



**VILLAGE  
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

# Giving Thanks for Young People

SCRIPTURE:  
Luke 2:41-52

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Oct. 29, 2023 — Sermon by Rev. Dr. Rodger Nishioka

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It has always intrigued me that in all of the gospels, the only story the Holy Spirit has given us about Jesus Christ as a young person is this one. We have two stories about his birth in Matthew and Luke. We have lots of stories about his teaching, healing, miracles, stories about the last night he spent with his disciples, his arrest, betrayal, torture, death by crucifixion and the triumph of his resurrection. We even have stories about his life after his resurrection. But from birth to his baptism as an adult, we only have this one story.

Jesus is 12 years old, which means for the Jewish people, he is on the verge of adulthood, marked by his bar mitzvah. Thirteen is the age when a boy turns into a man and girl turns into a woman. It is time for Passover—the most important of the pilgrimage festivals for the Jewish people. If you were able, all Jews traveled to Jerusalem to the temple. Pilgrims traveled from miles around. Whole villages and towns would clear out and all would gather in a moving religious ceremony.

Passover is one of the greatest holy days for the Hebrew people, so Mary and Joseph and Jesus go from Nazareth in the northern part of Israel to Jerusalem. It is about 90 miles and likely, Joseph and Mary would have walked. Scholars estimate it would have taken 4-5 days for them to go from Nazareth into the Jordan river valley and then up to Jerusalem. Once they arrive, they stay for the Passover festival. Then, it is time to go home.

The Bible says they go one day's journey. Then, Mary and Joseph, along with other pilgrims, set up camp for the night. At that point, they begin looking for Jesus. It may seem odd that they have not noticed the whole day that Jesus was not with them, but we know from later texts that Mary and Joseph went on to have other children. They were likely watching their younger children and trusting that Jesus, on

the verge of adulthood, would take care of himself.

It does give you pause to think about having Jesus Christ as your older brother. It puts a whole new twist on “sibling rivalry.” A younger sister says, “Oh, Jesus, you just think you are so perfect.” Jesus shrugs his shoulders and gestures up to heaven.

Well, that night Mary and Joseph begin to look for Jesus. I would imagine the conversation was pretty typical. Mary turns to her husband and says, “Sweetheart, have you seen the Messiah?” Joseph turns to Mary and says, “No, my matzo ball. Last time we talked, you said you were going to watch for the lamb of God who taketh away the sins of the world.” Mary, a bit exasperated, says, “Well, he has to be around here somewhere. Let’s look for him.” And they do. First, they would start with those camping nearest to them. These are relatives and close friends. “Excuse me. Have you seen Jesus?” Actually, in the Aramaic, it would be “Jeshua.” We get the name “Joshua” from Jesus. Mary and Joseph would have asked, “Have you seen Josh around?” Their relatives and friends would have said, “No. Actually we have not seen him the whole day we have been traveling.” Then they would expand their search. They would go to the next group of pilgrims. “Excuse me. Have you seen a young man? Tall. Bright. He might be talking a lot about ‘the plan.’” “No, ma’am. No, sir.”

The Bible says, “When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him.” I think they went back that night. They entrusted their other children to relatives and hurried back in the middle of the night when it really was not safe to travel. There were bandits, robbers and wild animals. They arrive back in Jerusalem and search for three days.

Imagine the desperation they were feeling. On the third day, they are probably in the marketplace and they overhear a woman talking to a man about a kid who had been in the temple for several days.

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Mary turns to Joseph and says, “It’s him.” Then, they run to the temple, a place they have not yet looked and they find Jesus sitting there. He is sitting among the scholars and the teachers. You know: Religious leaders. Over-educated. Self-impressed. Graduates of theological seminaries like Princeton Theological Seminary and Columbia Theological Seminary. You know the kind. All this time, Jesus has been sitting with them—listening to them and asking questions and the Bible tells us that all who heard him were amazed by his understanding and his answers.

When Mary and Joseph find him, Luke says they are astonished. Mary goes up to Jesus—likely interrupting the conversation among these learned men and her son, which is not something a woman is supposed to do. And she says, “Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.” Yes. I am sure it sounded just like that. Actually, I bet it sounded more desperate and more angry. “Child! Why have you treated us like this?! Look! Your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety!” Then Jesus, as usual, does something extraordinary: He answers her question with a question. “Mom, Dad, why were you even searching for me? Didn’t you know I must be in my Father’s house?”

Then verse 50 says, “But they did not understand what he said to them,” which is actually Bible code for, “Mary did not calm down right away.” The rest of the passage says that they returned to Nazareth and Jesus was obedient to them. That’s important. You know, I think it must have been a long, four-day journey for our Lord. The whole time his mother and father were mad at him. Joseph muttering under his breath, “Sure. All knowing. You would think he would know to call or at least text us, but no.” Mary muttering, “A ditch. For four days, while we were looking for you, I pictured you in a ditch, dying, asking for me. And there you are, in the temple, sitting among the teachers!”

