

“(Going) Home Alone”

Luke 2:41-52 – December 27, 2009

INTRO: Outside of *The Gospel of Thomas*, which never made it into the canon of what we call the New Testament, Luke’s is the only Gospel to include a story from Jesus’ youth. We hear that he was born, and generally what we get next, in the other Gospels, are stories about his ministry. Even today’s story is a bit of leap, moving from the birth, directly to a story of his adolescence.

For the first time in five years, David Goldman didn’t come home alone to his home in Mount Laurel, NJ. David is the father who has been fighting to get his 9 year old son Sean, back from Brazil. Sean has been living there, with his stepfather, after the death of his mother last year. Sean’s mother took him to Brazil in 2004, and never returned. David Goldman has been arguing for years, that Sean belonged with him, under an international treaty that sets procedures for dealing with child abductions. After numerous trips to Brazil, thinking his son might come home with him, finally on Christmas day, David’s dream of being united with his son, came true. But now the hard work of getting reacquainted starts. Father and son have been together just a few times in the past five years. They will need to learn about each other, and David will begin the tough job of parenting this son—a child he last knew well, when he was 4 years old. And Sean will need to get reacquainted with the United States again, the snows of New Jersey, and the traditions and customs of our country and of his father’s family.

Today’s Gospel story involves traditions and customs. As Jesus grew up, he was learning the traditions and customs of his family. From what we know, they were a family that carefully observed the Jewish laws. Attendance at Passover celebration would have fulfilled the requirements that all males make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem for Passover. Traveling at a pace of maybe 15 miles a day, it would have taken them 4-5 days to get there and an equal number of days to get home. The story tells us that they stayed for the whole 7 day festival and then headed back home to Nazareth. The trip home is where the main action is found in this story, because they somehow lose Jesus. They traveled a whole day’s journey back towards Nazareth, and realize he’s not with them.

Before we’re too hard on Mary and Joseph, we may want to hear what some scholars speculate might have happened. Families traveled together and shared responsibilities of caring for everybody’s children—so you counted on others to help supervise your kids. (It may have been like the way neighborhoods used to function. If you misbehaved and the neighbor down the street was present, they went ahead and disciplined you. Or a neighbor watched out for you, if your parents weren’t around.) And men may have traveled in one group, women in another. Being 12 years old, Jesus was at the age where he could have been with either group. His father might have thought he was with the women and children, and his mother might have thought he was with the guys, talking about football—or whatever guys talked about back then! Either way, Jesus stayed behind without their knowledge or permission, and he must have assumed his parents would know where he was and what he was doing.

Anne Lamott, facing the trials and tribulations of her son’s adolescent actions, had her take on the story of Jesus as an adolescent: “At the same time he’s blowing the elders away, how is Jesus treating his parents? I’ll tell you: He’s making them crazy. He’s ditched them. They can’t find him for three days. Some of you know what it’s like not to find your kid for three hours. You die. Mary and Joseph have looked everywhere, in the market, at the video arcade. Finally they find him, in the last place they thought to look — the temple. And immediately, he mouths off: ‘Oh, sorry, sorry, I was busy doing all this other stuff, my Father’s work. Like, Joseph, you’re not my real father — you’re not the boss of me. I don’t even have to listen to you.’” (*Plan B-Further Thoughts on Faith*)

Now we have to remember, this is Anne’s take on the story, while she’s in the midst of raising an adolescent herself. But I do think she’s right on target when she talks about the emotions of losing a son or daughter—whether it’s for a day, three hours, or thirty minutes.

I can’t help hearing this story about Jesus parents heading back to Nazareth alone, without recalling the *Home Alone* movies. The first movie has the family racing to catch a flight out from Chicago to Paris for Christmas. The night before, they disciplined their young son and sent him to his third floor bedroom, and somehow the next morning, after a power failure causes them to oversleep, they all forgot him and flew to France. They finally realize he’s not with them, during the flight. Of course when they do figure it out, his parents are absolutely crazy worried. And they try to find ways to get home as quickly as they can.

In the meantime, 8 year old Kevin fend for himself. He eats all the junk food he wants, he uses his brother's money to buy groceries and order out pizza, he watches movies, does his own laundry, and he successfully defends their home from two squirrely guys who are robbing houses in the family's neighborhood. What I think is significant about all that, is that at only 8 years of age, Kevin has learned enough from his family to survive. He knows their patterns of life, he knows their traditions and values, and at least in the short term, he is getting along pretty well on his own. He's learned the basics.

Jesus has learned the basics of a faithful Jewish life. His parents have done a good job of teaching him. Today's story is not about parents who have done something wrong or neglected their child in some way, so much as it is a story about parents who have done something right.

