

# *The Perfect Adolescent*

by

The Reverend Leigh DeVries  
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

December 26, 2021

Luke 2: 41-52

<sup>41</sup> Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. <sup>42</sup> And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. <sup>43</sup> When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. <sup>44</sup> 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. <sup>45</sup> When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. <sup>46</sup> After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. <sup>47</sup> And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. <sup>48</sup> When his parents<sup>[1]</sup> 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." <sup>49</sup> He said to them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" <sup>50</sup> But they did not understand what he said to them. <sup>51</sup> Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart. <sup>52</sup> And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.

I don't know for sure, but I bet for the parents in the room hearing that story, your blood pressure might have just gone up a little bit.

This passage from Luke is the solitary story of Jesus' youth in the Christian Bible.

And what is that one story we get? Jesus being the quintessential adolescent. He pushes boundaries, retreats from his earthly family, takes risks, tests limits, and focuses so entirely on himself, ignoring the inconvenience he's caused. It's a primary task of adolescence, withdrawing from our families and learning to define ourselves as our own person.

Jesus doesn't quite disobey his parents, but he's definitely being a little sketchy. Not breaking the rules per se, maybe just bending them a bit.

We learn from this passage that Mary and Joseph led a faithful Jewish family, going to the temple in Jerusalem for Passover. They would have traveled as more than just a nuclear family, likely in a caravan of extended family and friends. And just like Kevin's parents from Home Alone, Mary and Joseph didn't realize their son wasn't in the mass of people traveling as a group. And by that forgetfulness and trust that their son would do as told, they left him behind.

Imagine their panic.

Your son, the one who an angel came to foretell, to name; this kid who the magi and shepherds years before traveled to see; this boy who at his circumcision had been prophesied over—you lost him. This being you know *will* become the Messiah, who has been entrusted to your care by God, that kid, you can't find him.

I have a niece who is 13. And while she is absolutely brilliant, self-reliant and resourceful, I, along with my family, would be terrified if we had somehow lost track of her for three days. There would be tears, calls to authorities, prayers, the frantic retracing of steps, everything. And while that's for 2021, I can't imagine it would've been "no big deal" for parents to have lost their 12-year-old in the first century in a big city, away from home.

Joseph and Mary anxiously search for three days, a not inconsequential number for us Christians. And then, by the actual grace of God, they stumble on Jesus in the

temple, sitting among teachers, listening to them, and asking questions. The priests and rabbis look on in amazement at Jesus' answers and understanding of the Law. And then, up walk Mary and Joseph, steaming I imagine. They walk up, and Mary says to Jesus, "Child, why have you treated us like this?! Your Father and I have been looking for you in great anxiety!"

If she's anything like my mother, she had some choice words in her head for this "son of God." Perhaps questioning how this supposed embodiment of God in the flesh could be so ridiculously inconsiderate and disrespectful.

We get Jesus' response, but the writer doesn't tell us a thing about his tone, so it's up to us to interpret the level of sincerity or, eh-ehm, potential sass in his words.

Option 1) Jesus chose to stay in the temple. He assumed his parents knew where he was. Really. [said sincerely]

- "Why were you searching for me? Didn't you know that I must be in my Father's house?"

Option 2) Jesus lost track of time, was really enjoying himself *for three days*. So he just stayed, assuming his parents knew that they would easily figure out where he was. They would naturally think Jesus would be in his Father's house. [said curiously]

- "Why were you searching for me? Didn't you know that I must be in my Father's house?"

Or, Option 3) Jesus knew that his parents were freaking out. And he chose to stay in the temple and learn and discuss and understand in full knowledge of his parent's anxiety because, well, he wanted to. And could they really be mad about him learning in the temple?! He *was* the son of God, so... ? [said sassily]

- "Why were you searching for me? Didn't you know that I must be in my Father's house?"

As a youth pastor who knows a lot of 12-year-olds, you can probably guess which interpretation I lean toward. I find it very difficult not to interpret Jesus' response to Mary's admonishment as a slippery way to try and get out of trouble. "Didn't you know I would be in my father's house?"

The scripture then reads, 'but they (meaning Mary and Joseph) did not understand what he said to them.' If I were Jesus' parent in this scenario, you can sure bet that I "wouldn't understand what he said!" Parents don't get a satisfying end to this vignette. Still, I imagine Jesus got in no small amount of trouble for this little impromptu solo retreat in Jerusalem.

It's easy for me to read this story as Jesus being a punk tween, using his status in his family as the Messiah to get out of the consequences.

Do you remember being 12? It was rough, real uncomfortable for me. Your body changes, doing all these new weird things. Sometimes it just hurts with pain from your limbs actually growing. Your skin gets messed up, and you start to focus way more on what your peers think about you than what your parents think. Clothes fit one day and don't fit the next. At 12, you're in between, in this strange liminal space of neither here nor there, neither child nor adult. It is in a word, awkward.

My parents decided to home school us for middle school. They thought it was when kids got mean, so we should stay home. My Dad was in charge of physical education. His syllabus? He told me to run for thirty minutes five days a week. That was my PE. He had just gotten into marathoning and, for some misguided reason, thought I would enjoy it like he did. And also that running for thirty minutes a day would be an engaging way for a 12-year-old to move their body. [beat]

I hated running. I have never been sporty spice. I would get bored, tired, frustrated. I still have no idea why my Dad thought that his youngest and most contrary child would actually follow his instructions if left unsupervised. Before my "runs," I would stuff a book up my shirt. I would jog until my Dad couldn't see me and then go to the woods near our house, climb a tree and read.

That was my 12-year-old defiance, or well, one of them.

