

“When the Christ Child Speaks”

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Based upon Matt. 2:1-12; Luke 2:41-52

When author Anne Lamott’s son, Sam, was thirteen, he and she had such an explosive argument that Lamott went to her pastor seeking parenting advice. Recognizing her frustration, her pastor joked, “In biblical times, they used to stone a few 13-year olds, which kept the others quiet and at home. The mothers were usually in the first row of stone throwers and had to be restrained.” That comment, (which is not accurate by the way), and the knowledge that often adolescents who are perfectly behaved in public are nasty to their parents at home, led Lamott to read and interpret today’s lesson from *Luke* with new eyes. In her book, Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith, she writes: “But at the 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.’ And what is Mary doing this whole time? Mary’s got a rock in her hand.”¹

Although there is no evidence in the biblical text that Mary was contemplating stoning Jesus, and there is ample evidence in the Talmud that Jewish authorities went to great lengths to make it legally impossible to enforce the law in Deuteronomy 21:18-21, which permits the stoning of “stubborn and rebellious sons,”² Lamott’s story still makes me smile because as a mother, I too, have a hard time appreciating Jesus’ treatment of Mary and Joseph in this story. I’m not surprised he wandered off and got caught up in the Temple. To the Son of God, I imagine that the lure of the Temple would have been as powerful as the lure of a video arcade to many teenage boys today. So I can understand his going there, and understand him losing track of time while he was debating with the scribes and rabbis. But when his panicked parents finally found him, you would think, if Jesus really lived without sin as Christians have long affirmed that he could have come up with a more sensitive response that honored his father and mother than the one he offered. “I’m sorry, Mom,” he could have said. “I just got so caught up in this discussion of the Torah that I completely lost track of time, and I didn’t even realize you guys had left town. It will never happen again;” or, “Oh my goodness, I’m so sorry. The last thing I’d ever wanted to do was to hurt you, my dear, sweet, brave mother, but I need to focus on my Father God’s business now that I’m growing up. No offense Joseph.”

¹ *Animating Illustrations* for “Genius Jesus,” Homileticonline, Dec. 27, 2009, retrieved Dec. 31, 2018 at <https://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/> citing Anne Lamott’s book, Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith (New York: Riverhead, 2005).

² For example, the Talmudic jurists interpreted every word so restrictively that there was hardly a moment when a boy could be charged. The son had to be old enough to be criminally liable, at least 13 years old according to the law. But he also had to be a “son” not a “man.” If he had pubic hair he was no longer a “son,” but a “man.” The charge had to be repeated disloyalty and defiance including repudiating and reviling his parents and being a glutton and a drunkard, excluding occasions when festive drinking or indulgent eating was considered legitimate, such as for holiday celebrations. See “*Rebellious Son*” in THE JEWISH VIRTUAL LIBRARY, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/rebellious-son>.

He didn't say any of these things, however. Instead, with the insensitive obtuseness of a difficult adolescent, or the callousness of an unkind king, Jesus said, "Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" (or "about my Father's business," depending on how you translate the Greek.) These are the first words that the Christ child speaks in the *Gospel of Luke*. If you didn't know all the wonderful things that Jesus did later on in his adult ministry, would you want to follow him based upon this story? Maybe, maybe not.

Luke is the only canonical gospel writer who included a story about Jesus as a child. Although this story may make us think at first that that was probably a good thing, the truth is that Christians throughout the centuries have wondered what Jesus was like as a child. It's almost impossible not to do so. "Did he have miraculous powers even as a toddler, like the little boy from the *Incredibles*?" we wonder. "Did he exhibit extraordinary divine wisdom and otherworldly inclinations, or like a typical human boy, did Jesus spend most of his time playing in dirt, climbing trees, and filling his pockets with beetles and rocks?" Sometime, most likely during the first century of the Church, someone became so preoccupied with these kinds of questions that he decided to write down his imaginings in what is now known as the non-canonical *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*.³ It is filled with stories that purport to record what Jesus was like as a child. Some of them are enchanting: Jesus makes birds out of clay and then animates them so they can fly away; Jesus helps Joseph when he discovers a board is too short for an important carpentry project, by miraculously stretching out the wood to the right length. But many of the stories depict a powerful kid without the wisdom, compassion, or maturity to use his powers for good. He kills one boy for bumping into him, makes another wither up into dust for draining a pool of water that he was playing with, and curses adults easily. The villagers are scared of Jesus throughout most of the *Infancy Gospel*. It is only at the end of the gospel that people start to revere Jesus for his wisdom, in a story about Jesus in the Temple that is very similar to today's text from *Luke*.

