

My Father's House (Luke 2.39-52) | February 3, 2019

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Stories of Disobedience

- This is one of those stories that sparks the imagination and might also stir up some memories. Maybe it reminds us of familiar episodes in our own childhood.
- In a way, this story runs along those same lines in that it's about a kind of disobedience.

A Strange Story

- Considering all the stories we have about Jesus, if we were to select the top ten strangest episodes, a good argument could be made for this story ending up on that list.
- First, its singular to St. Luke (Mark, Matthew and John don't include it). Second, it's the only story we find in the gospels about Jesus' childhood. Third, it's a little out of left field, since we might expect a story about his boyhood being about how Jesus always cleaned his room or was very nice to the other children.
- Instead, at first reading, it almost seems as if Jesus is being cast as a cheeky, holier-than-thou, pre-teen. Is this Jesus' on a learning curve? Is this Jesus about to enter his terrible teens? Why does Luke include *this* story?

Why this story?

- Part of the reason we find this story is because Luke's investigation has turned it up. He's interviewed eyewitnesses, he's done his homework, he's a good first century journalist. (And we do get the feeling that Luke's had some contact with Jesus' family given the detail provided – particularly information shared from Mary's point of view in the first two chapters.)

- But as a biographer, Luke is also telling us a carefully crafted story. So what we have is not only some first-century investigatory journalism, but a story with an slant, with a point. (Which is how we tell stories still today. Pick up a biography of Emily Carr, Nelson Mandela or Terry Fox and we'll find an arranged story, told from a point of view, depicting a character in a certain light.)

What's remarkable about the story?

- So what light is Jesus in? What picture are we given?
- We're told that after the Passover festival Jesus stays behind, and is finally found in the Temple after a frantic search by his parents.
- Now, forgetting your twelve-year-old in another city might seem like terribly poor parenting in this day and age, but really, it's the unremarkable part of the story. According to Jewish custom, Jesus is considered virtually a man at age twelve, and his parents would have been traveling with extended family and other villagers from Nazareth, along with thousands of others into and out of Jerusalem. Mary and Joseph likely have a number of other children at this point, and their first-born is expected to be in and around other trusted family members on the road.
- So the expectation that Jesus would be around and about, something like expecting the eldest in a large family to be capable of making it home from school without too much assistance. Eventually they realize he's not in the group and go find him.
- The remarkable part of the story is not that Jesus goes missing, but *where* his parents find him, *what* they find him doing, and *how* Jesus responds to their concern about his disappearance.

Jesus in the Temple, his company, and his response

- First, *where is Jesus and what is he doing?* Well, he's in the Temple and is in dialogue with the most educated people in Jerusalem who are all amazed at his

insight. Luke's saying that Jesus is someone already at age twelve with a strange authority and wisdom.

- Not only this, he's showing us Jesus in the *Temple*. The next and last time we find him in the Temple, is at the very end of Jesus' life, where he causes a commotion and sets off a chain of events that eventually lead to his death.
- So both episodes in the Temple, at the beginning of his life and at the end, portray Jesus in a somewhat *uncontrollable* light. This is someone *unlike* others around him.
- And this *unlikeness* is all part of the story Luke is building. And if somehow unexpectedly and mysteriously Jesus is Israel's God come to live among them, this scene puts Jesus exactly where God's expected to be – in the Temple, the very centre of Jewish life, leading and teaching Israel's leaders and teachers – that, in itself is a startling image. Do those around Jesus even understand who he is and what's going on?
- Second, when they find him, *how does Jesus respond to his parents?* When they turn up and effectively say, "We were worried sick and were looking for you everywhere. Don't you understand how family works?", Jesus replies, "Is it a big surprise to find me in my Father's house, focused on my Father's work?"
- In in behind those words is a foreshadowing of what we'll discover throughout St. Luke's biography of Jesus. It's as if he's saying: "Don't you remember that I have *other family?* Another allegiance? A deeper loyalty?"

Loyalty & Obedience

- That's the crux of the story. One of the themes the Gospel of Luke surrounds the question of loyalty and disloyalty; rebellion and compliance.
- At different points in the Gospels (and this is one of them) Jesus surprises people with this kind of stark response, and sometimes it really puts people's noses out of joint.

