

Jesus The Boy, The Baptised, The Beloved

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Have you ever lost your child in a crowd? Ever gotten lost? When I was in my first seminary year in N.Y. City, my parents and my younger brother Jim came to visit. Jim, about 12 years old, and I took the subway to Times Square and 42nd street to take in the sights. At one point I looked around and Jim was nowhere to be found. I hit the panic button. There we were on Times Square with thousands of people all around, and Jim was gone. I searched frantically, then we found one another. We were apart for only 10 minutes, but it felt like an hour. It still gives me chills.

I

Mary and Joseph must have felt the same way when they discovered Jesus, 12 year old Jesus, was missing.

The three had joined the caravan of villagers from Nazareth to Jerusalem for the Passover festival. It was a 65 mile trip, which took three days to travel on foot.

When the Passover festival was over the pilgrimagers packed up and began the trip home. Jesus missed the departure.

Mary and Joseph did not miss Jesus until the group stopped for the first night on the road. It is not difficult to see how it might have happened: the hubbub of more than a million visitors there in Jerusalem for the festival, the village traveling together, Mary and Joseph assuming Jesus was playing with his friends. The African proverb says it takes a village to raise a child. It also takes a village to *lose* one.

When the caravan stopped for the night, and Mary and Joseph could not find Jesus, we can well imagine their panic. It's like the movie *Home Alone* in which the family and relatives hustle off to the airport for a Christmas trip to Europe and leave their youngest son asleep in his upstairs sleeping cave.

Mary and Joseph couldn't start their journey back to Jerusalem until the next morning. What a restless night of worry that must have been. When they got to Jerusalem they searched all day long—to no avail. It was not until the next day—the third day—that they found him. There he was in the temple, sitting with the teachers, listening, asking and answering questions. The teachers, the text says, were amazed by his precocious understanding.

We love this scene—Jesus the boy in the temple. It has been often captured in art, displayed in pictures on Sunday school walls or depicted in illustrated Bibles. Jesus the boy talking with the elders of his religion in the temple.

When Mary and Joseph found him we can imagine their tumultuous jumble of emotions. Jubilation and exasperation: Mary said, “Child, why have you treated us like this?” Then she added, “Look, your father and I have been looking for you anxiously.” Or as we might say in Southern dialect: “We’ve been worried sick!!”

Jesus responded with these sharp, vivid words: “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” Earlier translated: “Did you not know I must be about my Father’s business?” Both meanings—“in my Father’s house” and “about my Father’s business”—work. Jesus might have said, “Where else would I be but in the temple? You brought me here for my dedication as an infant, and you’ve taken me here with you every year since. You’ve seen my love of this place. Where else would I be?” Or, “You’ve known my desire to be about my Heavenly Father’s work. Where else would I be?”

It is a moment psychologists call “individuation”. Jesus is claiming his own identity apart from his parents. But Jesus is claiming more. Something spiritual and

theological is going on here. He is claiming a higher loyalty than to his earthy parents: an intimate relationship with his heavenly Parent. “My Father’s house”, he said. It would become his favored name for god, *Abba*, in the Aramaic, Daddy or Poppa. It signified a relationship of intimacy, trust, loyalty, obedience.

At the heart of Jesus’ spirituality was his *Abba-experience* of God. And I think it began early. As Luke says, “And Jesus grew in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and humans.” (Luke 2:52)

We have nine prayers of Jesus in the gospels. In all but one he addressed God as *Abba*. The only one where he didn’t was the cry from the cross where he quoted Psalm 22, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?”

Today’s story ends with the words that Mary “kept” or pondered these things in her heart. We ponder still. And it says that Jesus returned with them to Nazareth and was “obedient” to them. I bet he was!

II

We have no record, historical or biblical, of what happened to Jesus between the ages of twelve and thirty, between today’s episode and his baptism in the Jordan

River. A minister friend, Cheryl Patterson, suggests this is so because he was “grounded” for eighteen years!

Speculation abounds about these missing years. Was he ever married? Did he study with the Essene Community at the Dead Sea? Some say he traveled to India to learn the wisdom of the East.

Nazareth was a town of 200-300 persons. Did he spend all his growing up years there? Did he study with the local rabbis? Luke suggests he was raised in an orthodox Jewish home, observing the laws and customs.