Scholars do not agree on whether the fact that Luke recorded a similar Temple story makes either the story or the *Infancy Gospel* more or less credible. But it's important to note that although the two versions are similar, Luke changed the Temple story significantly. In the *Infancy Gospel* version, the focus of the story is on how much the authorities in the Temple were impressed by 12-year old Jesus. In other words, it isn't really a real incident involving a disobedient boy. It's a formulaic story about a genius hero. Such stories were common in Luke's day, and even before that in biographies of famous people. For example, in Jewish Hellenistic legends about Moses, there are stories about how a 14-year old Moses received universal applause from the chief priests for his "love of letters." The historian Josephus similarly noted that the prophet Samuel began his work when he was only 12, and according to a Syriac translation of the Septuagint, the Greek Old Testament, the prophet Daniel received the spirit of understanding which made him wiser than the elders, when he too, was only twelve.⁴ The point of these stories was to establish that the hero was precociously brilliant. The *Infancy Gospel* followed this pattern, and to a degree, Luke did too. He wanted to establish that even when he was young, Jesus was extremely wise because such a story serves as a useful transition from the

³ See Hock, Ronald F., *The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas* (Santa Rosa: Polebridge Press, 1995).

⁴ For more about these texts and this practice, see, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Expository Article: *Luke 2:41-52*", *INTERPRETATION*, 1982, 399- 403.

stories of Jesus' miraculous birth, to the stories about his miraculous adult ministry.

But when Luke recounted his twelve-year-old genius story, instead of focusing on the Temple authorities' reaction to Jesus, he focused on Jesus' parents' reaction. Moreover, Mary in his version is no longer the unbelievably courageous young woman who sang the "*Magnificat*," nor the revered, holy *Theotokos*, God-bearer. She is simply the deeply anxious mother of a Jewish boy on the cusp of manhood, whom she accidentally lost somewhere in busy Jerusalem. This tells us that Luke wanted to make a point about something other than Jesus' brilliance. He wanted to make a point about his and our priorities as well.

Incidentally, Mary was not a bad mother, notwithstanding the fact that she lost Jesus. Luke makes this clear by emphasizing how devout she was celebrating Passover in Jerusalem every year. He also provides a good reason why Jesus could have been left behind, by mentioning that Mary and Joseph traveled by caravan. In those days, when families caravanned together, they usually traveled gender-segregated, with the men up front, the women traveling behind with their young children, and older children and animals traveling in between. It's not hard to imagine, therefore, that Mary could have assumed her nearly-grown son was with Joseph and the other men, while he assumed that the still-a-child-for-one-more-year-Jesus was with her. Remember *Home Alone*? Those parents also left their son behind because each assumed that the other, or one of their other children, was with him. Stuff happens sometimes.

Luke makes no mention of the birth narrative, and no suggestions that Mary and Joseph were anxious because their memories of angels and magi made them fear what God would do to them for losing Jesus. So, we can only assume that when they rushed back to Jerusalem after discovering their mistake, Mary and Joseph were thinking only of their missing boy, not of God's plan. But the boy they found in the Temple was no ordinary, disobedient son; he was the extraordinarily obedient Son of God. "This is what I came for," Jesus basically tells his parents, although they don't understand at the time. "Where else did you think I would I be? This is God's house, so this is where I belong." Thus, Luke makes clear that even when he was a child, Jesus was so obedient to God that he was already subordinating other priorities to his sense of God's purpose for his life.⁵ Long before his baptism, when the Spirit descended upon him like a dove, Jesus embraced his identity as God's flesh and blood, and God's servant. Even from a young age, he felt like God was his real Father and his first priority.

The challenge of this text for us theologically, therefore, is not, "How could Mary and Joseph lose Jesus?" or even "How could Jesus ever be rude to his parents?" The challenge for us is to recognize what Mary and Joseph needed to recognize, that we cannot domesticate Jesus just because we love him being a part of our lives. You see, Mary and Joseph were most likely upset because they thought of Jesus as theirs. Over the course of twelve years of feeding and clothing and teaching their child, twelve years of showing him how to make things with his hands, and pray with his heart, twelve years of kissing him good-night, and measuring his growth spurts, and laughing at his silly jokes, Mary and Joseph had apparently forgotten that they were living with God. So the Temple crisis was a harsh reminder for them that Jesus was not going to be a

⁵ See Culpepper, R. Alan, "*The Gospel of Luke*," in THE NEW INTERPRETER'S BIBLE, Vol. IX, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 78.

carpenter like Joseph when he grew up. He had his own plans, his Father's plans, and nothing, not even his loving human family, was going to deter him from fulfilling his God-given purpose.

