

“Breaking Away”

Luke 2:41-52

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at Plymouth Congregational Church, UCC

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There’s nothing so satisfying as running away from home. Perhaps you’ve treasured that thought in your heart over the last few weeks. Maybe it occurred to you after you threw in the garbage your fourth attempt at making your grandmother’s fudge. Maybe it happened while the kids were bouncing off the walls in anticipation of Christmas morning. Maybe your sense of claustrophobia while shopping at Target reached its peak and you had to fight the urge not to scream. If any scene from “National Lampoon’s Christmas Vacation” bears a resemblance to your holiday season this year, you are to be congratulated. You made it through. You’re here.

There’s nothing so satisfying as running away from home. I discovered that peculiar joy when I was five or six. For Christmas, I had been given a tiny purple suitcase with the words, “Going to Grandma’s House” emblazoned on the front. It wasn’t long before I decided to use my purple suitcase for outings to places other than Grandma’s house. One spring day, for some very important reason I can no longer recall, I got mad at my parents. They probably asked me to do something unreasonable—like clean up my room, and it set me off. I decided they were being dictatorial and imperious, or in the sophisticated language of a six year old, stupid, and I had had enough. I packed my suitcase with a pair of pajamas, a toothbrush, and a toy (I didn’t want to get bored), and decided I wasn’t going to tell them I was going. They would discover several hours later that I had disappeared. My missing suitcase would tip them off! They would search the neighborhood for hours and finally find me safe and sound. It would all go perfectly—like an episode of “Young and the Restless”—my mom’s favorite soap opera. My parents would repent of their unreasonable ways and we would live happily ever after.

Well, it never happened that way. Never, not even once. I packed my little suitcase a half dozen times, actually went through the front door two or three times and made it all the way down the street once. All in all, my attempts at running away were passionate, but ultimately short-lived. Like most kids who try to run away, maybe I simply wanted assurance that I could break away, exercise a little independence, and then, when freedom inevitably got old, I could come home and be welcomed home. The best part of running away is coming home again.

Our scripture reading this morning is a little jarring for the First Sunday after Christmas. Jesus was just born three days ago (wasn’t he?), and already in Luke we meet Jesus the almost-adolescent. Luke’s gospel is the only gospel in the New Testament that includes a story about Jesus’ near-adolescence—not that there weren’t stories floating around to choose from. One collection of stories called the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* portrays Jesus as a miniature miracle-worker, making birds out of mud and healing his playmates after childhood accidents.¹ This suggests that Luke presumably had enough material to work with if he wanted to make a bigger deal out of the childhood of Jesus. But instead, we have just one story.

It begins after the festival of the Passover after the hoopla has died down and the crowds have gone home. The nominally faithful and the occasionally observant have left town, no doubt with slight headaches and plans to return next year. What remains are, not to put too fine a point on

it, people like us—people who don't mind attending religious services twice in one week.ⁱⁱ While Jesus' parents are headed in a caravan out of town, they are completely unaware that their 12 year old son is not with them, as they think, but is in fact still in the temple. They are a day out of town when they realize it and of course, go back to Jerusalem to search for him. It's a parent's worst nightmare, and who knows how many places they search before finally finding him in the temple, probably sitting there blithely unaware of how much anxiety and worry he has caused them.

It turns out that all things considered, Jesus has been a pretty good boy—except for not telling his parents that he was going to stick around Jerusalem for a few days. After all, he's not lying dead in some back ally of Jerusalem; he's hanging out with the teachers. And more than hanging out, he's holding his own. Luke says that “all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers.” This is Jesus as a tween-age genius, a precocious know-it-all whose command of scripture and the law amazes the adults and befuddles his parents. And what about Mary and Joseph, for whom it might seem that Jesus *was* just born three days ago? Their baby boy is growing up and even with the spectacular promises that have been made about their child, still, he's just a boy.

Mary demands an explanation from Jesus—and we probably cannot read too much anger, relief, and frustration in her words. “Child,” she says, “why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.” And Jesus, here neither repentant nor particularly attuned to his mother's feelings, responds either like a mouthy twerp or an oblivious boy. “Why were you searching for me?” he asks. Why? Boy, if Mary had a penchant for sarcasm, now would be a good time to exercise it. Because then Jesus delivers the kicker: “Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?” This must have been a slap in the face to Mary and Joseph—a betrayal, even—but one that they didn't entirely understand. What does it mean that he must be in his Father's house? But without explanation, Jesus leaves the temple and goes home with his parents and was “obedient to them”. And Mary, presumably after she calmed down, “treasured all these things in her heart.”

