

Our Heroic Journeys

Luke 2: 41-52

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Chad Martin

Today we are invited to give our attention to a story that we rarely attend to in worship and sermons, and one that I had never associated with the Christmas season. But this week when so many of us are steeped in family relationships might be exactly the right time to focus on a story that reminds us of the humanity of Jesus. Reading this story anew in recent weeks, I noticed again how much Mary, Joseph and Jesus are portrayed here in a way that sounds like most every family I know. Most every parent has at least one story about losing a child or a child running away or wandering off absent-mindedly. Most every parent has had the experience of finally catching up with their child with a mix of emotions – not being sure if we should scold them or just wrap them up in a big hug. So listen carefully to this story. This includes those of you out there who are not yet adults. Whether you are 10 or 12 or 14 or 16 years old, listen to the story. Pay attention to what jumps out at you. Notice what it triggers from your own memories and experiences. If you're in high school, middle school or close to that, does anything in this story sound familiar to you? Listen carefully. Who do you identify with in the story?

[Read Luke 2: 41-52.]

I wonder – whether you are young or old, what stories from your own life come to mind when you hear this story about Jesus and his parents?

I invite us to treat this story like a wisdom story, a tale that gives insight for our own journeys in life. It's a story that reminds us how very human Jesus was, that he had experiences with people around him that echoes our own relationships.

As you ponder the story, I invite you to consider three pieces of the story that I notice – three pieces of wisdom that can inform our own journeys this week.

First, this story reminds us that Jesus modeled his own way of being family.

Try as some Christians might, I don't think we can say Jesus was a champion of "traditional family values." Instead, this story sheds at least a glimmer of hope that Jesus was breaking down patriarchal and hetero-normative assumptions about family.

We can read Jesus' response to Mary and Joseph here, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?", alongside a later story about Jesus and Mary, also from the Luke's gospel: "Then his mother and his brothers came to him, but they could not reach him because of the crowd. And he was told, 'Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to see you.' But he said to them, 'My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.' (Luke 8: 19-21) We can sympathize with how painful those words were for Mary. And we should be wary of the patriarchal overtones going on here. It sounds like the storyteller thinks Mary's role is on the sidelines. The point is not to be dismissive of one's mother. The point is that Jesus undercut the tribal, kinship-dominated social patterns of his time.

Various feminist and queer scholars point out how these exchanges show Jesus was rejecting the prevailing understanding of family. If we add in the story of the virgin birth where Mary chooses to accept God's calling (she has agency and a voice in the story), we see a new vision of family – of God's household, if you will – unfolding.

As one queer scholar puts it, “The story of single, pregnant, unwed girl becomes a story accessible to many women’s experience but also to [LGBTQ] experience. God is with us and will reverse cultural shame, bringing life and empowered hope... In fact, much of the Gospel traditions is anti-family, looking to alternative structures to the patriarchal household... All obligations to parents, wives and families are abandoned for this liminal gender space of God’s reign.”[1]

In this perspective there is room for all in the family of God. That is, traditional notions of family are no longer the ideal. Instead, single individuals, blended families, queer families and single parents can all be part of the household of God. There is no one-size-fits-all vision of what family should be.

It seems to me that at the very least we can take this story about Mary and Joseph finding Jesus in the temple to mean that experiences of tension between parents and children are normal. Even the holy family had to navigate the bumps and conflicts that come with an adolescent finding his own path separate from his parents. The story underscores basic human psychology. We all have to separate and develop our own personhood that is formed in so many ways by our families of origin and yet is independent from and sometimes in tension with those families. We can take comfort in the familiarity of this tension during the holiday season!

But this story pushes further. Read at its fullest and deepest, it is a validation of anyone who has suffered pain and abuse in their families of origin. It is a validation of women. It is a validation of LGBTQ people and their families.

Jesus invites us all to follow him toward God’s household – an expansive community where all relationships embody loving kindness, compassion and full participation. Jesus modeled his own way of being family. I wonder how you are each forming your own vision of family? What tensions need tending with your family of origin as you continue to become the person God is calling you to be?

Second, this story reminds us of the value of mentors and teachers along the way. Last week the TED Radio Hour was an episode called “The Hero’s Journey.” One segment featured Jarret Krosoczka, the creator of dozens of books for children and youth, including the Lunch Lady graphic novel series – about a school lunch lady who fights crime.

Krosoczka’s story is not particularly unique. I can think of others like it. Yet it caught my attention for the way he cherishes the influence of particular people and mentors in his journey. His dad left when he was a baby and his mom was a heroin addict. The story could have unraveled right there. But he was raised by caring grandparents. And drawing was his coping mechanism in life. He loved to draw. He tells this story:

When I was in third grade a monumental event happened... A published author, came to tell us about what he did for a living. And afterwards we all went back to our classrooms and we all drew our own renditions of his main character Rotten Ralph. And suddenly the author appeared in our doorway. And I remember him sort of sauntering down the aisles going from kid to kid and not saying a word. But he stopped, next to my desk. And he tapped on my desk and he said, “Nice cat.”

And he just said those two simple words, “Nice cat,” and it made a huge difference for me. It filled me up with confidence. It validated what I was doing. I mean this was a professional.[2]

Krosoczka talks about how small but how significant this was. And he tells about other moments like this. In high school he struggled to make friends so he would draw silly pictures of all the teachers to make other kids laugh. One day in English class someone laughed a little too hard and the teacher was “not pleased.” The teacher saw that Krosoczka was the cause of the commotion and he tells of being sent to the hall for the first time ever. And he thought, “Oh no, I’m doomed.” And the teacher came out and said, “Let me see the paper.” He sheepishly showed the drawing to the teacher who said, “You’re really talented. You’re really good. You know, the school newspaper needs a new cartoonist, and you should do it. Just stop drawing in my class.” For the next three years he was the cartoonist.