In response to all this, Luke says, “His mother treasured all these things in her heart.” Isn’t that beautiful? And Jesus increased, grew in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor. That’s right. Even the Messiah grew. Even Jesus, fully human and fully God, matured.

Many Bibles label this story, “The boy, Jesus, lost in the temple.” I think that’s wrong. I do not think Jesus was lost. I think he knew exactly where he was going and exactly what he was supposed to be doing.

It was more than 30 years ago, I was working for the national offices of the Presbyterian Church and we were holding the General Assembly meeting in Philadelphia. The General Assembly is largest annual meeting of the Presbyterian Church (USA). More than 1,000 commissioners and delegates from churches all over the country gather for ten days of meetings. That year, the most controversial action before the General Assembly was the approval of a brand new curriculum for youth and their parents titled “God’s Gift of Sexuality.” It had been in development more than seven years and had been through testing and multiple revisions. Everyone had an opinion about it. We had never before issued a churchwide curriculum for young people about human sexuality. Thirty years ago, we did not know much of what we know now. If it was approved, we would be the first denomination to publish a curriculum on human sexuality for young people in the United States. The Lutherans and Episcopalians and Methodists and Baptists were all watching us. I was not sure it was going to be approved.

The committee considering the curriculum held days of hearings. There were many people who testified. Some argued that the curriculum talked too much about abstinence. Some said there was too much information about contraception. Some said there should be no mention of abortion. Some objected to any discussion about homosexuality. Others said the term “sexual orientation” should be replaced with “sexual preference.” By a vote of 37 to 29, the committee recommended it be approved.

When the recommendation came to the full floor of the General Assembly, we were in the huge convention center. There were over 1,000 commissioners and delegates at tables spread across the whole floor. There was a huge stage at the front with giant 50-foot screens on either side. The recommendation to approve the curriculum and send it to the churches was made by the committee chair. You could see commissioners already lined up at microphones ready to support the recommendation and oppose it. Seated at these long tables, with more than 800

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adult commissioners on the floor, were nearly 180 young people spread among them as youth advisory delegates. I was disappointed to see that very few young people were standing in the lines. The moderator recognized each speaker and it went on and on. Amendments were proposed and then approved or defeated. In the third hour of debate, one commissioner got up and asked that the whole curriculum be sent back to a committee for further study and revision because it was obvious there were too many people lined up to speak and the Assembly had other business. I could feel that the commissioners were getting weary and I thought his motion would pass, which would possibly delay the curriculum another year or two.

But then the moderator recognized the youth advisory delegate at microphone five. On the screen appeared the face of a young woman. She was from New Castle presbytery in Delaware. She was holding a piece of paper in front of her and it was visibly shaking—showing how nervous she was to be speaking in front of all of these people. She said she understood that there were lots of concerns about this curriculum and she recognized it was not perfect—there were a lot of people upset about the sections on abortion, contraception, homosexuality and gender and she said she would have been okay with sending it back for more revisions until she read the chapter on sexual abuse. She was almost whispering at this point. She said that she was going to say something she had never told anyone before. When she was 11, she was sexually abused several times by a friend of their family whom everyone liked and trusted. And that for years, she worried that it was her fault and was so ashamed. She wondered if God was testing her in some way and if she had failed. And then she read the chapter in the curriculum that

clearly said three things: First, God does not cause this or ever want this to happen. Second, it is not your fault. Third, there are ways to get help. She said that if she had learned this, then maybe she would not have tried to take her life three different times in the past seven years. She then said she thought other kids needed to hear this, too.

The floor was quiet when she finished. She went back to her seat and put her head down on the table and collapsed into sobs. I was so grateful for adults and other youth delegates around her who came to comfort her. The moderator called for a vote on the motion to refer for further study and it failed. Then he called for a vote on recommendation to send the curriculum to the churches and it passed. I had never before seen the heart of the General Assembly turned in this way.

I saw her later and asked if she was doing okay and she said she was. She said so many people had reached out to her but the best thing, she said, was this. Then she held out her hands and showed me a handful of notes. She said whenever she returns to her seat, she finds a note or two. Some of the notes are signed. Some are anonymous. Several of the writers said they experienced the same thing as a child or a young person. One of them came from a 64-year-old woman who said the same thing had happened to her and she had never told anyone until now. They all thanked her for her courage.

For years I have heard people say that youth are the future of the church and that is true. But we must remember that young people are not only the future of the church. They are the church *today*. And they are showing us the way. Thanks be to God for young people and our ministry with them.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.