

A Storytelling Commentary on Luke 2:41-52

Thomas E. Boomershine, PhD

In this delightful story of parenting, we are invited to enter into the experience of Mary as she copes with the reality of an adolescent who is distinctively connected to God. The dynamic of the story leads us as listeners into a high degree of sympathetic identification with Mary as she copes with her son. One of the first things to identify is that Jesus is 12 years old. Often this story is told of him as a child and I have heard recordings of it in which he has a child's voice. This is a young man; he's not a child. He's 12 years old and it's important when you tell this not to tell it in a young voice but rather of the voice of a young man. It may even be that his voice has changed, as happens with a significant number of 12 year olds. Regardless of that, which we will never know historically, he is in this story one that has come of age.

The second episode of this story is an experience of deep anxiety and parental panic when Mary and Joseph discover that Jesus is not with them. The background of this is every parent's fear of losing a child. I remember experiencing the terrible possibility of losing one of my children. It's okay to tell the second episode in a tone of real anxiety. They found Jesus after three days. So they're running around the city looking for him for three days and when they found him, he was sitting among the teachers. He had been at school in the temple all along, having a great time learning.

Mary's address to him is usually translated as "child." That is the literal meaning of the Greek word *technon*, but it also refers to a young man. I think it is far better to translate this as young man so that when she spoke to him she said, "Young man! Why have you treated us like this?! Why?!" She is angry at Jesus and so I highly recommend that you tell this not in the typical detached mother tone that is usually given to Mary, but rather as a real mother who was really upset at her son for putting her through four days of panic, one day traveling back to the city and three days looking around for him.

The translation in the NRSV—"I've been searching for you in great anxiety"—is too formal. "I've been anxiously searching for," "Your father and I have been looking for you everywhere," "We were panicked," "We were really afraid that we had lost you," —all of these are possible paraphrases. I think a better translation would be, "Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you." But, however you decide to tell it, the important thing is to communicate Mary's deep anxiety and her anger at Jesus for what he has put them through.

Jesus' response is utterly ingenuous. He can't understand why his mother was so panicked. On the one hand, his reply is the typical adolescent smart-kid response, but it's also an authentic expression of the typical adolescent preoccupation with whatever it is that they are doing that is exciting and not thinking for a minute about what the consequences might be for Mom and Dad.

This is a story of Mary dealing with a rebellious adolescent. But, given that this might be the overall impact of the story, the storyteller then says that Jesus went back to Galilee, was obedient to his parents, and grew up well. This is a delightful story about Jesus coming of age. It is the only story like it in the whole of the gospel tradition. This is a story really worth telling and reflecting on in relation to the dynamics of being a parent. Every child is a gift, a child of God who is given to parents to enable the destiny and purpose that what God intends for that child to be fulfilled. But every parent must always recognize that the child belongs to God, not to them.