

## Not Home Alone

Luke 2:41-52

[A sermon preached by the Rev Stan Gockel at the First Presbyterian Church of Portland, Indiana on the First Sunday after Christmas, December 27, 2015]

### I

Twenty-five years ago the hit movie of the holiday season was not a *Star Wars* movie, but *Home Alone*.

I'm sure you remember the charming story of 10-year-old Kevin...  
left behind in his big suburban Chicago house...  
when his family hurriedly leaves for a Christmas vacation in Paris.

Kevin's parents don't discover that he is missing until somewhere high above the Atlantic Ocean.

They get to Paris and immediately try to book a return flight to Chicago.

But because it is the holidays and all the flights are booked,  
it is three days before they can get back.

Meanwhile, Kevin is coping quite nicely with being "home alone."

He manages to go shopping,  
prepares meals for himself,  
even does laundry.

He learns that the older gentleman who lives next door is not a brutal serial killer.

And he hilariously foils two bumbling burglars who attempt to break into the house.

Finally on Christmas Day, Kevin's family arrives home to find Kevin safe and sound and everything in order.

Kevin's relationship with his family is made stronger as he learns that they really were concerned about him and he realizes how much he missed them.

## II

I can't help but think of the movie *Home Alone* when I read our gospel lesson, Luke 2:41-52.

Of course, the star of this story is not Kevin,  
the little boy left behind when his family goes on vacation,  
but Jesus, a 12-year-old boy.

Do you remember what it was like to be twelve-years-old?

Maybe it was a long time ago or maybe just a few years.

If you can't remember exactly,  
think about somebody you know who's twelve—  
sixth grade or maybe seventh,  
the end of elementary school  
or the beginning of middle school.

Twelve is an in-between time,  
not yet fully grown  
but no longer a little kid.

In some countries twelve-year-olds are working full-time,  
picking through garbage dumps searching for copper wire or computer parts  
to sell,  
or pounding rocks into small pieces to make gravel,  
earning pennies a day for their families.

In some parts of Africa, a girl who's now twelve is head of her household taking care of younger siblings after their parents have died of Ebola or AIDS.

There are countries in Africa where a boy who's twelve is carrying an AK-47 as part of a rebel army he probably didn't choose to join.

In far too many countries, 12-year-old girls are sold by their parents into sexual slavery.

Twelve can be a difficult age.

Twelve was when I could no longer see the chalk board at school and had to get glasses—clunky black plastic frames that for some reason are back in style.

Twelve was when my mom took me shopping for clothes and came home and announced to my father that I now had to wear “husky” pants.

You can imagine how that felt.

When Jesus was twelve, he and his parents went to Jerusalem as they did every year for the festival of Passover.

I suppose you might be thinking that twelve is one of those special Bible numbers:  
 twelve sons of Jacob,  
 twelve tribes of Israel,  
 twelve disciples,  
 twelve baskets of bread and fish left over on the hillside.

Or, maybe, twelve was simply Jesus' age.

He was twelve, an in-between time.

Luke places this story in between the dedication of the infant Jesus in the temple and Jesus' baptism as an adult in the River Jordan.

Luke is the only one who tells this story—  
 the only gospel writer who includes anything at all about Jesus' childhood.

Don't you wish we had more stories of Jesus as a child?

Some Bible movies have imaginary scenes of Jesus working in the carpenter shop with Joseph or sitting on Mary's lap listening to stories.

Some of the writings that didn't make it into the New Testament,  
 the so-called apocryphal gospels,  
 tell fanciful stories of Jesus' childhood—  
 bringing a dead bird back to life  
 or punishing mean neighbors with miraculous feats.

But Luke doesn't try to overwhelm us with magic or miracles.

His story is far more ordinary, and he seems to want us to know something of what Jesus was like growing up.

### III

So it was that in all the bustle and confusion of getting ready for the return trip to Nazareth,

Jesus gets left behind in Jerusalem.

Jesus' mother, Mary, was even slower than Kevin's mother to realize the child was missing.

Instead of a few hours, it took a whole day for Jesus' parents to notice that his passenger seat was empty.

The family had been in Jerusalem for the Passover,  
the most important religious holiday of the year for Israel.

It is also significant that Luke describes Jesus as being 12 years old.

Under Jewish law he was about to "come of age."

