

When Faith is Scary
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Luke 2: 41-51

Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. ⁴² And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. ⁴³ When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents were unaware of this. ⁴⁴ 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. ⁴⁵ When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. ⁴⁶ After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. ⁴⁷ And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. ⁴⁸ When his parents^[1] saw him they were astonished, and his mother said to him, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously looking for you." ⁴⁹ He said to them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?"^[2] ⁵⁰ But they did not understand what he said to them. ⁵¹ Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was obedient to them, and his mother treasured all these things in her heart.

When my family and I first moved to the Boston area, one of the things we were most excited about was living in a city with public transportation. There is a T station about a 5 minute walk from our apartment and it's a direct shot downtown. So one day back in the summer of 2020, we hopped on the train to go explore. We walked all over Boston Common, over to the Esplanade, down Commonwealth, and over to Copley Square. Now I love walking through a city, but after several hours, our kids were sort of done, so we found the nearest T station and started to head for home. When the train came, Mary Page and I wanted to make sure we all had masks on, we had the stroller and diaper bag, definitely our 2 year old Julian and our 7 year old Nina...wait. Nina wasn't there. We turned around and saw the doors of the train close, right before Nina made her way on. I remember looking through the glass at her panic stricken face. I remember shouting, "Stop the train," just as I saw the emergency release lever. I immediately pulled it, the door opened and we grabbed Nina, all of us in tears. The train operator, slightly annoyed with us, came back to fix the door and away we went.

The whole moment of thinking the train might leave Nina, of thinking that our 7 year old might be all alone in a big city lasted maybe 2 seconds. But it was one of the scariest moments of my life.

Our Scripture today is a story where Mary and Joseph lose the child Jesus in the big city. It's kind of an odd story. It's the only story we have of Jesus as a child – we have the stories of Jesus as a baby. And we have plenty of stories of Jesus as an adult, but this story where Mary and Joseph lose the 12 year old Jesus is the only one we have of him as a kid. And the story ends with the parents discovering Jesus in the temple having a religious conversation with the greatest theological minds of the day.

I have to admit that I've never really thought much about this story and when I have, I always thought that the writer of Luke was simply trying to make the point that, even as a boy, Jesus had this deep connection to God, this deep theological insight. It never once occurred to me to think about this story from the perspective of Mary and Joseph.

Today, Matthew and Lorna have prepared a special piece of music for us that invites us to do just that – consider this story from the perspective of Mary and Joseph and the sheer panic they must have felt when they discovered that their kid was missing, lost and all alone in the big city of Jerusalem.

As Matthew and Lorna share this piece with us, I want to invite all of us to put ourselves in the shoes of Mary and imagine what that must have been like.

*Tell me, some pitying angel, quickly say,
Where does my soul's sweet darling stray,
In tiger's, or more cruel Herod's way?*

*Ah! rather let his little footsteps press
Unregarded through the wilderness,
Where milder savages resort:
The desert's safer than a tyrant's court.*

*Why, fairest object of my love,
Why dost thou from my longing eyes remove?
Was it a waking dream that did foretell
Thy wondrous birth? no vision from above?*

*Where's Gabriel now that visited my cell?
I call; he comes not; flatt'ring hopes, farewell.*

*Me Judah's daughters once caress'd,
Call'd me of mothers the most bless'd.*

Now (fatal change!) of mothers most distress'd.

*How shall my soul its motions guide?
How shall I stem the various tide,
Whilst faith and doubt my lab'ring soul divide?*

*For whilst of thy dear sight beguil'd,
I trust the God, but oh! I fear the child.*

Was it a waking dream that did foretell

Thy wondrous birth? no vision from above?

*Where's Gabriel now that visited my cell?
I call; he comes not; flatt'ring hopes, farewell.*

*Me Judah's daughters once caress'd,
Call'd me of mothers the most bless'd.*

At the beginning of the gospel of Luke, Mary hears words from the angel Gabriel that I imagine any of us would like to hear. “Mary, you are favored by God.” Mary apparently believed the angel. Later in that same chapter, she boldly declares that all generations would consider her blessed. I love Mary. We even named our second child after her as Julian’s first name is Mary. She’s one of my favorite characters in all of Scripture, but I have to admit that rarely have I thought much about Mary beyond the Christmas stories. I think about her saying, “yes” to be the one to bring Jesus into the world. I think about her powerful song where she proclaimed that God would lift up the lowly. I think about Mary and Joseph finding no room at the inn and bringing Jesus into the world in a manger. I think about the wise men and their gifts and the shepherds and their proclamation. But I usually stop right there. I really have never thought about what it was actually like to be Jesus’ mother – not just at his birth but for his whole life.