We are not so different from Mary and Joseph, although we were not blessed as they were to know him as a child. We, too, forget who he really was and is, and in a much shorter time frame. All throughout Advent we pray for Jesus' arrival. Then at Christmas we embrace the quiet, perfect, haloed baby in the manger. We rejoice with the shepherds and the angels, and give homage like the magi because we love the "with us" part of Christ Emmanuel. Jesus knows what it feels like to be hungry and cold, scared and frustrated; he took on our lives and our human image. So we welcome him with open arms. But all the while we are spiritually smelling his sweet baby head, we aren't really thinking about him being *God* with us. We're thinking about him more as a friend with miraculous powers, or a divine therapeutic vending machine. Somewhere between Christmas and Epiphany, we forget that if Jesus was really God, then that means we cannot possibly control him, and although he will always understand us, we will never fully understand him. So when stories like this one come along, like his parents, we can be seriously shocked to discover that his priorities are not the same as ours.

One of Jesus' shocking priorities was that he put serving God before serving his own family. After this incident, Luke says Jesus went home and was obedient to his parents for the rest of his childhood. But once he became an adult and began his ministry, Jesus repeatedly redefined "family" to be those who served his Father, not just those he was connected to by blood. "Who are my mother and father?" he asked, when Mary tried again, at a later point, to take him away from his teaching. (Luke 8:19-21). "If anyone wants to follow me, he must leave his family," he told his disciples. (See e.g. Matt. 8:22 and Luke 14:26). Christians typically hate these texts; we ignore them as much as possible because our families matter to us more than anything. But Jesus spoke this way intentionally because it was God's desire to correct the problems that extreme family love can cause. In Jesus' day even more than ours, family was everything. So if you were born to a bad one, a poor one, a socially-insignificant one, you didn't stand a chance. You could never change who "your people" were, and that affected everything from how you were raised, to what job you could do, to how others in the community reacted to you. It kept people in social, economic, and religious silos; it created tribal conflicts; it ensured that the unjust and inequitable status quo would never change. So Jesus said, "Not in my kingdom. In my kingdom everyone matters because we all have the same Father who is God. If we love God more than anyone else, then we will be able to love everyone as God loves us, including our family members and others too."

Many of Jesus' other teachings are equally challenging. He sided with the poor over the rich, and told those who wanted to be great to become like slaves. He said that those who loved their lives would lose them, and that we are all called to pick up our own crosses. He said, "Love your enemy as yourself," and so many other shocking things that, that if we really took what he said seriously, we might not be as eager to follow him. But few of us really do. We give our hearts to loving-Jesus, healing-Jesus, saving-Jesus, and dismiss the challenges of God-incarnate-Jesus, as being impractical or metaphorical. "Who did you come to see?" Jesus would ask later in his ministry with the same kind of bewilderment and frustration he voiced to his parents in today's text. We know the magi sought a king, and Joseph and Mary sought their

baby boy. Who do we seek when we gaze on the baby in the manger? Who do we listen to when we resume our lives after that baby and the other crèche characters get put away with the rest of our Christmas decorations? The good news of Epiphany is that God is with us. The challenging news is the same. What would it mean for us, if we followed the 12-year old Jesus' example, and put our Father's business first before all? Mary left the Temple pondering this in her heart, and so should we.

On Epiphany Sunday, we celebrate, among other things that Jesus came as a light to the world. Like real light, which is both a particle and a wave, Jesus was both fully human and fully divine. So as we head into the New Year, we must neither leave Jesus behind, nor forget who he was and is. The good news of the Gospel is that God came to be *with* us, so God knows the trials of the human condition intimately, and is available to be a source of wisdom and strength like no other. The good news of the Gospel, even though it doesn't always feel like it, is that *God* came to be with us, and knows better than we do what needs to change in our lives and our world for darkness to be defeated. Don't be afraid of that last bit of good news, but don't forget or dismiss it either. The beautiful babe and the precocious tween grew into the man who out of love used his divine power to set us free. He knows what we need to know, and came to show us the way. Thanks be to God. Amen.