

Kids grow up so fast, don't they? Just a few short weeks ago, we cooed over the baby asleep on the hay at the Christmas Pageant. Last week, Jesus was still an infant, but a royal one, growing into a King and a threat to the powers-that-be. By next Sunday, Jesus will be a grown man, publicly beginning his work and ministry.

Today's Jesus is a little less endearing. He's "fully human" all right, and almost a teenager. To anyone who has been around teens, this Jesus must be all too familiar. Our pre-teen Savior is beginning the life-long process of becoming his own person, separating from his parents, and figuring out for himself who he's going to be when he grows up...and his attitude toward his parents appears downright insensitive.

Yet, this is all we have to go on. Luke is the only gospel writer to tell us anything about Jesus as a boy. And the only story he offers us is one that is fairly frustrating. In a sort of Biblical *Home Alone*, Jesus decides to stay in Jerusalem at the end of a family visit, and an entire day passes before his parents realize. It then takes them three days to find Jesus in the temple – three days has a certain significance, of course – but the family went to Jerusalem for the primary purpose of visiting the temple. Wouldn't they search there first? And when they do find their child, he's not frightened or apologetic. He certainly doesn't behave the way a well-brought-up boy should behave, especially one who is the Son of God!

Finally, there is what seems to be a happy ending. A child who once was lost and now is found. Who promises to obey his parents in the future. A child who strays, and who ends up in church of all places! When his parents find him, he reassures them – “didn't you know I would be in my Father's house?”

(Actually, this part is rather endearing. If you were the Director of Children's Ministries in Jesus' synagogue, it would make you proud.)

All this leaves us wondering. Jesus **is** Jesus, right? **We** know who Jesus is. Why doesn't **Jesus** know who he is? **Mary and Joseph** know who Jesus is. So why are they so surprised? And if this isn't just a sweet story about a boy who loved to be in temple, what is it? Does it have any significance for us now?

I think that Luke's story is a story of call. About Jesus beginning to figure out who he is and who he is called to be. And, like Jesus, we also have a call, or a purpose. As we journey through life, we ask, “what does God want me to do?” In this story, Jesus catches what might be the first glimpse of what God wants him to do, and it sets the stage for everything that is to follow.

We can imagine how this could have transpired. Picture Jesus accompanying his parents and their extended family to the big city for Passover, where they would worship in the main temple, just as they did every year.

Jesus would have already studied the Torah, and as a 12-year-old, he's fast approaching manhood and the opportunity to participate in more formal lessons. If he is one of the most promising students, he might even be chosen to study as a rabbi!

After the festivities, the women and young children begin to make their way slowly home, and when the men (who leave later because they travel faster) join them to camp at night, Mary and Joseph discover that their oldest son is not a part of either caravan. Frantic with worry, they search for three days. But far from being lost, Jesus is just starting to find himself.

Here he is – the carpenter’s son – the target of cruel jokes as neighbors whisper about his father marrying a visibly pregnant Mary. This boy from rural Nazareth on the cusp of manhood stands in THE temple. He peers inside and sees students not much older than himself seated at the feet of the rabbis. Perhaps he stops to listen. He overhears a rabbi’s question and thinks to himself, “I know the answer!” And he steps in.

Soon, Jesus is in his element! He asks questions that amaze the esteemed teachers. His responses demonstrate an understanding of the law well beyond his years.

And, we might add, he is completely oblivious to his impact on Mom and Dad. Did he have a nagging sense that he should have told Mary where he was going? Maybe. **Or maybe being in the temple just felt so right.** Instead of being the boy who – in his hometown – felt just little bit out-of-place, **Jesus was at home.**

So when Mary and Joseph find their son, his response is not meant to imply “you’re not the boss of me” or to disrespect his parents at all. He simply states the obvious. “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?”

**“I must be in my Father’s house.”**

It sounds like Jesus is simply telling his parents “you know where to find me.” There’s more to it than that. “In my Father’s house” is a curious translation from the Greek. More literally, the words mean “the things of the Father.” Others translate this as, “in my Father’s interests.” So Jesus is realizing, and articulating to his parents, **“I must do God’s work.”**

Must is already a strong word, but it is a translation of the Greek word, *dei* /, which more clearly means “it is necessary.” This is the first time that Jesus uses this word, and he will use it repeatedly to refer to an important actions.

“It is necessary that I be about my Father’s affairs.”

“It is necessary that I preach” (4:43)

“It is necessary that I go to Jerusalem” (13:33) he will say, shortly before his death.

