

December 29, 2024
Feast of the Holy Family of Jesus
Luke 2:41-52

Each year Jesus' parents went to Jerusalem for the feast of Passover, and when he was twelve years old, they went up according to festival custom. After they had completed its days, as they were returning, the boy Jesus remained behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. Thinking that he was in the caravan, they journeyed for a day and looked for him among their relatives and acquaintances, but not finding him, they returned to Jerusalem to look for him.

After three days they found him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions, and all who heard him were astounded at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him, they were astonished, and his mother said to him, "Son, why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been looking for you with great anxiety." And he said to them, "Why were you looking 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.

He went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them; and his mother kept all these things in her heart. And Jesus advanced in wisdom and age and favor before God and man.

Background:

For Luke, Jerusalem is a very significant place. His Gospel begins in Jerusalem, with Zechariah entering the Holy of Holies and learning of the future birth of John. His Gospel also ends in Jerusalem, with the death and resurrection of Jesus. Jerusalem is also the city where the disciples will receive the Holy Spirit and be sent out across the world.

In this Gospel text Luke notes that Jesus is twelve years old. The Law of Moses requires that every male child at this age make the trip to Jerusalem for Passover. This then would be the first time Jesus would have been allowed to make the journey with the other adult members of his community, and read from the Hebrew Scriptures in the temple. It marks his standing as an adult within the community, and a time of transition for Jesus.

Traditionally twelve was the age when boys left the world of their mothers and the other women, and they entered the much harsher world of their fathers and the other adult males. Prior to the age of twelve, the women of the community were responsible for the raising of the children. When the boys left the protection of the women, the fathers and men of the community began to prepare them for the harsh world and being responsible for the survival and protection of their family and community.

The caravans of pilgrims like the rest of society were segregated. Women and children traveled separately from the men. Because Jesus was just twelve, he might have traveled with either the men or the women. Therefore, Mary could have reasonably presumed that Jesus was traveling with Joseph, and Joseph assumed that he was traveling with Mary. Apparently, when the caravan stopped for the night, each learned that Jesus was not traveling with the other. Mary and Joseph returned to Jerusalem, probably without the benefit of traveling with a group.

When Mary and Joseph find their son, he is involved in a discussion with the religious teachers of the temple. Luke seems to portray Jesus as fitting in with the learned religious wise men. But at the same time, he is an irresponsible member of his family, and the cause of great stress and perhaps peril in their return to Jerusalem. His response to Mary and Joseph adds to his poor behavior. (The form of verb that is used in "don't you know" is plural, indicating he is addressing both Mary and Joseph.) While the text does not include Jesus' recognition of his lack of responsibility, or an apology to Mary and Joseph, it does conclude by stating that Jesus returned with them and remained obedient to them, again in the plural. In the last verse of the text, Luke states that Jesus advanced in age, wisdom, and favor before God and men.

Several times the Gospel text treats both Mary and Joseph as the parents of Jesus. When they find him in the temple, Mary confronts Jesus, "Son, why have you done this to us? Your father and I ..." Jesus does respond that he was in his Father's house. But Luke here treats both Mary and Joseph as equally the parents of Jesus.

By including in his Gospel what might be looked upon as a humiliating story about Jesus' shameful lack of consideration, Luke is making a theological statement about who Jesus' true Father is. In responding to his parent's concern about his absence from their caravan, he tells them he has been in his Father's house. Jesus is not only living between the worlds of men and women of his day, but he is also living between the world of his father Joseph's house and that of his Heavenly Father. At this point in the Gospel, Jesus has not fully made the transition to being a responsible adult of his day, nor has he completely made the transition to God his Father. Therefore, he returns to Nazareth, and in doing so he advances before God and men.

Reflection Questions:

1. What do you remember about your transition from adolescence into the adult world?
2. What is your experience of loss?
3. What do you think are some of the thoughts that went through Mary and Joseph as they searched three days for Jesus?
4. What do you think Jesus learned from this experience?
5. What do you think Mary and Joseph learned?
6. What did you learn?
7. What are some things you keep in your heart?
8. When you hear Jesus respond in this way to his parents' concern for him, "Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house," what feelings and thoughts are most present to you?
9. Can you take some time now to talk with God about the image of Jesus that Luke presents here, your own experience of becoming an adult, or your struggle now to live both in your real world and in the world of God?

The Gospel background and reflection questions are written by Fr. Paul Gallagher, OFM. They are edited by Sister Anne Marie Lom, OSF and Joe Thiel. The excerpts from the Sunday readings are prepared by Joe Thiel. To be added to the distribution list, send your name and email address to annemarie.lom@gmail.com

Our Gospel Reflections are hosted by the Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity. Their homepage is <https://fscs-calledtobe.org/>. One link there is labeled Franciscan Gospel Reflections. A click on the icon will take you to the Gospel reflections for the upcoming Sunday. By following this link, you will be able to blog or comment on the reflection questions. The material will be posted on Fridays and will be available until the following Friday when the new material is posted.

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Excerpts from the readings for December 26, 2021, Feast of the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph
In year C of the liturgical cycle, the Lectionary has multiple choices for 1st and 2nd readings on this feast.

Sirach 3:2-6, 12-14

God sets a father in honor over his children; a mother's authority he confirms over her sons.
Whoever honors his father atones for sins, and preserves himself from them.
When he prays, he is heard; he stores up riches who reveres his mother.
Whoever honors his father is gladdened by children, and, when he prays, is heard.

