



“Searching for Jesus”

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Luke 2:41-52

I love reading those old church marquee signs. You know, the ones where you have to change the letters one by one. I remember a particular sign outside a United Methodist Church that listed the sermon titles for the coming Sunday. This is what it said, “11:00 a.m. - Jesus: Walking on the Water; 7:00 p.m. - Searching for Jesus.”

I remember growing up at Judson Baptist Church in Nashville, TN when Harry was the Music Minister there. The adult choir would practice on Wednesday evenings in the Choir Room right behind the sanctuary. And because choir practice always happened after Wednesday evening programming, the church was usually shut down and dark. My twin brother and I would sit in the darkened Sanctuary waiting for my parents to be done with choir practice. We would do homework or draw pictures from the dim illumination of the streetlights outside in the parking lot shining through the windows. We would not only draw pictures, we would also tell stories, lay down in the pews, and play hide and seek. Because my folks were good Baptists, we were at the church three to four times a week, and we knew every corner and crevice, every room like it was our home.

I think the youth and children at Royal Lane feel the same way. The youth group had a lock-in around Halloween time where twenty or so kids played games and watched movies until the wee hours of the night. I was working late that particular evening and heard some commotion outside my office. The youth were separated into teams and they were running around the campus of the church looking for clues that would lead them to the next part of the game. Well, the youth didn't know I was still in my office when they were banging around the hallway outside the Sanctuary and so I went to the office door and swung it open really quickly and abruptly and yelled, “Rawr!” I think four of our youth lost years on their lives in that moment. I mean, I couldn't let them get through Halloween without a good scare.

Before I scared the youth, however, I loved hearing their laughter and their animated talking outside my office as they maneuvered around the church, exploring and finding new and fun places. I think it's so important for our children to feel comfortable and calm and cared for in their church home. I want our kids to trust the church as a place to learn and grow and build relationships. It is important that our children and youth feel like Jesus did when he was a young boy. They need to be taken seriously and their knowledge and insight affirmed and cultivated. Just as Jesus confidently brought his wisdom into the temple and taught the religious leaders, our children, too, have a lot to teach us about grace and acceptance and patience and poise.

But you know, there are many days Amanda and I feel like Joseph and Mary, wondering where Annaleigh and Beatrice have run off to. As a ministry family, our kids have grown up in the

church and have always felt comfortable and safe. I'm sure you remember how comfortable Beatrice was when we joined this church and she took off, running down the aisle. My girls explore hallways, they know where all of the classrooms are, they can tell you everything that is happening at the church at any moment of the day. And if, every so often, I lose track of them because they run off to go about their Heavenly Parent's business, which is usually making toilet paper bags for the homeless with the holy rollers or sitting with their senior adult best friends at Wednesday night supper then, that's ok.

I think this idea that Jesus was a precocious and bold youth really hit home for me when Annaleigh did something just as nerve-wracking as Jesus sitting with and schooling the elders in the Temple. Less than a week ago, Annaleigh sang "Once in Royal David's City" right here in a room full of people. It was the most people she had ever sung in front of and she was definitely nervous. But she did it and she did it well. Now she knows that she has the ability to do hard things and that everyone is here to support her and love her.

I think "Once in Royal David's City" was an important hymn for Annaleigh to sing because of its reference to the humanity and the childhood of Jesus. Just like the Gospel Lesson for today, this hymn is one of the only places where we hear anything about Jesus as a boy. In most of the Gospels we either get Jesus as a baby and then straight into his baptism, or the story simply begins as Jesus enters the ministry after being baptized by John the Baptist. Baby to baptism... there is a lot in the middle there about which we don't really have any information. How do we identify with Jesus and grow closer to him when he didn't have to go through all of the mistakes and the missteps we all went through while young and naive?

That's why "Once in Royal David's City" is important because the third verse reads, "Jesus is our childhood's pattern; day by day, like us he grew." Jesus grew up just like we had to grow up. Maybe he didn't sit in the outer courts of the Temple while his parents were in choir practice. But he did have a lot of exposure to Judaism and he was at the Temple in Jerusalem a lot. You see, most Jews only had to make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem once in their lifetime or every several years. Only the most dedicated and pious Jews made a trip every year. It seems that Mary and Joseph were a bit like my Rob and Sharon Gregg because Jesus was at the Temple with regularity. It is clear that Jesus was used to being on the Temple grounds and surrounded by religious leaders and their teachings.

But I bet we all have the question in our heads, how could Joseph and Mary leave Jesus behind? It's thought that, if Mary and Joseph traveled to Jerusalem from Nazareth, that it would take three days, travelling 25 miles each day. And because the road to Jerusalem was such a highly traveled road, bandits and thieves would attack and rob the pilgrims. Remember, as we studied the Gospel of Mark we learned about the blind man, Bartimaeus, who was begging alongside the road when Jesus walked by on his way to his trial and death in Jerusalem during Passover? Well that particular road was called the "Way of Blood" because people would be beaten until they were bloody. Many even died on that road. So, to be safe, pilgrims would travel in groups of 100 or more in order to reduce their exposure to attack.

