

# THE GOSPEL OUTSIDE - EMPTY NESTS

## Eastertide

Luke 2:41-52

A Sermon Preached by  
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Seattle, Washington 98125  
May 13, 2018

Scripture – Read by Liturgists

Listen for the word of God.

**Luke 2:41-52<sup>1</sup>**

Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. When the festival was ended they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." He said to them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" But they did not understand what he said to them. Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart.

And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.

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Pastor Amy Roon

Please pray with me.

God,  
Be in my head,  
Be in our heart,  
Be in our understanding,  
Be in the words heard and the words spoken.  
- Amen

I have to tell you this – even hearing that story again. This story is just so different to me as a parent than it ever was as a child, ever. I tried to talk to the youth about it the other day, and had all these different layers, now .. like "Eh... what is the thing?"

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<sup>1</sup> The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), New Testament. ©1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. .

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I'm like *you* ... like ... And this is like just every nightmare, right? This is the moment ... A way you're looking for your kid ... You think this is all; this is like the whole layers of the things. "We have been searching for you!"

"Why are you searching for me? Did you not know?"

NO!

NO!

I did not know. You didn't tell me! You didn't leave a note! You didn't tell a friend!

I tried to get on with it.

But they did not understand what she said.

Well, I wouldn't either. I wouldn't either. Ahum. Whoosh.

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It is most likely in the Gospel of Luke because, just as in the birth narrative, there were particular elements like a once upon a time sort of elements to a narrative that would remind you that Jesus as a character is an amazing God figure. So there are tropes and stories of young people in their youth being known for wisdom and being respected by great leaders, so very likely that is all that this story was supposed to mean. But I find it really fascinating that the Gospel of Luke continues to wrap up the narrative of Jesus within the context of the story of a family – and of children and of Jesus as a child. It's the *only* time where we get the story. And we get it told *not* from Jesus's perspective but from his parents'.

As parents one of our first roles, especially if our children and when our children are very young, is as a steward of our child's story. But we are only stewards. As they age, our second role, which goes on for the rest of our lives and theirs, is to hand that story back to them and respect that they are their own storytellers.

I met Benjamin's birth mom when she was still pregnant. – And we had a conversation, and she said "Yep, this is .... I think this is what I want to do." And I am not – you can ... Margaret<sup>2</sup> can vouch for this. I am notorious for forgetting to take pictures of things and then having nothing to show for the moment. But I *knew* that no matter what happened that if this child that was in her womb was to be told of this story of our meeting, that we would want a picture. So we have this one fuzzy kind of awkward picture taken from my little flip cell phone – that I had to make sure that I had a phone advanced enough that could take pictures – that I could keep and that we have.

Now, it turns out that then I got radio silence. And I didn't hear anything from her. And I wasn't sure if this was really going to happen.

And I get a call in the at 4:45 in the morning and I'm ... And his whole story, which he loves having me tell over and over again, is of just a rush and a blur, because you just don't have any real notice is an adoptive parent. And so I am constantly surprised by people, even people who *know* – they *know* Benjamin and my story and that he's adopted – and they still forget! And I realized, I thought that's

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<sup>2</sup> Colleague Margaret Swanson, UCUC Director of Youth Ministries

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just so odd. They're ... "Oh! He looks so like her," because of they forget, that (I realized), oh, we have all these pictures of me in the hospital with him as an infant. And sure enough, if you wake up at 4:45 in the morning, get on a plane, rent a car do all of this with... with zero notice, and are then about 12 hours later trying to figure out if you actually can nurse a child you haven't given birth to and you're in a hospital and you're really tired, you look like you gave birth! So all those pictures really, really look ... I looked just as unwashed and tired and hopeless and so I ... it's ... Yeah. So sometimes I forget.

All right.

We finally get discharged and, of course, we still don't know exactly what will happen. T'mara has gone home.

And we find out that the paternal family has just barely learned of Benjamin's birth and are having a hard time letting go. And one of the social workers that I was working with said, "This agency, we will open up this weekend, if you would like to use our offices as a meeting place". And I said, "Yes."