Whoever reveres his father will live a long life; he who obeys his father brings comfort to his mother. My son, take care of your father when he is old; grieve him not as long as he lives. Even if his mind fail, be considerate of him; revile him not all the days of his life; kindness to a father will not be forgotten, firmly planted against the debt of your sins.

Or 1 Samuel 1:20-22, 24-28

In those days Hannah conceived, and at the end of her term bore a son whom she called Samuel, since she had asked the Lord for him. The next time her husband Elkanah was going up with his household to offer the customary sacrifice to the Lord, Hannah did not go, explaining to her husband, "Once the child is weaned, I will take him to appear before the Lord and to remain there forever." Once Samuel was weaned, Hannah brought him up with her, along with a three-year-old bull, an ephah of flour, and a skin of wine, and presented him at the temple of the Lord in Shiloh. After the boy's father had sacrificed the young bull, Hannah approached Eli and said: "I am the woman who stood near you here, praying to the Lord for this child. The Lord granted my request. Now I, in turn, give him to the Lord; as long as he lives, he shall be dedicated to the Lord."

Psalm 128:1-5

*Blessed are those who fear the Lord and walk in his ways.
For you shall eat the fruit of your handiwork; blessed shall you be, and favored.
Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine in the recesses of your home;
your children like olive plants around your table.
Behold, thus is the man blessed who fears the Lord.
The Lord bless you from Zion: may you see the prosperity of Jerusalem all the days of your life.*

Or Psalm 84:2-3, 5-6, 9-10

*Blessed are they who dwell in your house, O Lord. How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts!
My soul yearns and pines for the courts of the Lord. My heart and my flesh cry out for the living God.
Happy they who dwell in your house! Continually they praise you.
Happy the men whose strength you are! Their hearts are set upon the pilgrimage.
O Lord of hosts, hear our prayer; hearken, O God of Jacob!
O God, behold our shield, and look upon the face of your anointed.*

Reading 2 Colossians 3:12-21

Brothers and sisters: Put on heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving one another, if one has a grievance against another; as the Lord has forgiven you, so must you also do. And over all these put on love, the bond of perfection. And let the peace of Christ control your hearts, the peace into which you were also called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as in all wisdom you teach and admonish one another, singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. Do whatever you do in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father. Wives, be subordinate to your husbands, as is proper in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives, and avoid any bitterness toward them. Children, obey your parents in everything, for this is pleasing to the Lord. Fathers, do not provoke your children, so they may not become discouraged.

Or 1 John 3:1-2, 21-24

Beloved: See what love the Father has bestowed on us that we may be called the children of God. And so we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. We are God's children now; what we shall be has not yet been revealed. When it is revealed, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. If our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence in God and receive from him whatever we ask, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him. And his commandment is this: we should believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and love one another just as he commanded us. Those who keep his commandments remain in him,

and he in them, and the way we know that he remains in us is from the Spirit he gave us.

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“Son, why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been looking for you with great anxiety.”

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Friends,

Here are the Gospel background and reflection questions for December 29th, as prepared by Franciscan spiritual director Fr. Paul Gallagher. On this Feast of the Holy Family, the Gospel, from Luke, is the story of the finding in the temple, where at age twelve Jesus stays behind in Jerusalem when his family sets out on the journey home, after celebrating the Passover. When, after three days of searching, Mary and Joseph find Jesus among the teachers in the temple, he asks Mary, "Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?" But they did not understand. He went with them to Nazareth, and was obedient to them; and he advanced in wisdom and age and favor before God and man.

There are options on this feast for each of the other readings. All the options for the other readings each refer in some context to fathers, mothers, sons, children, and parents, and to dwelling in the Father's house. In the first reading option from Sirach, “God sets a father in honor over his children; a mother’s authority he confirms over her sons.” In the option from 1 Samuel, “Hannah brought Samuel and approached Eli at the temple, and said, ‘I prayed for this child, and the Lord granted my request. Now I, in turn, give him to the Lord.’” Psalm 128 declares, “Blessed are you who walk in the Lord’s ways. Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine, your children like olive plants around your table,” and Psalm 84 rejoins, “Blessed are they who dwell in your house, O Lord.” In the second reading option from Colossians, Paul writes, “Over all, put on love, and give thanks. Children, obey your parents.” In the option from 1 John, “We are God’s children now. His commandment is this: believe in the name of his Son, and love one another.”

The timeline may seem to be out of order, between this week's Gospel, a story from when Jesus is twelve, and next week's, when on the feast of Epiphany we are back to Jesus as an infant, as he gets a visit from the Magi. Maybe it is the choice of the Gospel story for the feast, rather than the feast itself, that seems to have strayed from the timeline. The feasts themselves are not technically out of order, since the holy family of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph has in fact become a family before the visit from the Magi. So the choice of the Gospel story for this feast goes out of the infancy narrative timeline. But the story fits the feast’s objective. This snapshot of a moment is from the middle of all those years where Jesus’ family on earth was Mary and Joseph. They are the family who raised him in their traditions, who saw that he got religious education and participated in the feasts with the extended family, and who he, except for the rare misunderstanding, was obedient to, as he advanced in wisdom and favor. To acknowledge and celebrate this feast, the return to Nazareth as a rejoined family after the finding in the temple is a fitting story for recognizing and reinforcing this Holy Family context.

Merry Christmas!

Joe

> i < May the Word light your way each day!