

This story has always seemed so improbable to me. How could parents actually lose a twelve year old child for a day? You can tell I'm not a parent. Did you see the news item this week about the guy travelling across Washington State in a van with his 12-year old daughter? She kicked off her shoes, bounced out at a rest area, and he took off without her. Discovered she was gone six hours later. The Gospel is alive and well and living in Seattle. I've since learned that every once in a while deep in the heart of every parent of a twelve-year old lurks the jealous desire that it could happen to them.

This story appears in the Bible for a couple of reasons. One is that people are naturally curious about what Jesus' childhood was like. Jesus grew up in complete obscurity in a primitive near Eastern town. History doesn't tell us very much, so people made up stuff. Maybe you've heard of The Gospel of St. Thomas or the Gospel of Peter. They tell stories about the childhood of Jesus, but they're forgeries written long after the four Gospels just to satisfy people's curiosity.

Another reason this story appears in the Bible is to tell us that in Jesus the child we see the same person we'll meet in Jesus the man. His conversation with the teachers shows his wisdom. His return to Nazareth shows his obedience. His absence for three days foreshadows his three days in the tomb. And his safety in the temple shows his triumph over loss. He also speaks for the first time in Luke's Gospel. He says, "Did you not know that I had to be in my Father's house?" The first words we hear Jesus say describe his union with God and his complete obedience to the Father. When he was an infant, angels told us, shepherds told us, Simeon told us who Jesus is. Now he tells us himself: He is one with the Father.

Holy Family Sunday is a new feast in the church year. We've only had it about 25 years, which is a short time in church history. The Holy Family was a popular devotion to the beloved Pope John XXIII, and with his support a feast was added to the calendar. And truly, I can think of no other time in church history when we needed a feast of the family as we do today. Families are stressful, and the Holy Family was no exception. Mary conceived her child out of wedlock. Joseph offered to divorce her. Herod threatened to kill their baby. And when Jesus was twelve years old, they lost him, because they thought relatives were taking care of him. This is not a perfect family. This is a typical family. The miracle of Christmas is that God became human. That would have been enough--but then he joined a family!

Jesus still turns up missing. When family life gets most stressful, we look for that twelve year old Jesus and find he's gone again. His first words to us will still be the same: "Why did you search for me? Did you not know I had to be in my Father's house?" As if to say if we were concerned more about the Father's mission and less about ourselves, then we could progress in wisdom, age, and grace as well.