

The only thing you can predict about 12-year old kids is that they will be unpredictable. Not quite teenagers, not quite children, they are figuring out who they are, and they often say or do things that surprise you. They can be very funny; they can be unusually perceptive; they can be exceptionally kind; and they can be uncontrollably frustrating. Parents and 12-year olds do not always think alike. But they don't always get angry. Often they come to a deeper understanding of one another.

In today's gospel, it is easy to put yourself in the shoes of the parents or of Jesus. If you are Mary and Joseph, you are in the caravan going from Jerusalem home to Nazareth, about 75 miles on foot. After the first day, you look around and cannot find your son, whom you assumed was with some other family or friends, probably because that's where he was on the way down. This is not just any son, by the way, but the Son of God entrusted to you for safekeeping. You are essentially God's babysitter, and you have lost the one person you were specially chosen to watch. You probably wonder what kind of punishment God has in store for someone like you. You go back to Jerusalem, and you find your son after three days. Three days! How would you sleep each night?

On the other hand, if you are Jesus, you decide the trip to Jerusalem was so exciting that you'd like to extend it a while longer. You stay behind while everyone else goes off. At age 12, you figure you can take care of yourself, no problem. You go to the Temple, where you've got a few questions you'd like answered. The authorities are impressed with your questions. Then you start giving answers that outdo theirs. Everyone is astounded. You are in the zone. You are where you belong.

When your parents find you, they know they should scold you, but you have them trapped. You didn't run off with a new girl friend. You didn't teepee somebody's yard. You didn't go to a soccer field. Instead, you entered the local school of religion for extra sessions. This is not normal behavior, especially for a 12-year old.

The whole story builds up to a puzzling line. Jesus asks, "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" We aren't sure what he means by this. Even Mary and Joseph didn't understand it, but whatever it meant, it was crystal clear to Jesus. It at least meant this: at age 12 he had to obey an inner voice, a higher authority, directing the future of his life. To his credit, Jesus goes home with his parents, and St. Luke says, he "was obedient to them." This is a good example for all kids to follow.

Twelve-year olds are unpredictable, and so is God. When we have a crisis, and we don't understand what is happening, we don't have to get angry. Instead, we can follow the example of Mary. After Jesus went to Nazareth with his parents, Luke says, "his mother kept all these things in her heart." Mary did not understand it all right away. But she kept the puzzle inside her, and she trusted that God loved her even when she did not understand her kid.