

“The Boy Jesus”  
Sermon by Oby Ballinger  
Edina Morningside Community Church; January 3, 2021

**Luke 2:41-52**

*Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, “Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.” He said to them, “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?” But they did not understand what he said to them. Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.*

At the church I joined in high school, there was an old woman named Minnie Isler. She must have been in her eighties or so—I can still see her big grey curls, and the silver bridge in her teeth when she smiled, which was often. Minnie's self-appointed ministry was taking care of teenagers, and I was among her ministry subjects. Now and then throughout the year, Minnie would take us out for ice cream to ask how we were doing. She prayed for us all the time and reminded us of that. Even when I went away to college and then seminary, Minnie would send a card with a few dollars in the mail: “Just a little something so you can get some ice cream.” Studies of youth ministry suggest that children in church are much more likely to remain active as adults if they have unrelated, non-pastor people who know their names and who engage them in meaningful conversation. Certainly, one of the reasons I'm a pastor in the church now is because Minnie Isler was one of those people in my teen years.

Today's story about Jesus at twelve years old in the temple emphasizes what happens with his parents, but I wonder today about all the others who must have cared for him. Mary and Joseph are among a large extended family group traveling together about 85 miles from their home in Nazareth to the temple in Jerusalem for the annual Passover celebration. It was the custom for youth of Jesus' age (almost adults by ancient standards), to be largely autonomous within the orbit of such an extended family group. That's why it takes a few days on the way back from Jerusalem for Joseph and Mary to discover that their son Jesus wasn't with them, then to retrace their steps, search through Jerusalem, and find him at the temple. Depending on how you count, it was between three and five days that they were apart. How do you suppose Jesus survived those days, as a twelve-year-old youth? Is he begging for food, or did strangers invite him to eat with them for days on end? Where is he sleeping in this big city of Jerusalem—on the streets, or in the temple? What did people think of him by himself, or his parents who had lost track of him? We don't know the answers to such questions, but they must have been on the minds of Mary and Joseph throughout their days of searching for Jesus.

When they do find him in the temple, we hear their concern in mother Mary's first words to Jesus. The Message Bible translates them like this: “Young man, why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been half out of our minds looking for you.” We can understand the simultaneous fear, anger, confusion, and relief within what Mary says. At the same time, Jesus is at an age where he's transitioning from close identification with his parents in childhood to a broader set of relationships, self-identity and autonomy. So, his response pushes against their desire to keep him close: “Why were you searching for me? “Didn't you *know* that I would be in my Father's house?”

Wendy Mogel, author of a youth development book called “The Blessing of a B-Minus”, describes parenting teenagers with the metaphor of swimming lessons. As [another parent summarizes](#), it’s like “we’re teaching our child to swim, and we are the side of the pool. And so they hold on to the parents and the side of the pool for a while, and then they push off it really hard. And then they get tired, and they come back and hold on to it, and then they push off again.” The parent’s experience is like that of a wall, “trying to be there and be solid and also being kicked all the time!” The Bible suggests that even parents with a presumably perfect child Jesus also had such experiences navigating his transition to adulthood.

But Mary and Joseph learn that there is a broader community of care for their son, and the temple authorities make space for him in their adult faith community. I am struck by the role of the local teachers here, who take Jesus seriously and engage his curiosity as he hangs around the temple for days. We see Jesus as a student of Hebrew wisdom, learning from his elders and amazing people with his insights. It’s a testament to the leadership and lack of ego in the temple community, that they have such desire to raise up the next generation. They treat this twelve-year-old young man respectfully as a conversation partner, without patronizing or talking down to him. It’s an example of how a caring intergenerational faith community can nurture the creativity of younger, newer voices, and how the insights of youth can inspire those who are older.

And sometimes, it takes the audacity, daring, and imagination of a child to show adults the way forward. Awhile back I heard about a young girl named Mari Copeny, who became better known as Little Miss Flint. When she was just eight years old, she wrote a letter to then-president Obama asking for a meeting with him in Washington, D.C., to discuss the water crisis happening in Flint, Michigan. The president flew to Flint to meet with her there instead. In the years since, Little Miss Flint [has raised over half a million dollars](#) to provide drinking water to residents, who still don’t have clean tap water. She also started various Flint Kids projects, inviting people to write letters of encouragement to children living in Flint, raising money for thousands of gifts to underserved kids in her hometown, and hosting screenings of the movie “Black Panther” for African-American kids, so they could see a movie that features superheroes who look like themselves. [Mari’s mother told her](#) early on that she would need to “work 20 times harder than most adults because [she is] a kid and adults just don’t take kids seriously,” but she was determined not to allow adults to stand in her way. [Mari’s website](#) credits her “youthful honesty” with the ability to call attention to the “hardships of Americans trapped by a collapsing and toxic infrastructure.” It also says that this now thirteen-year-old plans on running for president.

How many other Mari Copeny’s are there around us? Can the church see, welcome, and nurture them as the leaders they already are? We have an example in the temple community of Jesus’ day, which welcomes all who gathered there with questions about God. And this church has a legacy that recognizes the importance of creative education, beginning with our preschool ministries over seventy years ago, and more recently in the activities of Morningside Theatre Company. Women’s Fellowship has an annual outreach of cookies around Valentine’s Day to college students who might feel that they’ve outgrown the love of the church. How will we extend such a posture of openness and nurture with younger people in 2021, and in the years that follow beyond that? We do so by reaching out in caring, respectful ways to youth in our midst, by embracing earnest questions as opportunities for shared learning, by volunteering with ministries like Sunday school or youth group, by encouraging worship leadership among and by helping fund the Faith Formation Director position on our church staff. In 2021, I’m feeling the nudge to start a younger adult group, fostering community for those in their first years beyond high school or college. If that is a shared dream to serve the younger people among us, I’ll need your support in shifting responsibilities to other leaders. I welcome your feedback on that possibility, and help to make it happen.

We read that when Jesus, Joseph and Mary left the temple to return to Nazareth, Mary “treasured all these things in her heart”. Today I am treasuring the legacy of Minnie Isler in my faith, the witness of similar folks in your faith who have brought you to this place, the hospitality of temple teachers, and the examples of those like Jesus and Mari Copeny, who show that the sacred work of loving your neighbor as yourself can start at any age. Together in this new year, may we grow further as a caring temple of transformation and nurture, for young and old alike. Amen.