

Grace and peace to you from God the Father, and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

On the first Sunday of Christmas we find the boy Jesus, in the temple, growing in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and humankind. We too have returned to the house of God “to sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God,” who has gifted us with a savior. As the festival continues, “let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts.” For it is still Christmas.

Traditionally, this Sunday is known as the Feast of the Holy Family, and one purpose of it was to portray the family unit of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph as the model for all Christian families. However, this reading from Luke presents a less than idyllic, if realistic, depiction of family life with teenage children: we meet the young Jesus acting impetuously, seemingly oblivious of the impact his actions have on others. Despite the fact that he eventually caves in to his parents’ demands, it is clear that a decisive break has occurred. Jesus is separating himself from his earthly parents and is dedicating himself to the service of his heavenly “Father” (2:48–49). Although his parents have been told that Jesus will be the savior and Messiah, these revelations come as a surprise, even a shock. Here Jesus “looks like something less than the son one dreams of.”

Finally arriving in the temple, Mary and Joseph are astonished to discover amazed teachers and their precocious twelve-year-old son. Now let me ask the parents here today—If your child had been missing for three days, what would have been your reaction. I imagine first would have been relief and thankfulness when the child was found, but once you realized they were all right you’d probably have exploded. But Mary and Joseph ask, “Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.” I wonder how Mary *really* said it. More important, I wonder why Mary and Joseph looked for Jesus in all the wrong places. Why did it take them three days to figure out that Jesus must be in his Father’s house and about his Father’s business?

Had things been so blessedly ordinary for so long — no more angels, adoring shepherds, and OT prophecies — that the mystery surrounding their son’s birth had begun to fade like a dream? Or maybe Mary and Joseph were aware of what their son would do and become, but figured that was years away. Perhaps Jesus hadn’t shown any signs of theological curiosity and so his parents couldn’t imagine him hanging out in the temple. Maybe Mary and Joseph simply failed to see that their baby was growing up.

Like Mary and Joseph, we cannot or do not want to see that our Jesus is growing up even as we grow up. Our Jesus is growing beyond our childhood, beyond our children’s childhood. Our Jesus is growing beyond our expectations. Arriving in the temple, Mary saw only her boy. She couldn’t or wouldn’t see that Jesus had grown. Eager to be a good mother, always pondering the events that led up to and followed Jesus’ birth, Mary wasn’t quite ready to “lend” her Jesus to God. Perhaps she just wanted to keep her firstborn close to her. Maybe she simply wanted to delay the symbolic sword that Simeon announced would pierce her own heart as it took the life of her son.

Looking upon Jesus and seeing her baby, Mary asks, “Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.” And Jesus answers, “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be about my Father’s business?” These same questions face us this week after Christmas, as peace and goodwill fade and Christmas leaves so many of us wanting. With Mary, we ask, “Why have you treated us like this?” We ask ourselves; we ask our families. We ask the church and we ask God, when our expectations are shattered.

And Jesus answers, “Why were you searching for me?” We know where Jesus has gone. He’s about his Father’s business. But we aren’t ready to let go of our expectations and give our Jesus to God. We are not ready to accept that Jesus did not come to fulfill our expectations. He is not to be found in sentiment for the way things used to be or the way we wish things could be.

Jesus is about the future. Jesus was born and lived and died and rose to be about God's business of putting an end to our searching by making plain the way to God, even if that means shattering our expectations.

In the Temple, Mary expects Jesus to behave a certain way and Jesus expects his mother to know why he isn't. The problem is that Jesus and his parents have two different understandings of who Jesus' Father is. Mary tells Jesus that she and his father have been searching anxiously. The message is plain to any child who stays out all night and upon returning home is greeted with a parent's frantic, "Do you know how worried I was?" But Jesus responds that he's been in his Father's house, about his Father's business. Again, I wonder just how Jesus said it. Was he surprised or scolding?

Regardless of Jesus' tone, the tension between Jesus, son of Mary and Joseph, and Jesus, Son of God, is heightened. Sure, Jesus returns to Nazareth and is obedient to his parents. But it is clear that his priorities have changed. Jesus' primary concern is not the will of his parents but the will of God and the mission that God's will entails.

The good news for us in this week after Christmas is that, like Mary and Joseph, our search has ended. Jesus shows us the way to God. The scary part, perhaps, is that our search may not end where we expect. Mary and Joseph searched three days for Jesus, and on the third day found him alive and well. But they didn't find him in the expected places — the safe confines of his extended family or the familiar company of the pilgrims' caravan. After three days, Mary and Joseph found Jesus alive and well in the Temple at Jerusalem among the teachers of the law, the very company where it all will all end as Jesus is tried, convicted, and handed over to be killed.

Mary and Joseph find Jesus alive and well after three days in a place they didn't expect. This sounds like Easter. Yes, Luke's hint here is of resurrection. Jesus, dead and buried, is raised on the third day, and there is a new temple, Christ's resurrected body. Our searching will come to an end in new life, meaningful life, the life God intends, but not the life we expect.

But that's Easter. For now Jesus returns to Nazareth. He disappears back into the fabric of his hometown. For perhaps two more decades Jesus is in an out-of-the way place, far removed from the centers of religion and politics, in the company of ordinary people, just like us. Here Jesus continues to grow "in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor." The good news is that this description of Jesus is the description of every child of God, no matter what our age. We all will grow as we respond to God's love. In Christ we can expect nothing else. This gospel makes clear that Jesus was raised within a particularly observant family that followed the customs and traditions of the Judaism of his day. It also shows that the incarnation of Jesus teaches that God can be found even in difficult familial circumstances. It teaches that God's wisdom is available to the young as well as to the old, which means that we must make room for God to surprise us with unexpected revelations given by unusual messengers. It teaches us that though God's wisdom and holiness remind us of our limitations, it is precisely within these limitations that wisdom is often revealed.

May you enjoy the wonders of this season and may you always thank God for the gift of his son. Amen.