The group travelling with Mary and Joseph was also large because it was probably Jesus' Bar-Mitzvah that they had celebrated in Jerusalem. In Jesus' time, at age 12, boys would've had their

Bar-Mitzvahs and were technically considered adults. So, this particular trip to Jerusalem was probably a special one, a big party for Jesus' coming of age. That is why in the text it says that Mary and Joseph's friends and family were on this pilgrimage. With Jesus being an adult surrounded by a large group of people who knew him well, it is not so difficult to imagine that Mary and Joseph trusted him to stay with the group and travel with them when they left Jerusalem.

But Jesus was more attuned to beginning his adulthood work than his earthly parents realized. You see, it is also around the age of twelve that sons would join their fathers in their vocation and become apprentices. Masons' sons would learn masonry. Fishermen's sons would begin to fish. Carpenters' sons would begin building. So, it is not surprising that when asked what Jesus was doing at age twelve in the Temple, that he responded with, "I am going about my Father's business." The Son of God was beginning to figure out what his life would be, how he would need to learn and follow the words of the prophets, especially Isaiah, whom he will read later in the Gospel of Luke when he begins his earthly ministry. The Isaiah scroll, the theme for Jesus' ministry on earth was, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." That's what it was like to do his Father's business, his Father's work in the world. At twelve years old Jesus was ready to grow up and to grow into his calling as the savior of the world.

Whew, that's a lot for a twelve-year-old to handle, right? How do we relate to a Jesus who already seemed to be wiser and stronger and more confident than any of us could ever be, even in our latter years? We get the perfect baby of Christmas when "no crying he makes" straight to the adult Jesus walking into the wilderness to be baptized by John and have the heavens opened up to him, God shouting down God's pride. I think this is the reason we have a hard time finding Jesus after Christmas. I think this is why it is so easy to lose Jesus. How do we locate a Jesus who is already superhuman and God in the flesh? How do we follow that Jesus who didn't have to suffer through Math in school, or being bullied and having acne and going through puberty, or lying to his parents and wishing to be cool? I know, personally, that I am searching for a Jesus I can relate to, a Jesus who can somehow understand the struggle and the suffering I go through every day.

This Christmas, as we celebrated the birth of Christ, my daughter singing "Once in Royal David's City" helped me to find Jesus. I found Jesus because the third verse revealed more to me about the incarnation of God than a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger... more than the word made flesh and dwelt among us as portrayed in the Gospel of John. No, it was the third verse of the hymn that helped me understand that Jesus was just like us. "For He is our childhood's pattern; Day by day, like us, He grew; He was little, weak, and helpless, Tears and smiles, like us He knew; And He feelth for our sadness, and he shareth in our gladness."

I think Once in Royal David's City tells us about Jesus's vocation. And Jesus's vocation wasn't just about schooling the religious teachers. You see, Jesus found his vocation. He found his vocation as he was supposed to at twelve years old. Jesus' smart aleck remark was, "I must be in my Father's house." In the old King James version reads, "I must be about my Father's

business.” Whether he is in his Father’s house or about his Father’s business, the point is the same. Jesus sensed that he had a calling from God. And that calling wasn’t to be perfect, wasn’t to dodge pain, wasn’t to amass riches or be the most powerful political leader. No, Jesus’ vocation was to be like you and me. Jesus’ vocation was to walk through rejection. Jesus’ vocation was to carry a cross through pain. Jesus’ vocation was to feel the jabs of betrayal and the salty tears of loneliness. Jesus knew that his calling was to stand in line with the sea of humanity at the river Jordan and be baptized in the muddy water, and to come back out soaked to the bone in the sins of the world. Jesus was going to work.

And often, we have a hard time finding Jesus this time of year because Jesus goes from a weak, yet perfect little baby to the strong and sinless man in the desert. And because we miss all of the years of his childhood and adolescence, we just can’t find a way to bring our shame, our guilt, and our problems to this distant God. That is why this story of Jesus in the Temple is important right after Christmas. Unlike Mary and Joseph, we now know where to find Jesus. He is doing God’s business, God’s work in the world. Jesus is sharing a meal with the outcast. Jesus is embracing prostitutes. Jesus is calling out the religious and political leaders. Jesus is sleeping under the bridge. Jesus is sheltering the abused. Jesus is calling those on the margins into the middle of the circle. Jesus is welcoming children. Jesus is doing God’s business and if we are searching for Jesus, that is where we will find him.

We are nearing the end of the Christmas season and the hope, joy, peace, love candles are growing dim. The twinkling lights are slowing and the Santa inflatables are now flat. Jesus felt so close to us, so very near last week on Christmas Eve. Yet, the warm, fuzzy, grace moments have turned into life as usual. Things have returned to normal and we now look up and wonder where has Jesus gone. I think this adolescent story of Jesus lets us know that even though Jesus might seem far away, if we would but search for him, we will find him near to us, bearing the weight of humanity alongside us this week. Don’t lose hope. Jesus is here.

Amen.