

FIRST SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS DAY | DECEMBER 26, 2021

1 SAMUEL 2:18-20, 26 | PSALM 148 | COLOSSIANS 3:12-17 | LUKE 2:41-52

The winter Olympics are set to begin in about five or six weeks. Like many people, I like watching the Olympics when they're on TV, but the winter Olympics always leave me feeling a little befuddled. When you watch the summer Olympics, you know most of the sports and many of the athletes. Basketball. Track. Softball. But most of the time I watch the winter Olympics, I find myself scratching my head. What exactly are they doing? How do they win? And who exactly are these people?

The broadcasters know this. And it feels like for every hour of sports you watch during prime time, forty-five minutes is composed of slickly produced montages about the athletes you should care about. How they overcame adversity. Where they train. How they started doing this obscure sport. And more often than not, they'll have an old home video of one of these athletes skiing or curling or figure skating at a young age. And they are, almost always, amazing. The rest of the kids will be bumbling around while this prodigy soars through the air like they've been doing this forever. When you watch these videos, you think *Well, of course they made it to the Olympics. They've been destined from the start.*

That's sort of like what today's gospel reading is doing. This is the only story about Jesus's childhood that we have in the gospels. Which is a little bit unusual. Because we have lots of stories and myths and legends about the childhoods of other famous figures from that time period. Every political leader, military general, artistic prodigy had stories floating around about how their talents were discovered at a young age. That they didn't just become skilled later in life, but there was something different about them from the beginning.

And St. Luke gives us a version of that for Jesus. Jesus and his family are in Jerusalem for the Passover celebration when Jesus disappears. And when his parents find him, he's in the Temple, the center of Jewish religious and cultural life. And he isn't just hanging out or puttering around. He's in the middle of everything. Talking about the Torah and its interpretation with all the religious teachers. You can already imagine the NBC producers scrambling to get a video camera on this kid.

At first glance, it appears that Luke wants to tell us this story because Jesus is really smart. He's a prodigy. If you liked Jesus when he was thirty-three, you should have seen him when he was twelve. He's the very best and the very brightest right from the get go.

But that's not the most important part of this story. The point isn't that Jesus is smart. No, the real turning point in this story comes when Mary finds Jesus and says, "'Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.'" In short, *Why aren't you respecting your father?*

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And pay close attention to Jesus's answer. *Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?* There are at least three or four ways you can translate this line. And most scholars think "house" isn't that great. A better translation would be something like *Didn't you know I must be engaged in my Father's affairs? Didn't you know I must be doing my Father's work?*

The emphasis isn't on the location of Jesus within the Temple. Luke's Jesus never calls the Temple "my father's house" anywhere else. It's on what Jesus is called to do. It's that Jesus identifies his father, his primary relationship, not through his biological family, but through this vocation and community that God has given him. Essentially, Jesus says, *I am respecting my father. I'm among his people, doing his work, in the middle of the action.*

Those words that Jesus speaks to Mary are the first words he speaks in St. Luke's gospel. And you can understand them almost as a kind of thesis statement for everything to come after. Jesus is here to get involved in God's work, in God's community, and in God's activity.

To put it another way, the point of the story isn't that Jesus is smart. The point is that Jesus is wise. Barry Schwartz, the professor of psychology at Penn, has this great line in one of his books where he writes that wisdom is knowing when it's acceptable to break the rules. And that's what's so remarkable about this story. The depiction that Luke gives us of Jesus isn't just of someone who's at the head of the class. It's of someone who understands why he's here. And someone who is aware that following God's call might mean breaking some rules and conventions. Who isn't simply smart or enlightened but wise. Who understands his purpose.

One of the ironies of those prodigy videos they play during the Olympics is that they're meant to be inspiring. But are they actually inspiring? Well, no. Not at all. You don't watch those videos and think, *I'm going to give figure skating a shot.* You think, *Oh, no. I could never even get on the ice.* To encounter people who are prodigies is to feel wholly inadequate. Why even both trying?

But the vision Luke gives us of Jesus is one that we should find inspiring. Luke ends this story by telling us that after leaving the Temple, Jesus "increased in wisdom and in years." And that might be a good reminder for us to end on as well. That even though Jesus understands his mission and purpose, he understands that he is here to get involved in God's work, there is still room to grow and be transformed.

And if that's true for Jesus, it must be true for us as well. That we aren't simply "born" wise and we don't "find" a purpose all at once. But that God accompanies us as we grow in wisdom living out our vocations in the world. Life is meant to be a process of change and discovery and learning with God. And Jesus promises to be present with us along the way. Whenever we're getting involved with God's work, Christ is there alongside us. We know exactly where to find him.

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