



Treasure in Our Hearts

TEXT
Luke 2:41–52

January 13, 2019 — Sermon by Rev. Dr. Rodger Y. Nishioka

It is intriguing to me that as much as we know about Jesus' birth, we know so little about his years as a child. Only Luke writes about this one story of Jesus. 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 a 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 were to travel to Jerusalem to the temple. Pilgrims traveled from miles around. Whole towns and villages would clear out, and all would gather in a moving religious ceremony. Similar events still happen today. Like yesterday, just off I-435 and I-70, over 75,000 people traveled in the snow to be part of a religious experience at a place named Arrowhead Stadium.

Well, the 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 likely three to four days for them to go down 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, so likely they were watching their younger children and trusting that Jesus, on the verge of adulthood, would take care of himself.

You know, 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 to Jesus, "Oh, Jesus, you just think you are so perfect." Jesus shrugs his shoulders and gestures up to heaven. Well, Mary and Joseph that night 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 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, asking them, "Excuse me. Have you seen a young man — tall, handsome? He would 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 was not safe to travel. There really were bandits and robbers and wild animals.

They finally arrive back in Jerusalem, and they search for three days. Imagine the desperation they are feeling. On the third day, they are probably in the central marketplace again, and they overhear a woman talking to a man about a kid who had been in the temple for several days. 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 Austin Presbyterian Seminary and Princeton Theological Seminary. One of them has a Ph.D. from Baylor University. 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 at his understanding and his answers.

When Mary and Joseph find him, Luke says they are astonished. Mary goes up to Jesus and likely interrupts 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, it sounded probably something more like, "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?" Now this is an important word for young people today. When your parent, caregiver, is really angry and is asking you a question, your best strategy is not to ask a question back.

"Young man, what do you think you are doing?"

"Dad, what does it look like I'm doing?" It will not go well for you if you do that. You see, it worked for Jesus, but that is because he was both fully human *and* fully divine. You may think you are divine, but you are not. If you try this, you will soon discover just how "undivine" you are.

Then verse 50 says, "But they did not understand what he said to them" — which is actually Bible code language 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 three-day journey for our Lord. The whole time his mother and

father were mad at him. Joseph was muttering under his breath, "Sure, all-knowing. You would think he would know to call or at least text us, but no."

And Mary was 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.

You know, when it says that "Mary treasured all these things in her heart," I want you to understand that for the Middle Eastern peoples, Jews, Arabs, Persians, the heart is the center of not just feeling, but also thinking and willing and action. Western thought tells us that thinking happens in the head, while feeling happens in the heart. Much of the rest of the world rejects this binary.

When I was teaching for a term at the Near East School of Theology in Beirut, I was asking a Jewish student what she thought, and she pointed to her heart and said, "I think this is a very difficult concept for many of us to understand." Thinking, understanding and feeling, emotion and willing, doing — all of this is in Mary's heart. And when she treasures, it is not casual.

For the mother of our Lord, treasuring is not some passive, Presbyterian, pew potato proposition. It is active. When Mary treasured, those around her knew it. When we treasure, it is less about partisanship and more about leadership. When we treasure, it is less about ego and more about how we go forward together. When we treasure, it is less about a shutdown and more about building one another up. When we treasure, it is less about division and more about communion. When we treasure, it changes lives.

It was the start of my second year of teaching English and history at Wilson Middle School in Seattle. It was the first day of the year. Much research has been done about how the first day of the school year sets the student on a trajectory for good or for bad. So, I was concerned to see a student in my third period English class who clearly was sick. He was seated in the row of desks against the wall, and he was leaning his head against it. He was turning different shades of green.

I called roll, noted his name, put the class to work on some forms, then went over to his desk, bent down and said to him, "Hello, Ryan. I am Mr. Nishioka."

He groaned back, "I know who you are."

"Ryan," I said, "I think you're sick."

"I feel terrible," he said back to me. I helped him get his backpack together and wrote out a hall pass and took

him into the hall. I told him how to get to the nurse's office that was four buildings away, then called the nurse to let her know I had sent a student to her. I finished teaching third and fourth period, then hurried down to the teacher's lounge to get some lunch.

On the way, I passed the nurse's office and was surprised to see Ryan still there. He was in a chair, leaning against a file cabinet. I stepped into the office and asked the nurse, Mrs. Northrup, to step out of her office so I could talk with her. When she stepped out, I said to her, "Mrs. Northrup, I sent Ryan to you over two hours ago. Why is he still here?"

I could tell by her response that she was not happy. She explained that we cannot send a student home without a responsible adult. Ryan's mom and dad were no longer living together. His mom was out of town on a business trip. His dad was across town in some important meeting, and his assistant would not even get a note to him telling him that his son was sick.

Ryan and his little sister were staying with their next-door neighbor. Her name is Becky, but he does not know her last name, and there is no way to contact her. If worse comes to worse, Ryan just has to sit there and wait three and a half more hours until the day is over. Then he can catch the bus and go back to Becky's.

I went into the office and sat down next to Ryan. He

had his eyes closed as he was leaning against the file cabinet. "Hi, Ryan," I said. "This is Mr. Nishioka."

"I still know who you are," he said.

"Ryan, you understand what Mrs. Northrup said. We can't send you home unless we have an adult with your parents' permission," I told him.

"I know," he said. "That's OK, because I don't know anyone who would want me anyway," as a big tear rolled down his cheek.

I taught my last classes. The day ended, and I headed back to Mrs. Northrup's office to see if Ryan made it to his bus. When I saw her, I asked Mrs. Northrup what happened to Ryan, and she beamed. She told me that soon after I left, she asked him again if he could think of any other adult who could come get him. He was silent for a few minutes, then under his breath he said quietly, "Well, maybe there is someone. Her name is Joyce, but I don't know her last name either." It turns out Joyce was his Sunday school teacher.

Mrs. Northrup called the church and talked with the pastor. He gave her Joyce's contact information. Joyce was a realtor in the area. She called her and explained the situation, and Joyce said of course she knew Ryan. She knew that Ryan's mom was out of town, and she called her and got hold of her. Ryan's mom called Mrs. Northrup and told her it would be fine for Joyce to come get Ryan and take him home.

Mrs. Northrup said it wasn't 20 minutes later when this loud woman barged into her office. She had a comforter over her left arm and two movies in her right hand. She took one look at Ryan and said, "Dang, Ryan, you look terrible! I just talked to your mom. I'm going to take you home and take care of you. You need soup!"

Mrs. Northrup looked at me and said, "Mr. Nishioka, when she swooped Ryan up in her arms, he was doing his best to smile. Mark my words. That woman saved Ryan's whole middle school career."

And I said to Mrs. Northrup, because she is a follower of Jesus, too, "You know who that woman was, Mrs. Northrup?" And she smiled and said, "Yes, Mr. Nishioka. That woman was Jesus Christ."

When we treasure in our hearts, just like the mother of our Lord, it is active. People know that we are treasuring. In these early days of 2019, we can do that. Come on, church! We can do this. We were created for this!

We were created by the grace of God to bring hope and healing to this world. We were created so that a 12-year-old Jesus and a 12-year-old Ryan would know who they are and to whom they belong; that they and all of us are children of the living God, forever.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen!

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.