

Sermon Preached by The Rev. John S. Nieman  
St. Margaret's Episcopal Church  
January 2, 2022 Christmas 2/Year C  
Texts – Jeremiah 31:7-14; Psalm 84:1-8; Ephesians 1:3-6,15-19a; Luke 2:41-52

Every parent has had this experience. You're in an unfamiliar place surrounded by a huge crowd of people and you suddenly become aware that your precious child is nowhere to be seen. Your heart starts to race. You instantly imagine the worst. You wade through the crowd searching desperately, panic on your face. Where is she? Finally, you spot her. You rush up to her, embrace her like you've never embraced her before, and then...you let loose. "Where have you been? You almost gave me a heart attack! What were you thinking? Don't ever do that again!"

Margaret's and my heart-stopping experience occurred in the summer of 2005 in China. We were on a tour with our then eleven-year-old daughter as part of a group of over 100 families who had adopted children from China. We were visiting the summer palace of the former Chinese Emperors and Empresses a few miles outside of Beijing, walking beneath a long, covered colonnade with hundreds of other visitors, many of them part of our group. Our guide had stopped to gather us and give us some information when we realized Joanna was not with us. We looked frantically over a sea of black-haired children, panicked. Margaret and I took off ahead, desperately searching for our child, calling her name frantically. We were sure we'd never see her again. Then, there she was, standing the end of the colonnade, calmly waiting for the rest of the group to catch up. "Where have you been? What were you thinking?" She replied simply, "I realized when I got separated from the group that the best thing to do was simply wait at the end for all of you to catch up." Smart kid.

Now, I am well aware that in rare instances such a reconciliation tragically does not come to pass. The child is indeed lost or abducted. In such cases, the wrenching heartbreak and sorrow and perhaps guilt are truly beyond words. I have had a few parishioners over the years who endured that experience and have carried it with them throughout their lives. That reality is the reason for parents' terror whenever they lose sight of their child.

Today we are given the only image in all the gospels of Jesus between his birth and the time of his baptism as an adult. And it's just a hint, contained in a short passage. Luke goes to great lengths in the opening chapters of his gospel to demonstrate that Jesus' parents are obedient, God-fearing folks. They do everything right, everything that's expected of them. Eight days after Jesus was born, they have him circumcised according to the Law. They give him the name the angel told them to. Soon after that, they present him in the Temple, offering sacrifices to God, again, according to the Law. Like good, pious families everywhere, I'm sure they say their prayers together at night. And they make their annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover, offering sacrifices to God, again, according to the Law. Mary and Joseph do what they're supposed to do. And they expect Jesus to do the same.

It's during one of those annual pilgrimages, when Jesus is twelve years old, that he commits his first act of rebellion against his obedient family. Now granted, it's not as

if he's out drinking beers behind the shed with his buddies. He's hung back with the scholars in the Temple. I suspect that if any of our kids or grandkids chose to rebel by staying out late to discuss theology with a bunch of adults, we wouldn't be too upset. (Of course, it would depend on whose theology they was listening to.)

Regardless, his parents are clearly beside themselves when they discover he's not with the caravan of pilgrims making their way back home to Nazareth. Panic sets in. "Oh my God! Where's my kid? He's gone!" So they rush back to Jerusalem, and only after three days do they find him there amongst the scholars, "listening to them and asking questions." Mary, relieved to have found him, takes him aside and scolds him: "Why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety."

Sounds like a fairly tame response – too tame, in fact. Something tells me that the image of Mary meek and mild might have influenced the way this story got passed down. I imagine her words to have been a little rougher around the edges. "What are you nuts? What's gotten into you? Don't you ever do that again! You're gonna give your father a heart attack! And me? You're gonna send me to an early grave! You're grounded 'till Succoth, and no cell phone 'till Hanukkah." I suppose even holy families have their moments.

On some level, Jesus is simply manifesting normal pre-teen behavior. He's beginning to orient himself less toward home and his immediate family and more toward the outside world. Developmental psychologists might say that his locus of authority is shifting away from his parents and more toward his peers.

But what's unusual if not unique is that Jesus' peers are adult, highly educated biblical scholars. If nothing else, Jesus is clearly precocious. And it's not just any house he enters; it's the house of God. He's drawn to his heart's desire.

We have to give Mary and Joseph a lot of credit here. They must have been doing something right along the way up to this point to awaken Jesus' desire for God in the first place. Sure, he was miraculously conceived. He got off to a good start, you might say. But clearly there must have been an element of nurture involved here as well.

Regardless, Jesus is where he needs to be: among those who challenge his budding sense of God, draw him out, and encourage his inquiring heart.

On Christmas morning we heard this sentence from the Prologue of John's Gospel: "No one has ever seen God." That is foundational and reflects a fundamental truth of our faith. The only way we can get at some understanding of God is to sit with Jesus amongst the theologically curious and ask questions. In the midst of a culture that anxiously demands only answers and puts on a pedestal those who provide them, valid or not, wandering off to ask questions is indeed a rebellious act. But it's what the followers of Christ are called to do.