

Luke 2:41-52
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The Somethings of God

For the entirety of our married life, Dave and I have lived at least one state away from our families, which means that at least twice a year, we pack our suitcases and load up the car, sometimes with a dog, sometimes with a child in a car seat, other times with a teenager, and still others with a young adult in the backseat or in her VW Bug and head to Tennessee. It is our custom, as Luke says. Sometimes we stop along the way. Other times we power through arriving at our final destination a bit bedraggled. It is an unusual trip when we manage not to leave a bathing suit or a book behind, but thankfully we have always made it home without leaving behind a dog or our child. I can only imagine how Mary and Joseph's hearts stop when they realize that Jesus is nowhere to be found.

Jesus is twelve in this text, not an infant, not yet a teenager, and while twelve looked different in Jesus' day, his parents are still panicked when they can't find him. This is not a case of free-range parenting gone wild. Mary and Joseph are not irresponsible parents. They are simply relying on the village Bryan mentioned last week, as are all the other parents in the group traveling home after their annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Joseph and Mary do this every year, so it is understandable that they simply believe Jesus is somewhere in the mix, walking alongside cousins and friends.

This story is about more than the drama of a missing twelve-year-old, however. This moment begins to pivot us from the child Jesus who is "little, weak, and helpless," to the adult Jesus who will upend the world with his radical ministry of justice and love. It's a turning point

for Mary, too. When the Angel Gabriel startles her with the announcement that she would bear God's child, Luke tells us that she ponders and wonders what this all means. When the shepherds meet Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus in the manger, she ponders again, treasuring what she has heard. And for a third time here, Mary tucks away all that she hears and all that she does not understand regarding her beloved son, this Jesus she has birthed and raised, this child whose skinned knees she has kissed, this boy whose voice she knows better than her own. I have been known to push back when I hear the Christmas ballad that asks, "Mary, did you know?" I've been quick to jump to Mary's defense and talk back to the radio or muzak playing through the speakers at Target: "Of course Mary knew!" After all, she has been told from the outset all that Jesus was born to be and do. She is the only one in the room when Gabriel pays his surprising visit. And she goes on to sing a powerful song about what this child's birth will mean. So of course she knows. That said, I'm not sure Joseph or Mary can begin to comprehend fully what it means for Jesus to be both their baby boy AND the Son of God. In this moment they catch a tiny glimpse. They will not find Jesus among their friends and relatives because he does not belong solely to them.

When Mary and Joseph find Jesus among the throngs, Mary's heart and mind are racing both with terror imagining everything that could have gone wrong and with exuberant relief that nothing she imagined actually happened. As we heard last week, when Jesus is just over a week old, Simeon tells Mary that a sword will pierce her soul. I have understood this to mean that Jesus' suffering and death will hurt her deeply, which of course is true. This piercing is more than a one-time occurrence, however. Jesus pierces her soul and break her heart over and over again. So Mary's words here—the last ones we will hear from her in Luke's gospel—convey

something deeply poignant; she doesn't use a typical word for *worry*. Instead, she uses a word that means intense pain or grief to name what she and Joseph are feeling. This is one of the only times in scripture that this word is used. Worry doesn't begin to cover it; heartbreaking, soul piercing anguish is what she describes, which tells me there is more at stake than a child who is stubbornly asserting his independence.¹ Their life and his have changed in a stunning and heart-wrenching way. He is no longer her baby. He is no longer simply hers to hold.

And Jesus the tween responds to his mother's distress not with an apology but with a stunning word of truth. In most translations Jesus insists that Mary and Joseph should have known that they would find him in his Father's house. The language is not quite that precise, however. As Dr. Meda Stamper explains:

The phrase 'in my Father's house' is not easy to translate because the Greek does not specify to what it refers, but says something like 'in the undefined-plural-somethings of my Father.' This has been understood as a place (which, here, is the temple) or as a group of people (in this instance, the teachers) or as an activity (the business or affairs of the Father). But it is perhaps most helpful [Stamper suggests]... to leave it open, to think of it as all the **somethings**—places, people, doings—that advance the purposes of God's love for the world.²

Jesus must be about his Father's *somethings*. And those *somethings* extend far beyond the bounds of Mary and Joseph's household, far beyond Jesus' childhood village, far beyond any one race, nation, time, or place. And even as Jesus' leaving the nest breaks her heart and baffles

¹ Dr. Meda Stamper, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/first-sunday-of-christmas-3/commentary-on-luke-241-52-6>

² Stamper

her, Mary finds a way to tuck his words and all that she is witnessing away, to treasure it all, to treasure him, even as she cannot fully understand all that his life and ministry will mean for her or for the world Jesus is born to save.