Recently archaeologists have discovered four miles from Nazareth a city named Sepphoris, a bustling, cosmopolitan Roman/Hellenistic city which during Jesus’ growing up years was experiencing a massive building program. People traveled through there on routes east to west. There was a 3,000 seat theater. Could Joseph the carpenter and his son been involved in any of the building projects? Jesus might well have had more cosmopolitan experiences than his small home town suggests.

But Jesus was more than the sum of his sociological parts. I believe he had the experience of what German theologian Dorothee Soelle has called “childhood

mysticism”, the experience of oneness with God, an intimacy with God whom Jesus called *Abba*.

Which brings us to his baptism at age 30.

III

Mark’s gospel has no birth stories or boyhood stories. It plunges in, so to speak, at Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan River by John the Baptizer. John was baptizing people in a baptism of repentance and the forgiveness of sins.

As Mark tells the event,

And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens torn open and the spirit descending upon him like a dove. And a Voice came from heaven, “You are my son, The Beloved, in whom I am well pleased.

Or, “in whom I delight.”

We don’t know whether there was the first time Jesus sensed that he was the beloved son of God, or whether it was a confirmation of what he had experienced from his earliest years. I think the latter. There is a direct line from his saying, “I must

be about my Father's business" at age 12 in the temple and the Voice of God at his baptism when he was 30: "You are my son, the Beloved, in whom I am well pleased."

Jesus knew God's delight in him from the beginning. Gordon Cosby, the pastor of the Church of the Savior in Washington D.C., said that it is the chief duty of parents to *enjoy* their children. This delight in them conveys in ways deeper than words the grace of God, the sense of their Belovedness.

V

Now I move from Jesus' Belovedness and his relationship to God as Abba to our own Belovedness and our relationship to God as *Abba*.

Jesus wanted *us* to experience our Belovedness and to relate to God as *Abba*. Not only did he pray to God as Abba, he taught us to pray when we pray, "*Our Abba, who art in heaven.*" Paul says that when we pray in the Spirit, the Spirit helps us pray *Abba*.

Henri Nouwen wrote a wonderful book called *Life of the Beloved*. He wrote it with a particular friend in mind, but it has become one of his most read books. In it he wrote:

... all I want to say to you is “You are the Beloved,” and all I hope is that you can hear these words spoken to you with all the tenderness and force that love can hold. My only desire is to make these words reverberate in every corner of your being—“You are the Beloved.”

We hear countering voices inside our heads, voices which come from our culture and the people around us: “You are the Unloved; you are worthless; you’ll never amount to anything; you’re not smart enough, beautiful enough; good enough.” But the voice of God which Jesus heard and wants you to hear is saying, “You are the Beloved.”

Perhaps the goal of all religion is to overcome the elemental estrangement we feel from God—and that for a host of reasons—and restore us to the even more elemental communion with God.

You’ve seen the commercials about discovering your genetic identity. You send something off and get back your genetic make-up: 20% Italian, 5% Native American, 45% Irish, 65% African, etc.

One woman said that when she looked at her results she had a “genetic epiphany”. I love the phrase. Epiphany: a sudden revelation of truth. I think God has

been trying to convey to us a genetic epiphany from the beginning. God sends us our results, and we open the letter and it reads

You are made in the Divine Image, God's Beloved.

Genesis tells us the first, that God made us in God's own image, male and female. And Jesus tells us the second: You are the Beloved.

This is who we are, the Beloved. Our spiritual quest then is *becoming* who we are. As Nouwen says: "Becoming the Beloved is the great spiritual journey we have to make."

The calling of the church is to help us make that spiritual journey. We help each other discover our Belovedness then *grow* into our Belovedness. We do so in the messages we give and how we regard one another.

Can we be a community where we help each other be at home in the presence of God, be at home in our Belovedness?

I heard the story of a girl who got lost on her city streets. A policeman saw her wandering the streets alone and said, "Are you lost? Can I take you home?"

She said, "Just take me to my church. I can find my way home from there."

Church is where we hear this message from God, again using Nouwen's words:

I have called you by name, from the beginning. You are mine and I am yours. You are my Beloved, on you my favor rests. I have molded you in the depths of the earth and knitted you together in your mother's womb. I have carved you in the palms of my hands and hidden you in the shadow of my embrace. I look at you with infinite tenderness and care for you with a care more intimate than that of a mother for her child. I have counted every hair on your head and guided you at every step. Wherever you go I go with you, and wherever you rest I keep watch... I will not hide my face from you. You know me as your own as I know you as my own. You belong to me.... Wherever you are I will be. Nothing will ever separate us. We are one.

That is God's message to you this first Sunday of 2018.