In my twenties, though, I felt like I had to prove something, that I could run, that I could do halves and full marathons. Just because I refused as a tween didn't mean I couldn't do it. And, looking back now, I wanted to prove I *could* do what my Dad did.

So, with the confidence of a 12-year-old in a twenty-something's body, I trained for a half marathon. I ran it, dragging my college friends into it with me. I didn't love it, but I did it. I ran a few halves. Then, when I was 24, I decided I wanted to prove that I could do a full marathon, 26.2 miles. If my Dad could do it, so could I. I trained for six months.

And then the day of the race came. It snowed the night before. And they canceled the race.

They canceled it.

Never one to give up easily, particularly if I was proving something to my Dad (eh-hem, me), I decided to run the Leigh DeVries marathon by myself. There was a loop in Nashville by my YMCA. It was a bit over 6.5 miles long. I figured I could run 4 loops, grab water refills and carb up every six miles at my Y, using the bathroom their as needed.

So, I ran a full marathon by myself.

I look back on myself as that teenager, later as that twenty-something, and I see a girl dramatically vacillating between being the girl she thought her parents wanted her to be and desperately trying to figure out who she wanted to be.

A central task of adolescence is rejecting the familial voices who have told you who you should be, listening for the voice inside telling you who God created you to be. Of course, once we hit adolescence, there are plenty more voices willing to jump in to tell you who to be. Instead of being the person your parents want you to be, you try to become who you think your friends want you to be, who your culture tells you to be. Consequently, I would argue that letting go of those earthly voices who tell you who and what to be might actually be a central task of existence.

At 12, I already knew there was a version of myself that my Dad wanted me to be. And, I just never thought I could be *her*, so at that point, I refused to try. Then at 20, I thought I *could* be her if I just *really* tried, so I did. At 24, I ran that marathon. I finally did what I thought my Dad would be proud of – and you know what's wild? I'm lucky enough to have a dad who loved me every bit as much before I ran that

marathon as after. And, my dad loves me *now*. I worked so hard to try and earn something it turned out I already had.

I spent months, years really, learning distance running to prove to my dad and the world that I could be the person he wanted me to be, but in the end, it didn't actually change who I truly am, the person my dad already loved even if he didn't know her yet.

Similarly, though hopefully less dramatically, we spend months getting ready for Christmas, finding the perfect gifts, the ideal decorations. And then December 25 comes, and we celebrate the birth of a precious baby and get gifts from friends and family and from Santa.

For me, it's easy to be a Christian at Christmas, for the few hours when the lights are soft, the music is lovely, and the food abundant. The difficulty is when Christmas ends. Christmas takes up just a few weeks of the year, before we put away the pretty Christmas decorations, preparing for the brunt of winter.

I suspect Jesus was pretty easy to love on the day of his birth, that adorable baby wrapped in swaddling clothes. But, with this story of Jesus in his teenage years, we see that, like many teenagers, he may have been less easy to love as he got older. Teenagers... delightfully so in my opinion, sometimes take a bit more work. The preciousness of childhood has worn off for the awkwardness of puberty. They smell, they can be moody and disrespectful, and they ask all kinds of uncomfortable questions. They make mistakes and take unnecessary risks and stress everyone out.

And yet, while teenagers may take more effort to love in some ways, they also, in my opinion, ask the *best* questions: "Why were you searching for me? Didn't you know that I must be in my Father's house?"

At this moment, Jesus pulls away from his earthly family, no longer letting them define who he is. Instead, he discerns for himself what it means to be the Messiah.

Jesus did a better job than any of us putting aside the expectations set on him by his earthly family, by his culture, by the world. It was only by setting aside those expectations that Jesus could be the actual Emmanuel, God with us.

Today is the first Sunday of Christmas, the second holiday season we've celebrated during this seeming unending pandemic. We've been longing for a holiday from mask-wearing, social distancing, and covid testing. We've been waiting for fun, for Christmas. And it's come, yet again... but not the way we wanted.

I crave a “regular Christmas,” the simplicity of a *baby* Jesus, a precious savior, rocked to sleep on a silent night. I crave Santa, where you always know where you stand—naughty or nice. And if I'm nice, then I'll be worthy of gifts, of grace, of love.

And on this first Sunday of Christmas, instead of Santa, instead of a darling baby... we get a pubescent 12-year-old.

We get a young, impetuous, and frustrating know-it-all for a savior. A savior who looks at us and says, "why were you searching for me? Didn't you know that I must be here? That I must be here [point to self]? I must be Emmanuel, God with you,” our bodies becoming "Father's house.

We look everywhere but at ourselves to try and find peace. If only the pandemic ended... if only we got into that one school... if only we got that one job... if only we were in a different relationship... if only we ran that marathon... then we'll be enough, then life would be good, then we'd be lovable. If only we could be who our families, our friends, our culture, expect us to be, then we'd be worthy.

By fulfilling the expectations we've taken on, we think that somehow we can avoid that annoying savior within us. That savior demanding we look in the mirror and see we already have everything we need to be the person God created us to be. And so does everyone else: from the newborn baby to the anxious parent to the friends and family who travel with us. And yes, even the sassy, independent teenager.

Christ asks, why do you keep trying to be who everyone else wants, rather than the glorious being I made you to be? Why do you tell others who they should be when I have already called them enough? Why do you search for me when you know exactly where I am?

As we search for meaning during the pandemic that just won't end, may we remember, obnoxiously enough, that it is in God, in the call of Love, that we find

meaning and purpose. While we long for the seeming simplicity of baby Jesus, for a Santa-God who will tell us exactly where we stand, our God, at least today, shows up inconveniently as that awkward 12-year-old boy to remind us that if he's enough, you might be too.