This little story, tucked into the lectionary a few days after Christmas, provides one of the more realistic and relatable images of the holy family. Compared with angels singing and shepherds quaking, two parents exasperated with a teenage kid probably hits closer to home for most of us. And Luke's depiction of Jesus here is kind of refreshing. He's so good everywhere else—but here, well, here he's debating theology (okay, so it's not “Animal House”)—but it's audacious, at least. Here's a Jesus who's a lovely antidote to the cute infant we celebrate at Christmas. This Jesus breaks rules. This Jesus gets swept up in what he's doing and ignores everything else. This Jesus is even a little mouthy. It might actually be fun to do what Jesus would do if this was all the Jesus we had. Of course, if this was all the Jesus we had, we wouldn't have Jesus at all.

Breaking away. That's what Jesus is doing here, and boy, it makes for a good story. Breaking away seems to be the basis of every fish-out-of-water novel, every coming-of-age movie imaginable. The plot line goes something like this: a kid raised with a strict, traditional upbringing goes to the big city. He discovers his calling in an unusual place and for awhile his parents are blissfully clueless. Then, they realize he's not where he should be and they go looking for him. They finally find him doing what he loves, they argue with him about it but

eventually relent and accept him for who he is. It has Oscar written all over it. But that story really cares about one person—the kid who breaks away. Our story cares about all of them.

Let's go back to the scene in the temple. Joseph and Mary have discovered, after much searching, that Jesus is pretty much where they left him. They are, understandably, amazed at the scene before him and annoyed at the worry he has caused them. But they are more than merely frustrated. The NRSV translates into "anxiety" what is more like "sorrow." Literally, Mary and Joseph are "ones being pained."ⁱⁱⁱ That's what breaking away is, too: not just a necessary and celebrated act of freedom. It's heartache—for both parties, but first, for those who are being left. It must be painful to watch your child blossom in the company of other adults; it must be difficult to watch your kid march out the door with her little suitcase, so sure that anywhere else is better than your own home.

Because in and around all of this important human development and self-actualizing is something so simple it's easy to miss. Faithfulness. It's the faithfulness of Joseph and Mary who take Jesus year after year to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. The temple probably already felt like a second home to him. When Jesus goes missing, his parents look for him until they find him. And when they don't know what kind of business Jesus could possibly be about in the temple, which is a better translation for "in my Father's house," they take Jesus home and do what they've always done. They raise him with faithfulness. And as for the rest of it, the things they can't understand, they treasure those things in their hearts, because what else can they do? God's ways, much less those of other people, are mysterious.

Luke seems to say with this one story that the faithfulness of Mary and Joseph makes the faithfulness of Jesus possible. Because Jesus' life will reveal that faithfulness includes all kinds of breaks and hurts. Faithfulness, you could say, is an all-inclusive package. What faithfulness requires, as much for us as for Jesus, is more than one person. Faithfulness requires a community, a place where two or more can gather together on a routine basis for worship, for mutual support, for study and learning, for prayer, for celebration and peace-and-justice making. A place exactly like this.

A place like this is great for a wedding, but better for the couple. A place like this has a beautiful backdrop for a baptismal photo-op, but it wants to help you raise your child. A place like this provides a grand setting for a funeral, but life is what it's meant for. Christmas is transcendently beautiful here, but on the Sunday after Christmas, that's when the baby starts growing up. We're growing up, too. But not alone. We're trying to do it together—not perfectly—not without our own breaks and hurts, but still, together. With faith, and with faithfulness. So, to you I say: welcome home. And thanks to be God. And amen.

ⁱ You can find online the text of *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas*. I might suggest this as a place to start: <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/infancythomas.html>

ⁱⁱ It is Barbara Brown Taylor who makes the excellent comparison between this scene of Jesus in the temple after the Passover with the smaller crowds at church during the post-Christmas season. See *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 1*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Editors, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009), pp. 165.

ⁱⁱⁱ From the online Greek Interlinear Bible: <http://www.scripture4all.org/OnlineInterlinear/NTpdf/luk2.pdf>