So Guy Roz, the host of the interview asks him if, given his past and his parents’ problems, could he have made it without these mentors. And without hesitating he says, “There’s no way.”[3]

I wonder, how many of you have stories like this in your own journey? Who were the people who gave you a nudge at a key moment in your journey? For some of us, it is our parents who are also mentors to us. For many of us, we also need the support of teachers and aunts and uncles and youth group leaders at church to get us another step along the way.

And then I wonder again about the story of Jesus in the temple. How did those conversations with the rabbis impact Jesus’ journey? What did it feel like to encounter teachers who validated what was going on inside him? When he grew up, I wonder what he remembered about those three days in the temple?

As the author and cartoonist, Jarret Krosoczka reminds us, we all need this kind of support to succeed in life. So for the adults in the room, who do you see around you who needs a nudge of encouragement? And for the kids in the room – if you’re 10, 12 or 14 or however many years old – who do you look up to who is helping you become the person you are meant to be? How can you get the most out of that relationship?

Third, this story celebrates the inner wisdom of youth.

It says, “All who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers.” Jesus showed wisdom beyond his years. And this might be the central meaning of the story. Given the otherworldly features of the stories of the birth of Jesus, we would expect this story about his youth to show some super-human qualities. And while it’s watered down compared to some of the apocryphal stories about his childhood – such as the one where he stretches a piece of lumber when his father Joseph accidentally cut it too short – it still paints a picture of Jesus being a remarkable youth.

What does inner wisdom look like in a twelve-year-old? Have you seen glimpses of it? Recently I have been reading work by and about Gary Snyder, one of the beat poets of the 1950s and 60s who is also a prolific writer and activist about environmental causes, and he has been a practicing Buddhist for more than 50 years. In an old interview someone asked Snyder why he was drawn to Buddhism at such a young age in a time when it wasn’t yet the hip thing to do. He responded this way.

When I was young, I had an immediate, intuitive, deep sympathy with the natural world, which was not taught me by anyone... That sense of the authenticity, completeness and reality of the natural world itself made me aware even as a child of the contradictions that I could see going on around me in the state of Washington, in the way of exploitation,

logging, development, pollution. I lived on the edge of logging country, and the trees were rolling by on the tops of trucks.

He goes on to talk about sleeping outdoors in the woods on his own as young as nine or ten years old. And he says,

[This interest in the wilderness was] very much self-taught. As soon as I was permitted, from the time I was thirteen, I went into the Cascade Mountains, the high country, and got into real wilderness.[4]

An immediate, intuitive, deep sympathy with the natural world. Not taught by anyone. This is a glimpse of the inner wisdom of a twelve-year-old.

Perhaps we can only identify such inner wisdom of youth after the fact, in the rearview mirror. Perhaps it is hard to see such wisdom in ourselves at that age. Perhaps it is hard to see such wisdom in the children and youth around us and we only recognize it later when they are older.

But in this season of intense family time, I invite the parents in the room – and the aunts, uncles, mentors, etc. in the room – to be on the lookout for extraordinary wisdom and keen insights in the children and youth around you. You have an opportunity this week to notice more than just how many hours they are spending on their new Christmas electronic devices or how many treats they have consumed the last few days. What inner wisdom do they carry?

It may be hard to see. You may only get glimpses of it now. They may not have the right words to convey what they know. So we have to watch for it.

And to those of you who are 10, 12 or 14 years old, I have a question for you too. What truth or wisdom do you carry in your hearts? Trust that someday you will have words and actions to communicate that to people around you. Trust that someday that inner wisdom will guide you in ways that you might not understand now. Trust what is in your heart, for that is where God dwells in you.

A few days ago when I put a title on this sermon it was a variation on the TED program I mentioned, called “The Hero’s Journey.” I thought I might be drawing more from that program, especially since it had slick Star Wars references and drew on the work of Joseph Campbell about religious myth. It’s worth a listen, but would have taken us elsewhere for the morning.

But, my friends, what I want to say to you is this. We are all on heroic journeys. This is not to take away from the mythic stories that inspire us to do better. But it is to remind us that each one of us carries more than others can ever know or understand. We don’t get far in life without traversing harrowing experiences.

If the past week has reminded you of tensions in your own family, or losses that have impacted your family, take heart. You are not alone. And as we notice the names listed for prayer in your bulletin, we remember how often illness, grief and loss shape the contour of our journeys.

So we all need guiding hands along the way. And we all carry inner wisdom in the depths of our hearts that also keep us placing one foot in front of the other. For that is the good news – even the miracle – of Christmas: That God has taken up residence within and among us.

So my prayer for you this day is that something here helps reveal wisdom and strength to buoy you as you step into the ever-flowing river of life as you journey this week.

Whether it be through these words, the music or the caring presence of a kindred spirit as we gather, may you remember that God resides within and among you.

[1] Robert E. Goss, "Luke," in *The Queer Bible Commentary* edited by Deryn Guest, Robert E. Goss, Mona West and Thomas Bohache (London: SCM Press, 2006), 529 and 537.

[2] As quoted on, "The Hero's Journey," on the TED Radio Hour (Dec. 18, 2015). Audio available online at: <http://www.npr.org/programs/ted-radio-hour/458496650/the-heros-journey>. Accessed Dec. 24, 2015.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Gary Snyder, "The 'East West' Interview," in *The Gary Snyder Reader: Prose, Poetry, and Translations 1952-1998* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 1999), 91-2.