And I hear this from folks going, "Wasn't that really hard?" Because, yes, sure enough, his grandmother, his then-great-aunt, two siblings, several cousins, and his great-grandmother all came from Stockton. And there I am again. I've only been a parent for three days. To let them hold him and say hello and get to know me. And by the end of that time, where they were really struggling with the fact that *not* being birth parents they had no legal rights. We didn't have to have that meeting. I could've just said no, they've no legal standing. I'm overwhelmed – We're not to do this – But I didn't want to leave California and tell Benjamin that his birth family wanted to see him but I was too tired. Or I was too scared. Or I was too worried about how it would be. And by the end of that meeting. – I will never forget it – they turned to me and they said, "Sigh. It's okay. Because we're not actually giving Benjamin up; we're adding you." And they have always thought of it that way.

When I go down to California, Benjamin's grandmother introduces me as her daughter and simply has decided that's how it will be. And T'mara had been – and is – more introverted, more private. I had no idea how she was feeling. I hadn't heard from her since she left the hospital. I'd only known that she had indeed signed the papers so that we would be free to go, once the State of Washington, the State of California and all the lawyers – and anybody else whom I didn't even meet – agreed and said it's okay for you to be a parent so you can now leave the state. So we knew we were clear to go on Monday morning.

And I got a call on Sunday night. We're still exhausted. Benjamin's drinking okay. I got locked out of the apartment once. I want to admit it was just chaos. But I got a call saying actually, "Yes, yes. I would like to see him before you leave." So at 7 o'clock at night I packed this four-day-old baby into the car. And keep in mind this is before I had an iPhone, so I had to map out where I'm going to some subdivision in Pittsburg, California, to meet up with T'mara and her daughter and anybody else, any of her friends who ... And I didn't know where we were going. And it was nerve-racking. It was unsettling. It was in a neighborhood I felt terribly uncomfortable in. But I knew that I wanted this to be a part of his story.

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And it was when we were driving back to – ironically – to PSR<sup>3</sup> where we were staying – that I first really noticed and came up with that phrase and realized *this is my job*. *This* is my job as a parent until Benjamin can make the choices on his own to say: "These people are important to me. I'm going there," and have the means to do so, I am the steward of his story. And the enormity of what that would mean that all of any interaction of who he would see and that he got to be held by his birth family that we have those pictures and he could be baptized first with their tears and held in their love was the most important parental gift I could give him in those first days.

And so, too, since he is now 10, he is of course now well into the chapter of life where he is demanding that he get that story back – because being the steward of your child's story is such a *phenomenal* responsibility, it's easy to think that that *is* your child's story. It's ... But becoming a steward is a parent's story of becoming.

All grown children remember it differently. All grown children will tell their therapists what they actually remember. And if we learned anything from parenting or parenting stories, it's that this lesson of how to support and speak on behalf of and when and how to let go doesn't just apply to raising children but to any and all things that we care for, advocate for, and deeply love as if it were our own life. It's incredibly important to remember that we are stewards *only* of those things we love. And that our children as soon as they are able will take over as primary narrators, that some of the toughest years are then when we are sharing the responsibility of creating this story. And some of the toughest years as a child – or as a young adult – is figuring out who *you* want to help support your story – because of course as you grow into your own agency, you get to just make some other decisions even about who you've decided your parents are, who is going to help you carry your story.

So as I have noted before, the community of Luke *must* have included families. It is the only logical conclusion to me about how this narration unfolds with such attention to the growth and layers and development and connection to Jesus's family. In these first two chapters the primary characters are those who were stewards of Jesus's story. The fact that he was born in Bethlehem was because his parents decided to travel there so that that could be a part of his story. When he went to Temple and met prophets or was circumcised according to law or tradition or, even before this, the idea that he met his cousin John in the womb – are all things that only his parents and family and others who could tell him that story would be able to make happen.

And here, in this one glimpse into his boyhood life we see that Mary and Joseph are clearly a part of the community. They are bringing Jesus up with family and community traditions. *This* trip that they took every year. Was it the first year that they let them walk with his friends? My guess might be the second or third, because the last years probably went so well they weren't that worried about it. They didn't need to check in until supper time. I mean, it wasn't like Jesus to miss supper. And the panic and the fear of checking and checking and checking. ... Nobody knows where he is. This is a turning moment, as the story goes back to the temple to find him there and Jesus, in the Gospel of Luke, speaks *his own* first words.