After the Passover, the family joined other friends and relatives to begin the four-day journey back to Nazareth, their hometown.

The men usually traveled at one end of the caravan and the women at the other end, with the children in the middle.

Apparently, Jesus' parents thought he was with some other people in the caravan.

It was only as they stopped to make camp the first night that they discovered that Jesus was missing.

I can imagine the shock Mary and Joseph must have felt when they realized they had left their twelve-year-old son alone in the big city.

It took Mary and Joseph three days to find Jesus.

Three days of anxiety, tears, and guilt.

We can well imagine the thoughts going through Mary and Joseph's minds:

“How could we have left him behind?”

“Why didn’t we make absolutely certain that he was with us?”

“What terrible parents we are!”

After three days of frantic searching,  
they near the great temple.

They turn a corner and there he is.

Jesus wasn’t crying and worried.

He wasn’t blaming his parents for neglecting him.

No, they found Jesus sitting with the scribes, rabbis, and teachers of the law,  
asking them questions, and listening to their answers.

It seems that the people Jesus was with were pretty impressed with what he had to say.

His parents were more appalled than impressed.

When they saw that Jesus was not in any kind of danger,  
they got upset in a different way.

Do you remember how it was when your children were young?

At those times when you thought your child was lost or in some kind of trouble,  
and then you found out that they were all right,  
you didn’t know what to do first—  
hug them,  
or spank them for not listening to you in the first place.

One young parent told of going camping with his family. While his wife and he were putting up the tent, their five-year-old son wandered off with his three-year-old sister.

The father said, “We searched in the worst places first, including the lake, and when we found them safe, I swatted our son on his bottom out of joy and relief.”

That appears to be the way it was for Mary and Joseph.

Their first reaction is one of joy and relief that Jesus appears to be safe and sound.

Then the parental reaction kicks in,  
as his mother scolds him saying:

*“Son, why have you done this to us? Don’t you realize that your father and I have been worried sick about you?”*

When you were young did your parents ever speak to you like that?

Do you recall speaking to your children like that?

Jesus had been left behind,  
and his parents were relieved that he was alright,  
but aggravated at what he had put them through.

#### IV

So what does Jesus say?

Does he say, “Mom, Dad, I’m sorry. I’ll never do something like this again”?

I think that’s what I would have said.

What Jesus did say was this:

*“Why were you looking for me? Didn’t you know that I had to be here, dealing with the things of my Father?”* (The Message)

Neither Moses nor any of the prophets ever dared to make such a statement.

It was border-line blasphemous.

But Jesus as a twelve-year-old proclaimed it,  
revealing to all who were there his unique relationship with God,

revealing that his was a higher calling than simply following in his father's footsteps.

Jesus' earthly father, Joseph, was a carpenter.

But Jesus wasn't sitting there with a hammer and saw.

He was sitting in the temple with the learned rabbis and teachers,  
talking not about his earthly father's business,  
but that of his heavenly Father, God.

Jesus had left his parents and caused them a lot of worry by going to the Temple to get involved in divine business.

Hidden in Jesus' response, but not to be missed, are the words, "I must be."

Jesus' life was not driven by fate,  
nor by political coercion  
or religious expectation.

Instead, his life was bound to God's design for it.

He is the Son of God, and his life will be guided by his unique relationship to the Father.

Mary and Joseph did not understand,  
indeed, could not understand,  
the full implications of what Jesus said to them.

Luke concludes this sole New Testament account of Jesus' childhood by reminding us for a second time in this chapter that Jesus grew in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and his fellow human beings.

## V

So what does Luke want us to learn from this story?

For one thing, Jesus now claims for himself that special relationship with God that had earlier been proclaimed at his dedication in the Temple by old Simeon and Anna.

Heretofore, all signs of Jesus' special nature or mission have been to or through others:

the angel,  
 Mary,  
 Elizabeth,  
 Zechariah,  
 the shepherds,  
 Simeon and Anna.

Now Jesus claims it for himself.

He sits in the temple among the scribes and teachers and demonstrates his unusual understanding.

Many Bible scholars think Luke points back to the prophet Samuel as the model for this part of Jesus' life.

In 1 Samuel 2, the boy Samuel was given to God by his mother Hannah.

In time he was taken to live in the temple.

There Samuel came to an awareness of his special mission.