Soon after his birth, Mary brings Jesus to the temple, and an old man named Simeon comes up to Mary and offers a haunting prophecy – “a sword will pierce your own soul,” he tells her.

He was right.

Soon after Jesus was born, Mary would learn the truth of Simeon’s words. King Herod tried to kill him. The holy family had to flee as refugees. Mary would later suffer any parent’s worst fear as she watched her son suffer and die. Soon after the great pronouncement of Gabriel and the miraculous birth of Jesus, soon after the melody of “Joy to the World” had faded away, Mary’s life surely was one of fear and suffering.

At 12 years old, Jesus had gone missing. Alone in a big city, ruled over by a tyrant who would kill him if he knew who he really was. What could Mary have possibly felt other than what our song tells us – where are you now, Gabriel? Where’s the great vision now? Are you silent now?

Can you imagine how scared you’d be? How scared any of us would be if we were in Mary’s situation?

Finally, they find Jesus in the temple. In a moment of deep relief for Mary and Joseph, Jesus responds to them in maybe the most pre-teenage way possible, “What’s the matter with you? Didn’t you know I’d be in my Father’s house.” And I have to say that there’s something oddly comforting to know that even Jesus was a smart aleck to his parents when he was 12 years old.

Really, parents...it's not our fault. If the son of God couldn't overcome hormones to not speak to his parents in that way, it's just how it goes, right?

But in all seriousness, I'm not sure Jesus' answer gave Mary much relief. Even at 12, Jesus was going to dedicate his entire focus to living out who he believed God called him to be, no matter how much he would have to suffer for that life, no matter how much Mary would have to suffer for Jesus to follow God's call on his life.

The song Matthew and Lorna sang for us ends with these words:

I trust the God, but oh! I fear the child.

What if Mary's fear for the child was precisely because the child trusted God so much? As parents, we want our kids to grow up in the faith. We want them to have a personal relationship with God, with Jesus. We want them to develop habits of prayer and meditation. We want God to be real for them. But if I'm honest, I wonder if what I actually hope for my kids is that God will be real...but not too real for them.

Will Willimon was the dean of Duke University chapel when I attended seminary there and he loved to tell a story about one of his students. It was a young woman who was on the pre-med track to be a doctor. She graduated with honors and then went straight on to Duke Medical school. When she became a doctor, she didn't start a lucrative practice, she didn't join up with a respected healthcare system. Instead, she joined doctors without borders and began travelling to war torn places to care for people living under the crippling effects of poverty, war, and oppression.

Her parents were terrified. They were so proud she was going to be a doctor but never in their wildest dreams did they think she would be "that kind of doctor." So the father, in his fear and even anger, set up a meeting with Dean Willimon and he said to him, "This is your fault. You put in her head these ideas that she has to do something crazy like this to be a good person. She never would have done this if she hadn't paid too much attention to what you preached. This is your fault."

Will is never one to back away from a confrontation, so he responded to the man. "Don't blame me," he said. "You were the one who decided to have her baptized when she was a baby. Don't you know what you did? When you had her baptized, you gave her up to God. You messed around with the one who calls us to do more than we think we can do, who calls us to go to places we think we can't go, who calls us to give everything we have and then more to serve God and care for others. What did you think was going to happen?"

The man thought for a minute and then muttered almost to himself with tears in his eyes, "I just wanted her to be a good Methodist."

Friends, our faith is such a source of hope and comfort and joy. But let's never make the mistake of thinking that our faith is safe, that our God is safe. As Mary found out, in birthing Jesus into the world, she had unleashed a power that she could never even hope to contain. She had unleashed the radical, never ending love of God that was willing to go to any length to show that same love to all – not matter how much it might suffer, no matter how many swords would pierce Mary's soul.

I daresay the same is true for us whenever we invite Jesus into our homes, our lives, our churches, and our communities. For God is not content with us just being "good church people." God wants to change the world. And that is amazing work. It is exciting work. But it most definitely is not safe. As our song tells us:

*How shall my soul its motions guide?
How shall I stem the various tide,
Whilst faith and doubt my lab'ring soul divide?*

*For whilst of thy dear sight beguil'd,
I trust the God, but oh! I fear the child.*
