

I love the utter humanity of this story. Many of you who are either parents or who have at some time been tasked with watching over a child can relate to the panic Mary and Joseph must have felt. Our son was one of those kids we always seemed to be looking for. He'd wander off in a store or at an event and the panic would set in.

You'd think after a while that panic would wear off, but it never really did. Parents feel a primal need to watch out for the safety of their children.

So, we can relate to Mary and Joseph. We can relate to the fear. But we can also relate to the sudden realization that their child is growing up.

Here he is, only 12, not quite the age of Jewish adulthood...listening and learning with the grownups. Asking questions and offering answers that went far beyond expectations of a 12-year-old.

But recognizing that Jesus was growing up had to be different for Mary and Joseph.

No doubt they remembered the extraordinary circumstances surrounding their son's birth. I doubt Mary forgot what the angel Gabriel told her. But they had to have wondered when and what sort of sign would appear to signal it was starting.

Mary Did You Know is a much-loved Christmas song. There's a sentiment among some Christians that is very critical of the song.

The song essentially asks, Mary did you know...really know...who your son was and what he would do? The critics say it makes Mary seem clueless. They say, yes, of course she knew. I mean, an angel stood in front of her and told her.

But I don't share that sentiment. To say that she knew exactly how it would all go down I think does a disservice to the humanity of both Mary and Jesus.

Mary knew her boy was going to save the world. But there was still a lot to ponder for her. She pondered the visit of the shepherds at Jesus' birth.

Then, at his circumcision in the Temple at 8 days, old Simeon told her: "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be opposed <sup>35</sup> so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul, too." That is a heavy thing to ponder.

We don't know what shape those ponderings took over the 12 years between Jesus' circumcision and this story. Every now and then, Mary had to wonder about this sword that would pierce her heart. And when and how it would all start.

Most likely over those first 12 years the busyness of surviving and raising a family kept her occupied.

But no doubt those ponderings were always in the back of her mind.

For 12 years, maybe there hadn't really been much evidence that Jesus was different from any other growing boy, and they just got used to being a normal family.

Until now.

Jesus seems perhaps a little snarky in his response to Mary, but he truly is astounded that they didn't know where he would be.

Now, Mary has more to ponder. She assumed he would have stayed back to hang out with family and friends. But Jesus wasn't there. In a sense, Jesus is claiming a new family – the family of God, his father. A family that will ultimately enfold the whole world.

This story is unique to Luke's gospel. The only other gospel that deals with Jesus' birth and childhood is Matthew. Matthew tells the story of Joseph's encounter with the angel. The only thing about Jesus' childhood we hear in Matthew's gospel is the visit of the Magi and that the family fled to Egypt to escape the murderous Herod.

The other two gospels have nothing at all about Jesus' birth or childhood.

I'm going to do a little bit of a side bar, but I think it's an important one. What the gospel writers chose to include in their stories reflects their initial audience and the point they are trying to make to help that audience in their faith.

Matthew and Luke were probably written about the same time. But their initial audiences were different. Matthew's gospel was written to a very Jewish Christian congregation. The congregation was under threat of persecution by the Jews who did not believe in Jesus.

Matthew's writing seeks to show very clearly that Jesus is a continuation of the covenant Israel made with God and not a split from it. He takes great pains to connect Jesus with fulfillment of Hebrew scripture.

Less is known about Luke's audience. But what seems to be agreed on is that it was written to people in the diaspora. The diaspora were those communities outside of Jerusalem whose background was either fully Jewish, or Gentiles who worshipped Israel's God.

They were clearly versed in the Hebrew scriptures. Luke makes references that would assure faithful Jews that Jesus was God's anointed. But their culture was pretty Greek.

In that ancient culture, remarkable birth stories and stories about the unnatural abilities of leaders and heroes in their childhood were common.

They were seen as proof that the hands of gods were guiding the person's future. It's seen as a divine affirmation of that leader's stature.

So, Luke likely chose the aspects of Jesus birth and childhood that reassured would-be believers shaped by Greek culture that Jesus was the real deal.

Some of those background nuggets can make the Bible harder to understand today. There are specifics that weren't really written to us. Some of it just goes over our heads.

But some look at the gospels and say well, they don't align with each other so it must all be false. Knowing at least a little about the audience and the point the author needed to make keeps us from falling into that abyss.

Because regardless of initial audience, the gospels were clearly meant for future readers as well. The goal is the same – to tell us the story in a way that helps our faith. We aren't steeped in Greek culture, so we miss some of those references. And we have our own struggles with the Hebrew scriptures – the Old Testament.

Whether or not we catch all the references, we still feel the stories' powerful impact on our own faith. We might each have a different aspect of the story that helps us.

So here it is for me. Mary and Joseph were searching for Jesus, but they did not find him where they expected to. They have an image of their friend and family circle. That's where they expected to find him. But Jesus has moved out of that circle to a bigger one. One that ultimately includes the whole world.

Sometimes, maybe we wonder where we can find Jesus. Maybe we remember this story and think, oh yeah. I can find Jesus in the church...in God's house.

And I sincerely hope that we can. But I believe that if we only look for Jesus here, eventually we won't find him anywhere. We will learn that Jesus' circle of family and home is a whole lot bigger than we imagined.

Another way to translate In my Father's house maybe captures it better. Did you not know I would be about my Father's business? Jesus was immersing himself in the first stage of learning his Father's business.

But he didn't stay in the Temple. The whole rest of Luke's gospel, Jesus shows us where he can be found. It's where his Father's business is being taken care of. Sometimes that is learning and

discussing and asking questions – for us that might be in a church Bible study or a Pub theology discussion or a college dorm room or a wilderness experience.

But God's business goes beyond learning and discussing. Jesus will show us where God's business is in the rest of the Gospel.

But then, I imagine we pretty much know. It's where healing and reconciliation and forgiveness are happening. It's where people are being welcomed and fed and demons cast out.

And it's where the cross is found – where death and resurrection are happening. Where people are dying to their egos and self-centered motivations and seeking instead to be of service to all God's people.

All of that tells us our call is bigger than we might imagine, too. We are called to follow Jesus to all those places where God's work is being done, and to join in.