

Growing Up in Church  
Samuel 2: 18-20, 26  
Luke 2: 41-52  
December 27, 2015  
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If this incident from Luke took place today, can you imagine what we might read in the next morning's newspaper or the Twitter feed?

### **12-year boy old found after missing for 3 days: Questions about family remain**

Police and child welfare officials intervened today when a boy was reported lost after going missing for three days. The 12-year old, Jesus ben Joseph of Judea, was attending a revival meeting at the Crystal Palace in Atlanta **with** his mother, Mary, and a man claiming to be his father, one Joseph ben Heli, an itinerant carpenter.

“We’d just been down to the revival meeting,” said Mr. ben Heli, “and we had ourselves a great time listening to all the preaching and praying and singing. When it was over, we grabbed the kids and jumped into the van and headed home. We’d been driving a while when the kids started fighting in the back seat and my wife turned around to yell at them: ‘James, Judas, and Simon! You all settle down! Why can’t you be good like your big brother Jesus?’ That’s when we realized that Jesus wasn’t even in the car!”

Ben Heli claimed that due to the rain and heavy holiday traffic it took them a full day to get back to Atlanta, and then they searched for two days trying to find the boy in the city. Finally they went back to the Crystal Palace and found their son in the minister’s conference room in deep discussion.

Child welfare was called in as a routine precaution, but a standard background check on the parents revealed no birth record for their oldest son. It has since been discovered that Mr. and Mrs. ben Heli left the country 12 years ago quite suddenly, leading to suggestions that the boy might have been abducted. Meanwhile, all the children have been placed in foster care until authorities complete their investigation.”

Well, we can have fun speculating about all this, and that’s about all we can do as far as Jesus’ entire childhood and adolescence go. Unfortunately for our inquiring minds, the Bible doesn’t give us much to go on. In fact, of the four gospels that made it in the canon, this is the only passage that talks about Jesus between the time he was an infant and the beginning of his ministry probably 30 years later. Just one short story about Jesus spending three days in the Temple while his frantic parents searched high and low for him. It presents Jesus as an ordinary child who had an extraordinary impact on the people around him, the way Jesus is often depicted, as if everything about him is extraordinary and ordinary at the same time—as ordinary as God becoming one of us, we might say.

Maybe this story doesn’t strike you as all that extraordinary. Maybe you’ve known kids who are easily distracted, who march to a different drummer, who aren’t really in sync with their family...or their peers, and who can get absorbed in their favorite topic for hours—maybe even

days--on end. Maybe you aren't the least bit surprised to learn that Jesus felt more at home with the religious leaders of his community than with his parents and that, of course, they would find him "in his Father's house." Or maybe you find it a bit disappointing after all the stories about Jesus miraculous conception and birth that the only thing the gospel writers tell us about him as an adolescent is that he got lost in Jerusalem and ended up in a prolonged theological discussion with the rabbis. What's so special about that?

Well, you wouldn't be alone if you thought such things. There actually *are* many other stories about Jesus as a child that didn't make into the Christian canon. You can find them in some apocryphal books, written later than our Gospels, probably to fill this seeming gap in Jesus' biography. One such book is the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* which includes stories about Jesus from age 5 to twelve. They portray Jesus mostly as a young miracle worker. For example, at age 5 he makes birds out of mud, claps his hands and makes them fly away. But many of the other miracles in this book have a more malicious or vindictive tone to them, such as the time a boy knocks over Jesus' sandcastle. Jesus calls him an "unrighteous, impious ignoramus," and turns him into an old man. Soon after, another child runs into him and Jesus kills him with a word. This kind of horseplay upsets the local folks (for some reason) and they ask Joseph to discipline the boy. When Joseph speaks to his son, Jesus strikes all the complainers blind. Joseph then grabs him by the ear, and Jesus calls his father stupid. Jesus then raises the slain child from the dead so that he can prove that he didn't kill him in the first place.

