

Parents Just Don't Understand
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Luke 2:41-52
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Thirty years ago, upstart rappers DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince delighted teenagers and incensed parents (my Mom was one of them!) when their hit song proclaimed:

You know parents are the same
No matter time nor place
They don't understand that us kids
Are going to make some mistakes
So to you, all the kids all across the land
There's no need to argue
Parents just don't understand

The Fresh Prince, you know him as Will Smith, is now a parent himself. And his mother is no longer trying to dress him in Brady Bunch bell-bottoms and ruin his “rep,” nor is he taking his parents’ new Porsche for a joy-ride. Instead, Smith often portrays a parent in his own films, trying to make sense of what his children are doing and saying.

In this season of Christmas, we welcome Jesus into the world. And throughout the generations, we’ve argued about his humanity, and his divinity – is he like us, or is he like God, or is he somewhere in between? Today’s passage helps paint a more human side of Jesus. It turns out, Jesus, like each of us, had parents who just didn’t understand.

The whole family had gone to Jerusalem for the Passover festival. Jesus, so engrossed in the ritual celebration, fails to notice that his family has departed for home. And Jesus’ family, so engrossed in their travel logistics, fails to notice that Jesus isn’t with them. No, this is not the sequel to a *Home Alone* movie, but it sure does sound like something humans would do!

So the family turns around, and travels a whole day back to the city. When they reach the city limits, they retrace their steps, searching and searching for Jesus.

When the family finally locates Jesus, they find him in an unexpected place. At least for them. He’s in the Temple, sitting with the teachers, listening, asking questions, engaging with them in a way that most twelve-year-olds don’t. I think it’s important to note that Jesus is not teaching the teachers – that’ll happen in a few years. For now, he’s realizing where he’s meant to be. He is drawn to these discussions much in the same way as a musician who hears their first note, or a dancer who sees their first ballet, or a mathematician who sees their first equation. Jesus has found his calling. One day, it will be him, who illumines God’s word for all people.

The text tells us that Mary and Joseph were astonished. “Is this our boy?” And there’s a piece of me that says, “Yes, you two, this is your boy. Remember, the angels, and the shepherds, and Anna and Simeon, and the wise men (I know that’s Matthew, and I’m mixing gospels), and the whole host of others who have told you repeatedly how special this child is, and what his purpose will be? The moment has come, and it’s time for you to take notice.”

But there's another piece of me, too. I'm forty-one years old, and I've heard the Christmas story hundreds of times, and I've been to dozens of Christmas Eve services. And even though I know what's gonna happen, I still find myself profoundly moved each time I hear Luke 2:1-20. And I too, ponder, and treasure these things. And I can assure you that twelve years would not be long enough for me to reckon with, nor to accept fully Jesus' remarkable calling. And even if it were, is any parent ever really ready to see their child live into their calling?

And so it is with Mary and Joseph. They've nurtured their young son, and now, their young son is going to be equipped to take on challenges that are beyond their comprehension and expertise. And so Mary snaps at Jesus – not a flippant snap, not a mean snap, not a selfish snap. But an authentic, true, heartfelt, emotional snap: “Child, your Dad and I were worried sick about you!!! You are twelve years old, not twenty! What were you thinking?!?”

And Jesus reveals that he's definitely a human being, because every teenager has said something like this: “Well, I really don't know why you were searching for me? You knew that I'd be right here, in my Father's house. Remember the angels, and the shepherds, and Anna and Simeon, and the wise men (sorry that's Matthew, I'm mixing my gospels)? They told you I'd do this.

Next, the text tells us that Jesus' parents didn't understand what he told them.

But I disagree. I think they understood. I just think they had to process the reality of it all.

One day, twelve years ago, Mary snuggled an innocent child against her chest. She held him tight; she kept him safe; she dreamed of a comfortable salvation.

But today, she saw a little bird learning how to use his own wings. And she knew that in order for that bird to fly, he'd have to devote himself to a new household, one much bigger, much broader, much more complicated than his internal household. And she knew that for her to be the parent he needed her to be; she'd have to support him in becoming the man he needed to be.

And maybe the Fresh Prince is right – sometimes, parents just don't understand. Mary was given a lot to understand. But even when she didn't understand – especially in those times when Jesus's calling subordinated his familial obligations and relationships to his divine ones, and it couldn't help but feel like it was at her expense – Mary's faith never wavered. Mary supported her son. Mary stood by him on a dark Friday, and greeted him on a bright Sunday, and proclaimed his lordship when others were hesitant to believe.

And Mary inspires me this morning. Because if I'm honest with you, I want to cling to the warm light, and sweet carols, and cuddly baby of Christmas Eve. I want to hear that God is here, and I want to be joyful. And I want a familial Jesus.

But if Jesus is to do the work that must be done, and we are to join him in that pursuit, then we like Mary, must allow Jesus to be obedient to God's demands above our own. God calls the Christ, and God call us to go beyond what is comfortable, to go beyond what is understood. In this season of Christmas, may God give our children the strength and the wonder to be lost in devotion at the Temple, and our parents the grace to let them be obedient, even when they don't understand.

May it be so. And may it be soon!