We read that Samuel "*continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the Lord and with the people.*" (1 Samuel 2:26)

Luke obviously knew his Old Testament, for he uses a wealth of OT events and personalities to nourish his portrait of Jesus.

He shows how Jesus himself, at the young age of 12,  
 began to grasp that divine relationship and calling  
 that was his through birth.

Here was the temple prodigy astonishing both his earthly parents and the doctors of the law with his claim.

As the promised king he came to his Father's house.

Twenty or so years later he would return to his Father's house  
 and they would turn him out,



take him outside the city,  
and crucify him.

## VI

Second, this story teaches us that there is something more important than parents and families.

Jesus realized this early in his life,  
and he taught it later as an adult.

He said,

*“Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.”*  
(Matt. 10:37).

God must be first in our lives—that’s what Jesus is saying to us.

One time when Jesus was preaching in front of a crowd,  
Jesus’ family got concerned that he might be out of his mind.

Mary came with some of Jesus’ brothers to get him.

Some of the people told Jesus his family was looking for him.

What did Jesus say?

He said that his mother and brothers are those who hear the Word of God and do it  
(Matt. 12:46-50).

Jesus loved his family, but he knew that doing what God wanted him to do was the most important thing of all.

That’s a lesson we can impart to our children and grandchildren.

Family love and loyalties have their place but can only flourish under the higher love for and loyalty to God.

Third, this story teaches us that children need to be patient with their parents...  
and parents need to be patient with their children.

Luke tells us that Jesus was obedient to his parents,  
and his mother pondered all these things in her heart.

What we see in this verse is the growth that took place in the relationship of Jesus and his parents.

What a great need today for parents and children to have strong, healthy, growing relationships.

Someone once said that a child becomes an adult three years before his parents think he does,  
and about two years after he thinks he does.

Some parents really don't know how to let their children grow up.

I read of a 50-year-old woman who said,  
"My mom is still trying to tell me how to live my life."

Parents need to grow in how they listen to and understand their children.

Children need to grow in how they respect and honor their parents.

All of us need to grow in our love for God  
and our desire to serve God.

Like Kevin in the movie *Home Alone*,  
Jesus did fine on his own in Jerusalem.

When his parents told him how upset they were,  
he paid attention.

Luke tells us that when he went back home with his folks,  
he "was obedient to them."

It's tempting for both children and parents to close their ears when the other is saying things one doesn't want to hear.

## VII

Finally, I think Luke wants to give us a picture of Jesus growing into who God sent him to be.

This is why Luke ends the story by saying that

*“Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature, and in divine and human favor.”*

Steeped in Torah, Jesus is drawn to his Father's house in a way he may not yet fully understand.

Even after hearing God's words from heaven at his baptism,  
Jesus still had to live into what it meant to be God's Son.

Indeed, that was how the devil tried to get to him in the wilderness—

*“If you are the Son of God, turn these stones to bread...*

*“If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from the pinnacle of the temple....”*

But Jesus—

thoroughly Jewish,

circumcised on the eighth day,

dedicated in the temple,

taught by his faithful parents,

shaped by the rite of Passover—

Jesus did not depend on some super human willpower.

He depended on the sustaining power and presence of God and God's Word.

Jesus found strength to counteract the devil's definition of who he should be:

*“Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one. You shall worship the Lord your God and God alone shall you serve.”*

That same word directed Jesus at every step—

from the day he was twelve to the day he died.

That same word and that abiding trust sustained Jesus against every temptation to let someone other than God define him.

Even on the cross, he heard again the tempter's words now thrown at him by the crowd.

*"He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, God's chosen one!"*

Though his hands were nailed down,  
Jesus reached up and touched words that he had probably learned as a child.

*"Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."*

It was not so different from what he had said to his parents when he was 12 years old:

*"Do you not know that I must be in my Father's house, dealing with the things of my Father?"*

Now he was.

Now he is.

Forever.

**May God help us,  
like Jesus,  
to make our highest priority the things of our heavenly Father,  
so that we too might increase in wisdom and in stature,  
and in divine and human favor.**

Amen.

Sources:

The original sermon idea came from an issue of *Homiletics*, probably authored by Leonard Sweet.

Barbara Lundblad, "In the Temple," sermon retrieved from [http://day1.org/1023-in the temple](http://day1.org/1023-in-the-temple).