“It is necessary that everything written about me must be fulfilled” (24:44) he will say, after his resurrection.

Jesus is saying nothing less than, **“It is necessary that I do God’s work.”**

For us, this isn’t a surprise. Of course it is necessary that Jesus do God’s work! We, like Mary and Joseph, know that Jesus is not an ordinary kid. Yet Mary and Joseph are astonished by these glimpses into Jesus’ abilities and knowledge. Why is this? His birth was foretold hundreds of years in advance. If that message was too subtle, what about the angel Gabriel? The shepherds? Mary listened to their amazing words, and she heard them call **her** son the Messiah, the Lord. Did Mary lose faith? Did she forget these promises? Dismiss them as youthful visions?

I don’t know, but everything in this story indicates that Jesus was treated like any other child. Although we know it was plausible that Jesus could get lost among the extended family of travelers, I can’t help but think that the mother of the Lord would be a little over-protective. As someone said to me earlier this week, “if you were Jesus’ mom, wouldn’t you say to Joseph, “Is God going with you today or am I responsible for God?”

It is possible that when we ask, “Mary, did you know?” the answer is NO... She didn’t. She heard that her child would be the Son of the Most High, but what did that mean? Could she have joyfully nursed him and changed his diapers if she knew where his call to God’s work would lead?

We read that Mary treasured in her heart everything that was said. Did she keep them to herself, or did she pull those memories out as we would a baby book, leafing through prophecies and promises, and revealing them to Jesus? It seems like the answer, again, is no.

While it is anti-climatic that Jesus has to figure out his purpose in life just like everyone else, it's part of being human. If God wanted a divine superhero, God would have dropped Jesus down from heaven as an adult, pre-programmed to do exactly what God needed. But that wasn't God's plan. God wanted Jesus to experience everything about being human, and so Jesus, like us, had to discern his call in life.

When the Children's Ministries committee read this story earlier in the week, it led to reminiscences about our own calls – the ways in which we each learned that **it was necessary** for us to do God's work. It wasn't until we looked back, that seemingly unimportant incidents were revealed as moments of truth. Today, any one of the women there could look around her and say: "God called me to be a parent. God called me to lead Sunday School. When I hear the joys and concerns of grade schoolers...when I bake the casserole for PADS...when I nurture myself in the Moms' Bible Study, I am doing God's work." But at the time, it was just a simple decision – to go to one worship service...to volunteer for just one Vacation Bible School – that made all the difference.

For me, the beginning of my own sense of call began 15 years ago, when the Presbyterian Women of my home church asked me to organize the hot cocoa for the Advent reception! I remember thinking, "why are they asking me? I don't have a lot of time." But hot cocoa was a commitment I could make. As a young woman, single, new to the city, working as a business consultant, it would have been too scary if God had said to me, "Amy, I want you to give up everything familiar to enter seminary, pursue a call to ministry, and someday preach in Lake Forest." I would have said, "no thank you, God. I'm not ready." For every Mary who accepts God's call immediately, there is a Moses or a prophet Jeremiah or one of us, who says, "not me, Lord! I am not ready!"

And so God rarely communicates in a Mission Impossible Style message – a mysteriously delivered recording that announces, "your purpose in life, should you choose to accept it..." And demands that we make a choice before our mission self-destructs.

No, God offers us glimpses of our purpose. Reveals as much as we are able to accept. Then, we figure it the rest along the journey. God asks us to choose to be a part of God's work throughout our entire lives, even as they twist and turn and we grow and change. Perhaps we choose not to accept our call...at least right away...but it is still out there. Our purpose in life never self-destructs.

And how do we know when our work is God's work? Jesus wasn't a smarty pants kid in the temple, feeding his own ego – he was relishing his understanding of God because it confirmed his call to do God's work. When he realized that his actions hurt his parents, he knew that, for the time being, he needed to return home, and obey them. His hour had not yet come.

Even after Jesus embraced his call to teach, heal and publicly do God's work, he often withdrew from the crowds to be alone with God. To ask, "what next? What is necessary for me now? How can I best do your work?" In the wilderness, on the mountaintop, and in the garden, **Jesus prayed**. He asked God for guidance. He came to fully understand what was necessary, and to accept it. And we can do no less. Wherever we are, we pray. We ask God for guidance. We say, "How can I best do God's work."

And then we simply do our best.

For we, too, are called to be about the Father's interests.

Amen.