On this twelfth day of Christmas, when I will put up the creche and tuck baby Jesus away for another year, this text offers me one last gift. This story invites me to consider both what I treasure from the Christmas story and what I am called to see, hear, and do as I walk through the rest of Luke's gospel. Luke tells us more than once in chapter 2 that Jesus grows in wisdom. As the calendar moves more wholeheartedly into January, my grand intentions for 2025 abound. So why not add another; I'd like to grow in wisdom, too. I am not and never will be Jesus. I'm not Mary either; I do think she has something to teach me about Jesus and about what it means to grow in wisdom, to learn and love and follow this stunningly baffling and amazing child of hers. Because if I'm honest, there are days I'd like to hang on to the baby Jesus, too. I'd like to keep him right where I can see him, safe from the Herods and the Caesars and anyone else who seeks to do him harm. I'd like to imagine him safe in Nazareth, playing with his brothers and his cousins and maybe having the occasional intense Passover conversation with the teachers in the temple. I kid myself into thinking that I'd like to be able to find Jesus among familiar faces and places, too. But that is not who he is, nor is that who Mary or the world or you or I need him to be. I need a savior. We need a savior. The world needs a savior, one who is wise, courageous, loving, faithful, humble, and bold. And I am less than wise if I try to make him anything less than that.

So this story offers me a reset, and invites me to consider what it means to be wise, what it means to watch and learn from Jesus in the days ahead, what it looks like to be about God's *some things* rather than strictly about my own *some things*. That's what Mary does.

We will meet Mary only once more in Luke's gospel, in another stunning, soul-piercing moment. In chapter 8, when she and Jesus' brothers seek him out, he rebuffs them, saying that his true mother and brothers are those who hear and obey the word of God, stretching the notion of God's family far beyond any one family or village or nation. And as difficult as this truth may be for Mary to hear, she does not let it deter her from following Jesus, from persisting in listening and taking in what he teaches and does. Mary remains in the mix throughout the rest of the gospel, no longer central to the story and yet always essential to its unfolding.

For Mary the faithful declaration that Jesus is both human and divine is not an academic or intellectual claim; it is deeply personal. Our children are never strictly our own, nor are they simply extensions of us or our dreams. They are God's gifts to us to nurture and guide and love as they grow into the occasionally baffling and amazing human beings God has created them to be. Mary's child is God's gift in an entirely unique way. There is no "What to Expect" book that covers being a parent to the Savior of the world. There is no one to mentor her in raising him or in letting him go and grow. I am in awe of Mary for the ways she stays faithful throughout her life, ever attending to the *some things* of God, even when those *some things* break her heart. I am convinced that she is there, still pondering, still wondering, still treasuring, still doing her faithful best to follow this One she birthed not simply to be her baby boy but to be the Savior of the world, because her story does not end with Luke's gospel.

Luke's final mention of Mary comes in the opening verses of the book of Acts just after Jesus' ascension into heaven. Luke tells us that she gathers with the disciples in an upper room in Jerusalem where they "were constantly devoting themselves to prayer." It is this group that witnesses the coming of the Holy Spirit; it is this group that becomes the earliest church, and Mary is right there in the midst of them as together they concern themselves with the *some things* of God.

The *some things* of God—that is what I hope to be about in the coming year, and every year, honestly. It is what we as God's church should be about, as well. Those *some things* are not always what we want them to be. Those *some things* will push us beyond our comfort zones and outside what we expect and know and control. Those *some things* will on occasion frustrate us and even break our hearts. And yet, we are who claim Jesus as our Lord and Savior are born to be about every *something* that "advance[s] the purposes of God's love for the world," just like Jesus is.³ After all, by the grace of God, we too are counted among God's *some things*, along with Mary and every other child of God, not because of anything we have done or will do, but because of who God is and because of who Jesus is born to be. And that, dear ones, is astonishingly great good news for every last one of us, broken-hearted and befuddled as we may be.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

³ Stamper