

I've always sort of liked this story – it's really the only one in the gospels that gives even a hint at Jesus's family life and early years.

However I find it sort of difficult to preach on. It's kind of a fun story...and it probably makes every parent who's lost track of their kid in a store feel a little better.

But what is it we should take away from it?

Sometimes when I'm faced with a passage I don't know what to do with I just have to notice what catches my attention, then just start writing and see where it goes.

Here's what it is this time – it's verse 50. When Mary and Joseph finally found Jesus, Jesus is surprised they didn't know where to look. Didn't you know I would be here in my father's house?

But Mary and Joseph did not understand what he said to them.

They did not understand what he said to them.

OK, so by this point, both Mary and Joseph were visited by an angel at his conception. Mary's been to visit her cousin Elizabeth who calls Mary the mother of her Lord...and Mary sings that whole song that indicates she's got some understanding of who the child in her womb is.

Then, when Jesus was born, shepherds came to visit, telling an enchanting story about a multitude of angels praising God for this amazing birth.

Exotic astrologers from Persia came to visit him as an infant and brought him gifts that gave an inkling of who he is.

Last week we read about Jesus' dedication in the Temple when he was about 6 weeks old. There old Simeon and Anna held the baby and left no doubt about his identity...he is God's Messiah. He's God's own son.

How is it that Mary and Joseph now don't understand what Jesus is telling them? They're not dense. And they surely haven't forgotten all that. So what's up?

We know literally nothing about the years between that first scene in the temple and this one.

There's a book called the infancy gospel of Thomas that has stories allegedly about Jesus from age 5 to 12. They depict an arrogant, bratty Jesus with supernatural powers that are

sometimes used cruelly. It seems unlikely to be true and was declared heresy by the early church leaders.

I suspect the opposite is true...and it's maybe why Mary and Joseph have such a hard time understanding what Jesus said to them. I suspect the 12 years since the dedication and this scene have been strikingly ordinary.

We are pretty good at thinking about Jesus in divine terms, but we forget that incarnation means he was fully human, too. I imagine those 12 years were spent with all the normal things of growing up.

Jesus grew up in a house with siblings. Maybe they had the ordinary squabbles that siblings sometimes do. He likely went to school, maybe at the local synagogue. He probably began to learn his father's carpentry trade. He probably had chores at home to do.

He's clearly growing up in a family devoted to their faith. They go every year to Jerusalem for the Passover and Jesus has obviously learned much about that faith. They travel with relatives to Jerusalem, and maybe it's like a big family reunion. I like to imagine Jesus running through the streets of Jerusalem with his cousins.

Year by year he outgrew his clothes and sandals. Now at age 12, if his body hasn't begun the changes of puberty, it soon will, just like every other human adolescent.

For 12 years, things have just been so normal. Maybe Mary and Joseph had just gotten so used to the ordinariness of Jesus that they didn't make the connection between what had happened 12 years earlier and this vision of Jesus now.

Maybe they didn't want to. Remember what old Simeon had said about their baby boy 12 years earlier in the Temple. Holding the baby in his arms, Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed ³⁵so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own heart too."

Maybe there's a little part of Mary and Joseph that is hoping that doesn't turn out to be as ominous as it sounds. Maybe they were hoping they'd have more time to just be normal parents. After all, he's still just a boy.

They collect their son and rejoin the travelers on the road. We don't know much of anything about the next 18 years except that as Jesus grew up he was obedient to his parents and grew in wisdom and stature.

So what's the message for us in this story?

For one thing, this story, like very little else in the gospels, really gives us a glimpse into the humanity of Jesus and his family. That humanity gives us an anchor to hang on to. It reminds us that God is not some remote, distant deity who has nothing to do with the ordinary lives we live in our bodies. Rather God, too, has walked this earth with human skin and muscles and bones and organs...and emotions.

And maybe it's these ordinary, human aspects of Jesus as a growing child that can help us think about the kids in our churches. Across the board, church leaders and youth ministers have struggled with ministry to kids during the pandemic. And to be honest, it was a struggle before the pandemic to begin with.

What Jesus was doing in that temple session was growing into his identity. Presumably he had heard the stories from his birth about all the angels and shepherds and Magi and Simeon and Anna.

But because he is so utterly human, he too has to grow and learn into his identity as surely as we do...as surely as our kids do. Jesus does so sitting at the feet of his elders...people who had been around the block on the faith journey.

He listened to their experience and asked them questions. Together they wrestled with the stories of Abraham and Moses. They wondered together at the words of the prophets and what they meant now.

Jesus astounded them with his insight, so some of that identity had already begun taking shape. But Jesus didn't magically know everything he needed to know any more than we do.

None of us will grow into our identity as Christian disciples by just reading books or looking at quasi-spiritual social media memes. We may have a profound encounter with God hiking in the wilderness or after a life-changing event, but neither will automatically help us grow into our identity as a disciple of Jesus.

We grow into our identities the same way Jesus did...by learning from each other...by listening to each other and asking questions of those who've been around the block a few times.

We grow into our identities as disciples of Jesus by sharing our own experiences of God with one another and by praying together. We grow into that identity by serving and loving our neighbors every day in a way that seems extravagant and even foolish.

We grow into our identities through the relationships in our church community.

Perhaps the thing we most need to think about when the pandemic is over and we can gather more normally again is that notion of identity...who are we when our building isn't the focal point of church? Who are we called to be in a world that will be forever changed in some way?

How will we learn, again, what that identity means for us and for the world?

I don't know how all the nuts and bolts will shake out. But there will never be a better time for us as the church to think in a new way about our identity and how we grow into that.

There will never be a better time to rethink faith formation for kids and adults as a way to grow into our identity.

There will never be a better time to learn and grow, together, into the community God wants us to be.