to search for me, it was pretty unlikely I was sitting in that Sunday School class or in a church pew. I'd have been off horsing around with my friends. We also should remember that Jesus was from a rural village, and the city of Jerusalem was huge in a normal twelve-year old's eyes.

There was the allure of many sights, and sounds to draw a young boy. A modern example of this is the second "Home Alone" movie, where Kevin McAllister is left in New York city. Some of the film shows young Kevin mesmerized by the big city sights, before encountering the terrors that also reside in the big city.

With each passing hour, Mary and Joseph would grow more anxious. Their imaginations would run rampant wondering what happened to him. Remember in Home Alone when the concierge tells Kevin's mother, she shouldn't go out to look for him because of all the muggers and drug addicts on the loose. When you are afraid for a loved one, imagination can become your enemy very quickly.

Finally, almost as a last place to look, they go and check the temple, and there they find him dialoging with the doctors of the law. Where he had been all along. Mary speaks here with some harshness and also with relief, "Son, why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been frantic, searching for you everywhere." This is true. No stone was left unturned in their frantic search. They may have even without sleep and food while then hunted.

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Jesus simply and yet kindly replied, “But why did you need to search? You should have known that I would be in my Father’s house”. Did you hear what he said? Luke preserves this story, because it is a crucial moment in Jesus’ life, and in Mary and Joseph’s as well. Maybe more so for Joseph. Up until this point, Mary and Joseph have done a wonderful job of caring for Jesus, but they now need to let go of their boy.

The transition is stark. Mary and Joseph are no longer the center of Jesus’ world. Regardless of him being not yet 13, he has come of age. His Father, that is God the Father, is now the center of his life. Jesus has literally moved from his earthly parent’s home, into his heavenly father’s home. For twelve years, Jesus had followed their example, now they must follow him. Mary and Joseph now need to strive to be like Jesus, not to try and make him like them.

Ultimately, this little story is about growing up, but not about Jesus growing up. It is about Mary and Joseph, and you and I maturing in our faith. To truly grow up in God we need to detach ourselves from the past. We do tend to live in a variety of homes, you and I. Not just ones of bricks and mortar. We live in homes made of: guilt, sin, apathy and indifference. Homes of: gossip, pride and envy.

Homes of grief and sorrow. Homes where we have been told we do not matter, or we are unacceptable, or unlovable. Every one of us could name a home like that in which we dwell. Homes that narrow our vision, and leave our hearts cold and empty. The problem is that too often we get comfortable in homes like this. However, these are not our true homes. These are not the homes God offers us.

Jesus understands this even as a 12-year-old, and he modeled his whole life on a better choice. Moving to God’s home does not necessarily mean moving geographically, although it could. It means instead, a re-examining our lives, our beliefs, our relationships. It means seriously looking at those elements of our lives we think define us and give life meaning.

It means letting go of an identity that is limited to our biological families, or ethnic group, or nationality, or political party; and trusting that who we are, is who we are in God. It means we stop relating to one another in the old ways of: comparison, competition, and judgment; and begin relating through love, self-surrender, and vulnerability. It means we stop ruminating on: past guilt, hurts and sins; and accept the mercy and grace of God.

In a way, Jesus was asking Mary and Joseph where they were living. “Why did you need to search?” How often have we searched for days, weeks, maybe even years; to find our hope, our peace, our Saviour? How often have we wore ourselves to the bone, striving to earn Jesus’ attention, or find the secret to his grace, or say the right prayers. We may even do as Mary and Joseph imagined, that Jesus was with someone else, and he will rejoin us when he can, or as our spiritual night falls.

Jesus asks every one of us the same question; “Why did you need to search?” Jesus isn’t lost, or in some hidden corner of the world, he is where he should be and always is.

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He is through the Holy Spirit, with you always. I guess the point is that Jesus isn't the one who is lost, is he? It isn't we who search for him, but rather it was Jesus who searched and found us, no matter what dark corner of this world we may be hiding in. Maybe that is why we resonate so closely with Mary and Joseph.

Mary's question is one we ask so often of Jesus, in so many circumstances; isn't it? "Why have you done this to us, or me?" Jesus' answer is the same every time. I did this because I love you. I love you enough to help you see a bigger plan for your life. I love you enough to get you to move out of your little house of hurts, to God's house of grace and love.

Luke tells us bluntly, that after Jesus spoke, Mary and Joseph didn't understand what he meant. How much of our own confusion and pain has been caused by a lack of understanding? How often have we refused to trust the goodness of God in the bigger picture? Our struggle is not caused by God in Christ, but our solution lies with God. When we surrender ourselves to him fully, we can end our striving, our worry, our lack of confidence that we are loved.

And isn't that what the true meaning of Jesus' other name means; Emmanuel. God with us. Absolutely, that is what it means!