I don't know about you but these are not stories I want to tell children, or anyone else, especially those who sometimes inquire, "What would Jesus do?" But these are the kind of stories that might impress young readers, sounding a bit like Harry Potter and his Hogwarts classmates. Jesus' power in these "Infancy" narratives is much more like those kind of magical abilities than the kind of power that Jesus displays in the Gospels of Mt, Mark, Luke and John. Unfortunately, it seems like many folks, young and old, those who lived a couple of thousand years ago and those alive today, are more impressed with power that can bring immediate, dramatic results, no matter who might be hurt in the process, than power that works gently and gracefully and might involve personal sacrifice, the kind of power that we tend to associate with Jesus and his ministry

Now don't get me wrong. Jesus' authority was impressive, and we read in the gospels about people wondering where he got such power. When someone like Jesus appears in the world people want to know where he came from. Who were his parents? How did he get this way? What made him so special? I think that's why the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke were written in the first place. People wanted to know where this miracle worker who could heal the sick and raise the dead came from. He must have had a miraculous beginning.

The story of Jesus being found in the temple with the rabbis is Luke's "bridge" between Jesus' spectacular birth and his dramatic baptism where he is identified again as God's son. And what Luke seems to want us to know is that Jesus was very much a product of a Jewish family and the Jewish faith. We learn that his parents are scrupulous about keeping the law and traditions. They had him circumcised at 8 days and brought him to the temple for a ritual presentation as a baby, and they travelled to Jerusalem every year for the Passover. So maybe when the 12-year-old Jesus asks them, "Didn't you know that I must be in my Father's house?" he wasn't being impudent, he just thought they would know—because this is where they brought him so often—that this is where he would find shelter, comfort, and a familiar place where he could learn to be his true self.

Indeed in some ways it's curious that Mary and Joseph *don't* look for him in the temple right away and that they are astounded when they find him there. After all people and angels have been telling them since the day he was conceived that he was a very special child, filled with the Holy Spirit, the Son of the Most High, the Messiah. Now here he is on the brink of manhood in his society, beginning to claim his own identity. Here he is with the teachers and elders who confirm that indeed he is an extraordinary child of God. His parents may not completely understand him, but the community of faith, the Temple leaders, the Church helps him move toward fulfillment of his calling. We might well ask, "Would Jesus have found his calling, gone into ministry, without the teaching, direction, and mentorship of the temple leaders?"

Well, we certainly have no way of knowing and clearly Jesus was unlike anyone else we've known. But we also read today about Samuel, another young boy who literally grew up in the temple. His mother, Hannah, had promised God from before his conception that she would consecrate him to serve in the Temple his whole life and she had brought him to live there when he was about 3 years old. The part of his story we read today ends with the words "the boy continued to grow both in stature and in favor with God and with people," very similar words to those Luke uses to end his story about Jesus. What we didn't read today is the part that Eli, Samuel's mentor, played in his life. Not only did the old priest have to teach Samuel all the temple rituals and traditions, but more importantly how to recognize God's voice speaking to him. Once Samuel understood that God was calling him and what God was calling him to do, he went on to be one of the most important prophets in Israel's history.

Did Samuel need his older mentor to help him find his way? The scripture certainly suggests that. Did Jesus need these 3 days of deep discussion with the elders to help him hear his own call? That's not as clear. But for many of us, myself included, if I hadn't had the teaching, the mentoring, and especially the love and care and encouragement of the church where I grew up, I never would have pursued ministry, or at least not with the kind of confidence that the faith and encouragement of my home church gave me. Do you have a similar story? Or perhaps a story of how the *lack* of faith, the lack of encouragement, maybe even words of discouragement, disappointment, or outright disapproval held you back from pursuing a calling you thought you heard? The words of our elders, our teachers, our mentors, grownups we admire can have a profound impact on our lives. How has this faith community impacted those in our midst? How might we be an even more positive influence on our youth and children, but not only those who are still young? How might we help others already past their adolescence identify their gifts and fulfill their calling, their own particular vocation? How do we help each other to grow in wisdom, and divine and human favor?

Scripture says that one day while Jesus and his family were in Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, he got lost but then was found in God's house. The people in charge there didn't throw him out. In fact, they included him in their deep discussions about faith and God. It seems that was a turning point in Jesus' life. As we enter a new year of ministry here, let's remember this story and think about how we might include, teach and learn from those who find themselves here. It might be a turning point in all our lives.