Jesus "was brought up in the moral and ritual life of Judaism. Home, temple and synagogue formed him. He came from a devout Jewish family. His hanging out at the Temple after his parents headed home isn't a denial of his parent's authority, but an indirect testimony to the faith of the family. Jesus was clear about his loyalties—the things of God were important to him." (Fred Craddock)

It wasn't just Jesus' commitment we see here, it was his family that was committed to their relationship with God. When asked why he had stayed behind, Jesus responds that his life is guided by his relationship to God—he was "in his Father's house"—the temple. Early on, Jesus was in a profound relationship with God. And perhaps that relationship was facilitated because his parents included him in the family's life of faith—they didn't leave him at home in Nazareth when they went to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover—Jesus went with them.

"This may have been both a great adventure for Jesus and also a powerful experience to be in this holy place, where he heard the story of Israel's liberation told and retold. Without understanding it all, he was drawn to it." (Peter Storey)

Whenever we hear this story about Jesus in the temple—and the importance of his family's faith traditions in his life, it may be a good time to reflect on how we're doing with passing along the basics of the faith to our children and youth. Do we as parents and caring adults, make it clear what the traditions are that we value, and then include our children and youth in the learning and practicing of those traditions? And, yes, that includes participation in worship and Sunday School, but its more than just being physically present in church. It's letting our younger generation in on important rituals and the learnings and communal interaction that happen when as people of faith, we gather together in a variety of settings.

I'm always thrilled when whole families come and help make the peanut butter and jelly sandwiches on the third Saturday of the month. It provides a time for the generations to work together. And to have parents here with their children, the parents are saying in a big way, this is an important thing to do—to help someone else. The parents don't just come here on that Saturday morning and leave the kids at home alone, but the kids, maybe reluctantly, maybe not, come along—and work alongside other adults who believe this is an important service ministry.

I was intrigued by the idea of a thirteen year old, convincing her church in Burlington, to carry on the tradition of a community Christmas dinner, that another church had to let go of this year. The story goes that Becca Robinson went to a meeting of her church youth group—a combined ministry of the Episcopal and United Methodist Churches in Burlington—and she shared with the two other teens who were there, that maybe they could put on the dinner this year. That was less than three weeks ago. This would be a full-course ham dinner, with sides and dessert for at least 200 people. It was a tradition in their community, and Becca knew it was important. Furthermore, it was a chance to provide a meal for others who might not have had a Christmas meal. The United Methodist congregation had never organized a community dinner, but the Episcopal church had lots of experience. They made it happen. People in their churches stepped in to help, and they had so many volunteers they had to turn people away.

*(The Journal Sentinel, 12-26-09)*

I must say I was also interested in this story, because the 18 year old daughter of some friends of mine, was in that small group of three teens who got the idea of putting together the meal. She's the adopted daughter of a clergy couple. They adopted her from the Philippines when she was just a small child. Somehow in her 18 years, she has learned something about service from her parents—they've passed along the basics to her.

Our kids need to know that serving God isn't just a Sunday deal and that dedicating their lives to God's work is an option for them.

Instead of asking them, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” we should be asking them, “Where might God be calling you to use your gifts to accomplish God’s purpose for the world?” (*Homiletics*, 12/06)

“Jesus reminds us that (the temple, the church) is our one true home. It’s a place of listening and learning, teaching and questioning, growing and developing and deepening our relationship with God and with one another. This house is more than a temple, more than a congregation, more than a denomination—it’s any place, really, any place in the world where we make a profound and personal connection with our Creator, and where we grow in faith and love.” (*Homiletics* 5/03)

It is our responsibility to nurture our children and youth, so that they can learn about the faith that is important to us. It’s something we hand on to them. All of us have family heirlooms that have been handed down from generation to generation. One family treasured a very old vase. They even kept it on the mantle where everybody could see it. When the mother came in from shopping one afternoon, her teenage daughter said: “Mother, you know that vase that has been handed down from generation to generation?” “Yes, dear, what about it?” Her daughter said, “Well, this generation just dropped it.”

I hope we don’t become the generation that drops the heirloom of faith. I’m not so worried about our children getting lost at the mall or not coming home at the expected time, as I am worried about: them getting lost in the frantic activity of their world; and getting lost to lots of other loyalties; and never learning that one of their “homes” is this community of faith.

We need to give our children the opportunity to be “lost in God’s embrace.” (*Peter Storey*) So that they can come into contact with the things of God and the people of God—that they may too, call it their home.

--Sue Burwel

