



**ST. COLUMBA'S  
EPISCOPAL CHURCH**

## *Jesus Perfectly 12*

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*Second Christmas, Year B  
Luke 2: 41-52*

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I think today's gospel is about two things -- both easily relatable, thank God. The first is old as the rocks, it's about the yawning gap between children and their parents. Children -- at least my children -- tell me all the time that I don't understand them. If I'm lucky! Sometimes their judgement is that I don't understand anything! All the time there is laughter from them about how little their parents understand. And to be honest, the reverse is sometimes true. Their parents feel as though their children are blocks of sand having crashed into our planet from an alien one.

I came across a book entry that recorded elementary students who were asked to write about what it'd feel like to be 40 years old.

7 year old Rita wrote, *I am forty. I have wrinkles and grey hair and I would have a walking stick to help me walk.*

9 year old Jennifer wrote, *I am forty. I am turning old. I just left work because I cannot manage going up and down hills. I know I will soon die.*

My response. Dear Rita and Jennifer, *I am nearly 40 and literally everything you wrote has been or has felt true of me. Job well done.*

The second relatable thing in our gospel text is the searing feeling of having lost something. A good deal of my life has been in search of things I've lost. Books, keys, my wallet, memories, and of course children. Out of our three children we've lost two-thirds of them -- and only not having lost the third child merely because nearly half her life has been spent in lockdown these last 9 months. The children were 2 or 3 years old when we lost them. One on a walk for about five minutes and the other at the National Harbor for less than 3. But both of course felt more like 2 hours. More than five years later I can remember the exact spot I was when I realized they were not with us. Can nearly retrace each step looking for them. And after just a moment's reflection the echo of panic can still be felt.



For Joseph and Mary their search for Jesus went on for three days. Travelling by caravan they were a day into the journey before realizing he was missing. Luke, so good at

capturing compelling narrative, has Mary speak for the holy parents when they find him on the third day in the Temple, *Why!? Why did you run away? And look at what you've done to us! You almost drove us mad looking for you!*

Jesus responds coolly, *You could have saved a lot of time by looking in the only place anyone would have guessed I'd be: here in my Father's Temple.*

Have I mentioned that Jesus is twelve years old yet? While the culture that Jesus grew up in is markedly different than ours, the biology of Jesus is without meaningful difference than the biology of 12 year old children living now.

Though Jesus' family and tribe from Nazareth had travelled to Jerusalem every year since his birth, it was this year -- the year he turned 12 -- that a major miscommunication snapped between him and his parents.

Let's stipulate that simplifying neuroscience into an anecdote in a 10 minute sermon will necessarily leave out some of the interesting details, but some recent research has suggested that part of the reason preteen and teenage years are "notorious for being times of adventure, risk-taking, and deviance," is that "the brain's logical, rational area (the frontal cortex) and it's more affective, emotional, adventurous area (the amygdala)" are growing in disproportionate ways.

Sarah Flannery, the author of a wonderful book on children and family ministry that Amy let me borrow, summarizes her experience this way,

I have lost count of the number of times the parent of a 4th-grade girl or a 5th-grade boy has approached me to bemoan the loss of their sweet, good-natured kid who has been replaced by a stranger with a smart mouth ... (70)

From God's mouth to Mary's lips. Poor Mary and Joseph!

One important norm in ancient palestinian culture that needs to be understood to understand lots of the stories and parables in the Bible is that good children must honor their parents. It's in the 10 commandments for

goodness sake! That bringing shame upon the family, especially by children openly and flagrantly breaking with their parents, is perhaps the greatest offense one could manage. Something to be avoided at all cost.

Mary and Joseph must have wondered what their friends and relatives were thinking by Jesus acting so independently and compulsively -- just as Jenna and I were both filled with shame at having lost track of our kids when they wandered off. In the days Mary and Joseph spent looking for Jesus they must have wondered, Have we failed?

When they find Jesus their response, though, is striking. Mary clearly communicates her emotional distress. Tries to signal to Jesus that this is no "whoops-a-daisy" misunderstanding but rather something that must be addressed in the most serious of terms.

Jesus' response is also carefully crafted. *I must be in my Father's house.*

*I must be*, Jesus says. Not, *I lost track of time*. Or, *I've always wanted to do this*. Not a semi non apology apology, *I'm sorry if you are upset but ...*

No. Rather Jesus signals to his parents that he is caught up in a singular activity. An activity that defines him. That attracts him with the gravitational weight of necessity. In his mind, it'd be impossible to look anywhere else but right there! His world had shrunk to only that space in time.

With this too, surely, we can relate. To our own childhood when we're sure nothing else will do but THIS! To parents we thought we could trust -- that of course they would understand that we would not be anywhere but where they found us. How could we be of two minds on this!?

*I must be in my Father's house*, Jesus says.

I can imagine my response. *Your father's house?! Your father is a carpenter named JOSEPH -- whom you just horribly embarrassed -- and it's to his house in Nazareth that you are going to right now!*

But Mary and Joseph do not respond reactively. They do not let shame define their response. They listen -- they do not understand

-- but they listen and, at least, Mary takes all of it in and she treasures it, she stores it in her heart.



My favorite writer is the 20th century English philosopher and novelist Iris Murdoch. She defines love this way. **Love is the nonviolent apprehension of difference.** Love is the nonviolent apprehension of difference. Love is when I take what I do not know, the unfamiliar and strange, the uncomfortable and alien; and instead of casting it out or condemning it or demanding it change and conform -- instead of those things, against all odds, I find a way to connect (in however much a fog), I find a way to connect and grasp onto that strangeness and difference and I grasp it with care and affection. This is the seed of love.

This is the only childhood story we have of Jesus. Jesus perfectly 12 years old. Lost in his own world. Talking and listening and learning to adults with specialized knowledge. Oblivious to the total freak out he's causing his parents. And when they find him they somehow find space in themselves to let Jesus

be Jesus. Instead of shaming him, instead of returning the shame they must surely have felt; against all odds, they instill something in him that allows the Spirit to radically take shape and form. They give to Jesus what Jesus will perfectly give to us. A ministry that will change not just Nazareth or Palestine or the Middle East, but eventually a life that will shake the entire course of human history.

One last thing. Jesus' disappearance at 12 years old was the exception not the rule. Luke makes it abundantly clear that Jesus grew up in obedience to his parents. That that 12 year old still needed Mary and Joseph and that whole caravan from northern Israel to help him grow up. He needed them as any 12 year old needs their parents and their community and their church to help guide them as their bodies and emotions continue to change quickly and wildly.

But at 12 Jesus was not just the future. Just as so many of the children around this church are not just the future. These children are already witnesses. Already calling us to know something deeper about God and about ourselves. They are not just the future, as Sarah Flannery says, they are our present. *Amen.*