In this whole telling of the gospel that centers on Jesus's life, it isn't until that moment that Jesus speaks. And what a snarky teenager he immediately is! What we are witnessing is the first thing that happened because *Jesus* decided that's what he wanted to do and this was what he was going to say.

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<sup>3</sup> Pacific Schools of Religion, Berkeley, CA [www.psr.edu](http://www.psr.edu)

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And then I love how the narrators effectively say – perhaps to all the other gathered families there – "And then he went back and was very obedient until he was grown." And I mean, we all need that line, right?

Everything that we do and have done is a story to be told. And one of the most important things that we can do as chosen spiritual Christian family together is recognizing what role we're playing: when we're stewards of the child story – or of anyone's story – and when we're supporting a narrator who has yet to find their voice or whether that story is our own or whether it's our role to get out of the way and allow them to speak for themselves.

In justice work there are three primary voices: There's the *dominant* voice that is the law and social norms. There is a *secondary* voice of a person or a group that has legal protection and can or does conform to social norms. They have some power within that system. And then there's the *voice of the oppressed or the suppressed*, which usually doesn't have either legal protection, a legal right, or perhaps does not conform to social norms. All children fall into this category. All children fall into the category of either – as any parent of a particularly young child knows – not conforming to social norms. We are doing our best to teach them those social norms, and, meanwhile, they'll do whatever they want. But they also don't, they can't sue somebody. They can't go to court. There isn't a protection that says they can say, "This is what I want" and have it happen.

All adults will find themselves somewhere on the continuum, sometimes in a place of power. Sometimes in a place of vulnerability. For instance, in doing work around homelessness, you would have a city council and law and assumptions of what it means to live your life and have a home. And you might have organizations like UCHA<sup>4</sup> or homeless action teams as a secondary voice. And then you have a homeless couple trying to find a place so they can reunify with their baby in foster care. Who is a steward? Whose voice is primary? And where the dominant norms?

In doing work around racism, you would have perhaps the Seattle Police Department as a dominant voice. Racial justice action teams as a secondary voice. And you would have people of color trying to take naps in dorm rooms, have a barbecue [as] in Oakland, walk across the street, just trying to exist. Which voice is yours and what story needs to be heard? When is the steward's job to let the primary narrator take over?

And doing work around mental or physical health, you might have DSHS, and hospitals, or insurance companies. And you have able-bodied family members or friends. And you have someone with Alzheimer's who might tell the same story all day long and needs our help or support to tell the story that needs to be heard, to get the care they need. When is it our role to step into stewardship of someone's story when they cannot or will not be heard without your help? When is it our responsibility to recognize that that person we're speaking for would like the mic.

You know the ending to that primary nativity scene, the moment with the Angels and the sheep and the shepherds and animals and Joseph all surrounding Jesus and Mary. And Mary ponders and treasures these things in her heart.

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<sup>4</sup> University Congregational Housing Association

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At the end of this story we have a similar scene this time with rabbis and teachers and leaders all surrounding Jesus and recognizing him for prodigious wisdom and here, too, Mary treasuring this moment recording it, remembering it, on his behalf and for ours. That this story doesn't just mark the first words of Jesus in this gospel but the end of Mary and Joseph's decisions being central to the story. There is a grief there for Mary and Joseph as there is in any journey's ending. There's also relief and joy that the story of his life is bigger than their parenting. It's bigger than who we are. It's not all up to us as stewards to know the answers.

I love the image, the cycle to realize that if you have this imagery, that an understanding that God really gets what it means to be a parent. God really gets what it means to love and care for us and to know how to just let us go and muck it up and then say, "We're sorry and we'll try again." And for us to keep trying and to keep trying to support us *and* that God knows what it's like to be a kid and to say, "Hey! Back off! I have something to say now." In this rotating shift of when it's our voice to support and when it's our voice to hand the mic over to someone else. I find tremendous good news and relief to know that not every story is *my* story. It is the relief that we can feel when we remember that it's not all up to us and it is not possible to experience this relief until we let go and trust those we speak for to speak for themselves, for there is joy and struggle and beauty in each voice and story. – Amen.

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Transcribed by Beth Bartholomew from <https://universityucc.org/resources/sermons>  
8/16/2018