

“Meditation”
Luke 2:41-52
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This is one of my favorite services of the year...even though I know that my meditation is the only thing that stands between us and our Christmas Caroling!

At the same time, this Sunday lies in that awkward in-between time. We are here, and I'm grateful for that, but many families travel during the precious few days between Christmas and back-to-school...some are returning home from Christmas celebrations spent elsewhere, and still others have just left for their annual ski trip or beach vacation.

Christmas is over, but most likely the tree is still up and the hard task of taking down the decorations and storing away the extra bows and wrapping paper lies ahead. New Year's is coming, but we already have that nagging feeling that we should stop eating so many cookies and start exercising a little bit more. School starts up again soon, but some parents watch their kids go stir crazy and wonder if it might be time to get out of the house and back into the normal routine. “Christmas-tide,” those 12 days between Christmas and Epiphany, is no longer a holiday season of its own. This week has become a way of marking time between one big day and another.

Like us, the Jesus in today's story also seems to be in an awkward season. Last week, Jesus was the humble infant in the manger. Next week, as we hear the Epiphany stories, Jesus will be the Holy child, worshipped by “kings.” But today, Jesus is practically a teenager, and to our modern ears, not a very polite one.

To those of us who remember **being** a teenager, we may remember gawky, awkward years in which it seems no one understood us. It felt that way at the time, but compared to Jesus, our cry of “no one understands me” rings a little hollow!

On the other hand, to those of us who recall **raising** teens, this story may sound all too familiar. The pre-teen Jesus accompanies his parents and their extended family to the big city for the Passover festival. In a sort of Biblical *Home Alone*, Jesus decides to stay in Jerusalem, and an entire day passes before his parents realize. In an age of helicopter parenting, it’s hard to imagine how Mary and Joseph could just lose a child, but it was common for many families to caravan together, children accompanying the women at a slower pace with men following behind. When Mary and Joseph catch up, and Jesus is unaccounted for, they become frantic with worry. After **three** days of searching, they find Jesus in the temple, not lost at all! Instead, he’s in his element! Completely oblivious to the impact that his actions had on Mary and Joseph.

Instead of responding with apologies and contrition, Jesus, like some teenagers you might know, deflects all blame and places it squarely on his parents shoulders, saying,

"Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?"

Jesus, it seems, wasn’t lost at all. He was **found**. He had found himself and was in his element, brilliantly answering the questions posed to him by the most educated rabbis and astounding all who heard him.

To us, this is no surprise, but perhaps it was to Jesus. We don’t know if Jesus understood about who he was, or what his mission would be.

Jesus didn't hear angels praising God or shepherds naming him as Savior, yet that day in the temple *he heard God's call*. For whatever reason, Jesus was compelled to stay behind as his parents started for home. *He had to be in his Father's house – it was so obvious to him that he couldn't believe his parents didn't get it.*

And yet, Jesus' whole life so far had been preparation for this moment. Mary brought her son to the temple as an infant, she was fulfilling the Law of the Lord, consecrating her first-born son to God, just as Jewish mothers before her had done. It was God's plan that Jesus continue to follow all the other Jewish traditions as well, bar mitzvah at age 12, returning to the temple for Passover each year, and eventually, beginning public life at age 30.

Like Samuel, in our first reading, Jesus was raised to serve God. But Samuel, you may recall, was raised at the temple, studying with priests his entire life. Jesus didn't have this advantage – he would have received the same education as any other Jewish boy in his town – and yet he amazed everyone who heard.

And after this brilliant moment, what did Jesus do next? What magnificent feat of intelligence and faithfulness did he perform? Well, he returned home with his parents and was obedient to them.

Kind of a let-down? Not really. *His in-between time had not yet ended.*

And it wouldn't end for nearly 20 years! The next time we see Jesus, he will be around 30 years old, coming forward to be baptized by his cousin John. So Jesus has quite some time to wait. To think about who he is supposed to be when he grows up...to grow into God's call on his life.

So even though we know absolutely nothing about that in-between period, we know that it isn't just dead time. Because when Jesus appears on the scene, he hits the ground running! He is baptized, heads into the wilderness where he effectively resists temptation, and begins healing and preaching immediately. Jesus' whole life must have been about preparing to answer God's call when the time comes.

And his ministry will only last three years – three years to preach and teach, to heal and perform miracles. So if he has only three years to show the world all he knows about God and then complete his mission, by dying and rising, Jesus has to be ready. He has to have the spiritual discipline and faithfulness to live out his call.

So this in-between time for us need not be dead time. Certainly it's a time to relax...to rejuvenate... (or to drink a lot of coffee and eat leftovers, which just happens to be my plan for this week) – and there's nothing wrong with that! But it's also a time to look **ahead**. To think about what God might call us to do in the future.

So as we make our usual New Year's resolutions, perhaps this year we could make a more transformative resolution. There's nothing wrong with promising to eat healthy foods and exercise more – in fact, I like these resolutions so much that I make them every year! But why not think about what God is calling you to do, and to resolve to prepare yourself to respond?

If we think about it, we all have things that we want to do differently. If you don't know what those are, think about the things you say during the silent prayer of confession. I will “confess” to you that I say the same things every week:

“God, I’m sorry that I lost my patience with my husband and children.” Followed by...

“God, please help me to be more patient with my husband and children!”

I think we all want to become the person God calls us to be – more patient, more generous... less judgmental, less angry. If these words don’t apply to you, find your own words to describe the kind of person **you** want to be. We can use this in-between time to think about **how** to become that person.

In the seasons of the church, we’re going to enter another in-between period before we reach Lent in mid-February. Because working at a church involves a lot of planning ahead, we started thinking about Lent right around the first Sunday in Advent! So I started thinking about what I plan to give up and what I plan to take on for Lent this year. I realized that I spend about 4 hours a week on the train, with most of that time spent sorting through e-mail. Meanwhile, I spend a lot of time complaining that I never have enough time to read the Bible. What if...what if...I spent that time in Bible reading and prayer? What a brilliant idea, I thought! I can’t wait for Lent to come so that I can finally have more time with God!

As I prepared this meditation, I realized how foolish it was to wait until Lent to do what I wanted to do already. In-between time need not be dead time – it can be a time of growth and renewal – a time in which we both seriously and joyfully reflect on who we are...who we want to be...and most importantly, who God is calling us to be. And that is a New Year’s resolution worth making. Amen.