

Britt Carlson
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11 o'clock am

Community Church of Issaquah
Issaquah, Washington

"Kids and the Kingdom"

Luke 2:41-52

You know, as I was preparing for today, I was thinking to myself. Every year we take an *entire month* to celebrate Jesus the baby, so why isn't there at least a week when we remember Jesus the preteen? Maybe everybody just wants those years to go away in their own lives? I don't know.

All joking aside, it is strange that in all four of the Gospels, Jesus in the temple—the passage we just read—is the *only* passage that talks about any event in the long years between Jesus as a baby and Jesus as an adult. And of all possible ages, Luke chooses to talk about Jesus as a twelve-year-old.

And a true twelve-year-old Jesus is. He is seemingly oblivious to how his parents are going to feel about their son's disappearance. He does what he wants without thinking what the consequences will be. And even though Jesus eventually does cave in and return to Nazareth with his parents, he has clearly separated himself from ol' mom and dad. Like many parents, this was probably not the son Mary and Joseph had dreamt of when they held that newborn baby in their arms.

But while what's going on here in the temple might be a classic example of teenage angst, it's not just teenage angst. See *un*-like many adolescents, Jesus is separating himself from his family because he has radically aligned himself with God. He says to his parents, "Why didn't you search for me in the temple? Of course, that's where I would be. It's my father's house."

Now, Mary and Joseph had raised Jesus right. They had taken him to be circumcised on the eighth day in the temple. In fact, the whole reason they're in Jerusalem right now in the first

place is so that they can observe the Passover. They were a devout Jewish family. They would have been that family whose kids win the perfect Sunday school attendance awards. You would think that Mary and Joseph would understand why Jesus had to be in the temple.

But even for the most committed of the faithful, having children who follow God with whole-hearted dedication can be challenging because there's a moment of separation and fear. For Mary and Joseph that moment of separation came the day they couldn't find Jesus on their way home. For us, that challenge might come in the form of a son's call to full-time ministry—when that other career he was thinking about would have been so much more stable and stress-free. Or it might come in the form of a daughter who feels pulled to live in an intentional living community or serve overseas as a missionary. Who knows. But I have seen those calls come. And I've seen them stretch a family's faith in very concrete ways.

You see, this is what Jesus is doing. He's stretching things. His commitment to put God first and his relationship with God as father and son is changing the boundaries of his human family. That's the kind of change that is the hardest and yet the most needed for the family. Jesus is saying that a biological family—even the best of families, even the most Christian of families—is not God's ultimate aim. If we are going to radically align ourselves with God and with Jesus, we are going to find that our familial ties begin to be changed.

I was talking with a good friend of mine the other day. We were talking about singleness and dating and marriage and following the Lord, and my friend said, "You know what, if it comes

down to either having a spouse or having God, I will choose God every time.” Now for most of us thankfully the choice isn’t either/or. But that is the kind of complete commitment to God’s purposes that Jesus lives out in the temple. It’s a willingness to give up all things to be with God. Jesus is aligning himself totally with God’s will—even when it alienates and scares his parents. Parents who want to see their children well-settled and who are looking forward to grandchildren.

Now I’ve got to be fair to parents. One American church historian, Grant Wacker, says that when you study history you see what stays constant through the years and what fades away. And out of all the things that could be constants, one of the most constant things is a parents’ concern and care for their children. And that is so true. I know how much I care and love for my sister (who I hope you all get to meet today after church). I can’t even imagine how much more a parent would love their child. We want the very best for the people we love that deeply.

But what Jesus recognizes in the temple is that sometimes those ties of love start to tighten and tighten until suddenly they’re no longer ties of love but ties of control. The family can start to pull into itself with an unhealthy gravitational pull, shutting out other people and opportunities.

So when Jesus says to his father and mother “Don’t you know, I’m supposed to be in my Father’s house” he is saying that no family, however good, can take the place of our primary relationship to God. And what we’ll see is that he’s starting to point to a new family—a new place of love and security and care—a place whose pull is not the human family but the true Father, the Creator of heaven and earth.