- (To be clear, Jesus isn't being a brat for the sake of it, since at the end of the episode we read that Jesus returns home with his parents to Nazareth and was obedient to them)
- People often expect Jesus to do this, or that, and he does the other. People expect Jesus to stay with them, but he leaves; to go with them, but he stays; to do what they want, but he won't. It becomes clear, and this scene is an early indicator, that Jesus is getting his marching orders from elsewhere.
- He's not obstinate or rude, but almost, you could say, distracted, and later determined. There's a sense that Jesus is *preoccupied* with matters others around aren't tuned in to.
- So it's one of those episodes (as we see also early on in Mark's gospel) in which we're faced with Jesus' paramount interest in the *elsewhere*. His devotion to God overshadows any other master.
- With Israel's story in mind, Jesus acting like the child Israel hasn't been to God: attentive, trusting and obedient. Jesus filling the shoes Israel hasn't.
- And there's a further hint in how Jesus refers to God. He says, "My Father's house..." Israelites would sometimes use the plural, "Our Father" for God, or other terms, but using "My Father" is really something only Jesus does.
- Who does Jesus listen to? Only God. What way is Jesus going? Only God's way.
- This is one way in which we see God's character in Jesus – he's always reflecting God's nature and God's way of doing things into the world. Here's someone who is truly willing to call God *Father* and really follow through on all that that means – someone who trusts and reveals God's character.
- What is meant to come through this story is the *startling contrast* between how *preoccupied* Jesus is with the one he calls "Father" before anyone or anything else. Who and what, when push really comes to shove, is Jesus really tuned into?

But they didn't understand...

- And that becomes challenging, even for the people who we'd have to say at this point know Jesus the best.
- In this story Mary virtually scolds Jesus, because his preoccupation has caused them problems. And Luke says that his parents didn't understand Jesus' response to their questions and chastisement.
- So here's a moment in which their ideas about *who Jesus is* and *how he should* go about things get toppled over. They've been part of his story from the start, but Jesus is already breaking out of even his parents expectations, and they don't know what to think about it.
- Their framework is being challenged, their boxes, and questions aren't easily answered.
- Luke simply says, as he has earlier, that Mary stored up or pondered all these things in her heart.

Conclusion

- What a dramatic picture for people who call themselves Jesus' followers. I think the story asks us a couple of questions:

The first question this story asks is: *are we prepared for God to outgrow us?*

- Sooner or later, like Mary, we'll probably find ourselves asking God: "What do you think you're doing? Don't you realize the trouble your causing me?"
- Maybe that has to do with God not checking the boxes we expected, or answering a prayer, or even, if we're honest, feeling like he's disappeared on us. And it gets very frustrating very fast if we approach our faith expecting to do the leading and guiding, rather than being led and guided.

- When we sign up with Jesus, we're signing up for more than we've probably bargained for. We're getting to know someone *unlike* ourselves; someone trustworthy but *uncontrollable*, which can at times feel pretty darn inconvenient.
- That means that things are going to deepen with God, not get shallower. Our understanding, our trust, our view will need to widen, to expand, to deepen also.
- So there's both real challenge but also real comfort in this story. If we're experiencing the unexpected, even the inconvenient with God, it doesn't mean something's wrong. It might just mean things are getting deeper. The question is, what are we going to do with God when he begins to outgrow our understanding?
- Maybe a good place to begin, even in our lack of understanding, is to like Mary gather up and ponder in our hearts. Sometimes that's the only response.

The second question is, with Jesus' example in mind: *what are we (as Jesus' followers) preoccupied with?* (another way to say that might be, *what frequency are we tuned into?*)

- That's really one of the main questions we face daily as Christians. At every turn we find a choice to either go God's way or not. What controls and guides us? What, even good things upon reflection, need to take a back seat? Who or what, in the end, are we really going to call *Father*?
- Jesus' example says: *nothing is getting in between me and my Father; nothing is going to control me, direct me, guide me other than God. Wherever we find ourselves, we're preoccupied, tuning in to our Father's voice, getting on with our Father's work.*

Discussion Questions:

- Share a time you felt like God might be outgrowing your understanding, or you were being drawn in to a deeper place.
- What controllers and guides are you prone to being controlled or guided by?
- How are you learning to trust or obey God (with Jesus' example in mind) in this season of your life? What is God calling you to be preoccupied with?