December 30, Christmas 1C (Luke 2:41-52)

Jesus flips the script on his parents.

by David Keck in the December 5, 2018 issue

In each of the Gospels, the first words spoken by Jesus yield fascinating insights into that portrayal of his life. Mark's Jesus strikes a bold opening chord: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news" (1:15). The kingdom remains a central, transformative reality for all who hear and follow, and it forces us to question just where our loyalties truly lie. Matthew depicts Jesus' response to John the Baptist's question about who should be baptizing whom (3:15). A critical theme of Matthew's Gospel will be the higher (at times impossibly higher) righteousness to which Christians are called. John's Jesus speaks first by interrogating two of John's disciples about what they're looking for. Sometimes it seems like God is perpetually asking that question of us, waiting perhaps for our answers to improve.

In Luke as well, Jesus interrogates two people about their seeking—but he's a 12-year-old, and he's talking to his parents: "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" This rebuke to Mary and Joseph, like this story in general, both follows the expected order of a pious narrative and startles us with a radical disruption. Jesus is reordering norms and expectations. He is messing with us. And while each of these dramatic, theme-setting inaugural sayings confronts and challenges us, Luke's is all the more disconcerting because the Savior who is speaking with such authority is still a kid.

Luke sets his presentation of Jesus' first words in the context of a traditional Jewish religious observance. He concludes the story immediately prior to this one (the presentation of the baby Jesus in the temple) by noting that Mary and Joseph "finished everything required by the law of the Lord" (2:39). Fast- forwarding 12 years, Luke notes that year after year "as usual" the family goes to Jerusalem for Passover. They are good churchgoers, and the setting seems conventional. So comfortable and so regular is this that Mary and Joseph lose track of their boy as they head back home. But it takes them (like us) a while to realize that Jesus is

missing from their journey, and they return to Jerusalem to find him.

They are relieved to find him in the temple (who knows what the power of worried parental speculation had led them to imagine), but they remain frantic, even angry. Yes, it's great that he is alive, and yes, it's good to see him sitting with teachers and discussing religious matters, but why should they reward disobedience to their parental authority? Mary lets him have it—"Child, why have you treated us like this?" Up through this moment, standard piety and familial norms hold.

But now, ignorant parental anxiety has interrupted the serenity of sitting and talking in the temple with the learned. We can imagine a struggling adolescent blurting out to his adoptive parent, "You're not my real father!" But Jesus' rebuke about his real Father seems calmly presented, as if he is disappointed in his parents' inability to understand him. The preteen, not the parents, is the one who maintains composure. As someone with memories both of being dragged away tearfully by my parents from gatherings of friends and of hauling my own kids out of the same settings, I am amazed by this reversal of authority and emotional mastery.

Yet we should not be so astounded. If we continue reading this Gospel, we will hear disruptive parables that break apart our norms, reorienting our identities and priorities. The stories of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son somehow manage not only to convict us but also to fill us with a restorative hope, as if the medicine is bestowed at the same time that the unacknowledged sickness is revealed.

Luke's conclusion to this episode is, fittingly, strange. He states that Mary and Joseph "did not understand what [Jesus] said," yet Mary "treasured all these things in her heart." And, having revealed to them and to everyone in the temple who's really in charge, Jesus goes with them to Nazareth "and was obedient to them," seemingly restoring parental authority.

That Mary and Joseph don't understand is significant for the church. Jesus' opening words in each of the Gospels are disruptively startling not only for those not yet in the know, but also (if we are honest) for those of us who are already part of the Jesus saga. Perhaps Mary, to her credit, treasures the story *because* she does not yet understand. From Gabriel's initial message through the shepherds tracking her down in Bethlehem, astounding events have been buffeting her world. Now she has a rebuke from her son to wrestle with. She's honest enough to know she's got some further thinking to do.

When Christians and churches get comfortable with Jesus—when like his parents we presume to know where he should be and what he should be doing—Jesus rebukes us with what should have been obvious. He is not where we think he is supposed to be, rather he is doing the work of his heavenly Father. At such times, Jesus goes all the way back to what he said at the very beginning.

Jesus turns, looks us in the eye, and asks us one more time, *What, exactly, are you looking for?*