You know, though, there are some parents who do remember that the true father is the Lord. Remember back to our first reading for today: the boy Samuel is serving in the temple. But how

did Samuel get there? His mother, Hannah, put him there! Hannah was so grateful for being given a son that she entrusted him to the temple completely. Now I don’t know how many parents in this room would have felt comfortable giving up all of their child’s adorable growing up moments and handing their child over to be raised in the church by its pastors, but that is exactly what Hannah did.

She released her child and in releasing him changed the identity and focus of her family.

A summer ago, I heard a story that reminds me of Hannah and her ability to trust God with the future. I was about to preach at Gaston Oaks Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas, which is the second oldest Baptist church in Dallas.

But before I preached, I met with their current pastor to learn more about the church, and he told me a story that I think gets at the heart of what Jesus and Hannah understand about God.

He told me that the church had once been a large, thriving downtown congregation, but as people had moved out to the suburbs because of white flight the membership had shrunk. Well as this is all happening, the pastor at the time saw that a nearby group of Christian Karen [Kah-rin] refugees from Burma were in need of a church building. They soon started worshipping in Gaston Oaks’ building. Then a Spanish-speaking group from Central America needed a place, so they came in. Then an African congregation. Then a Bhutanese fellowship. Then a Tibetan church. And finally a congregation of believers from the Chin people group.¹

So today if you go to Gaston Oaks Baptist Church on a Sunday morning, its hallways are

¹ For a story written up about Gaston Oaks, see <https://www.faithandleadership.com/features/articles/new-future-for-aging-congregation>

filled with little kids running around chattering away in East Asian languages, black teens lounging against walls and in doorways, and women in brightly printed African clothing. These are the sights and sounds of salvation. Laughter and noise and as the Psalmist says “the joyful procession.”

But you know what, though? I bet when the original congregation was shrinking and the members of Gaston Oaks didn’t know what to do, I bet that they thought the solution was going to be sort of a multiplication of what they currently looked like. The children they imagined running up and down the church hallways probably—if they were honest—were just younger versions of themselves: white, middle to upper class, U.S. citizens.

And yet here they are. Seven vibrant and *very different Baptist* churches all under one roof. How completely different from the “old” Gaston Oaks and how completely joyful.

This is a radical realignment we find Hannah and Jesus showing us. It’s a realignment that says, “Even though I love my family, even though I love those I know, I am open to the new people that God is bringing into my life.”

Are we willing to be realigned like that? Are we willing to receive those the Lord brings to us? Can we receive them even when they don’t look like us? When they’re not what we expected? When they mystify us in how different they are from what we had been planning on?

Because if we know our Bible, we know that who God chooses is mysterious. In fact, the New Testament explicitly uses that word “mystery.” I think Mary and Joseph were probably pretty mystified as to why their son Jesus would have to separate from them, why he would have to leave them and drive them crazy with worry. But you know, what mystery is the perfect word for this morning. You see, the word “mystery” in

the New Testament references a very specific thing. When a New Testament writer talks about “the mystery” they are talking about God’s unexpected and miraculous inclusion of the Gentiles.

Luke is playing a long game with us in his Gospel. He is giving us hints right now of what Jesus is going to be all about. And what Jesus is going to be all about is about expanding God’s salvation from just the Jews to all the Gentiles. The mystery is that God would bring into the Holy Family of Israel a bunch of rowdy, not quite so pious, outsiders into the holy family of Israel. This is the mystery! That God, walking and talking in human flesh in Jesus Christ, has decided not just to choose who he’s always chosen—Israel—but that he is choosing the whole world.

God saves. But God’s salvation is always surprising. It never quite looks like what we think it would. The people involved are never quite the people we think would be involved.

I think that oftentimes we just have to get out of the way of what God’s doing. To at least not stop what God is trying to do. Think back to Gaston Oaks Baptist. Can you imagine if someone had said: “Mmm, these people, they make me feel uncomfortable. They don’t look like us. And the food they bring for their potlucks smell weird. And the clothes they wear are just so bright and garish.” Can you imagine? God’s salvation would be right in front of their faces and they would miss it!

This is what our task is as believers: to not miss out on God’s salvation. To receive what more often than not seems like an utter mystery to us. To be open to a new family and new priorities. Because in receiving, we will be filled. And in being filled, we will find joy. And joy, my friends, joy is what the Christian life is all about. So, blessed be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love, for that tie is the tie of Christ, the

tie that cannot be broken, a new family that will exist forever. Amen.