

The Mystery Of Following Jesus The Christ-Child – Brian Hartley

1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26; Colossians 3:12-17; Luke 2:41-52

Mothers go through great pain and suffering to bring forth their children, as some of you know all too well. As a result, they are known for being protective of their offspring and rightfully seek to exert their influence over said children. Nowhere is this, perhaps, more true, than is the case with their firstborn—for those of us who are born first experience both the unconditional love and the fledgling experimentation that come with parents who are new to the task. This morning's narratives, from both the Old and New Testaments, remind us of these time-worn truths, but also suggest to us something of the bonds of suffering, insight, and love that make up this bond that extends across a lifetime. And it is fitting that, in this year's final Sunday service, we learn to confess that our salvation is wrapped up in the tension between a mother's love and a son's search for meaning and vocation.

As we have seen throughout the Advent lessons and now continue into the Christmas season, Luke is intent on presenting to us a cast of characters, all of whom witness to the coming hope through the Savior born in Bethlehem. Preceding this morning's lesson is the unforgettable story of Jesus brought into the temple for dedication alongside his mother's purification, there to be met by two wise senior citizens, Anna and Simeon, both of whom are described as prayerful, righteous, and devout. Each of them, in turn, gives glory to God for the gift of the Christ-child and, like many of the rest of Luke's cast, break into song in this holiest of musicals.

But Simeon's lyrics end on a somewhat mysterious note when he concludes with, *a sword will pierce your own soul, too*. Up until this point, all references to the child had provoked nothing but praise—something on the order of, *Glory to God in the highest!* But now, for the first time, there is a hint of the boy's ultimate vocation—one that is to be discovered only in suffering. And his suffering, of course, could not help but impact that of the mother who had given him birth, as well.

But it is in today's Gospel text that, for the first time, we see mother and son engaged in conversation. And what is revealed here tells us a great deal about both characters, as well as about how the storyline is to progress. With regard to Mary, the last words we heard about her occurred back in the nativity story where Luke simply says, *Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart*. But now, we see her responding much more actively to his disappearance from their care, when the boy, Jesus, is discovered back in Jerusalem in the temple precincts.

Now remember, this is exactly the setting in which the previous story of Simeon and Anna had occurred. Only this time, Jesus is a budding adolescent who is described as something of a model student—carefully listening and asking questions of the city's great teachers. We are told that it has been three days since the lad turned up missing and, by this time, his parents must surely have been somewhat out of their minds. Mary's first response is one of utter astonishment. Who is this precocious child and where has he come from? This type of response is somewhat unique in the Luke/Acts corpus, occurring only four times. And curiously, it is repeated in the

resurrection narrative as a similar rejoinder by the disciples to the resurrected Lord. One can almost sense the palpable spinning of the wheels in Mary's head, as she has moved from obedience to the word of the angel, to the treasuring of things in her heart, to Simeon's curious statement about her son. And now, this. What is she to make of this boy granted to her as a pure gift from God?

Her wonder quickly turns, as it would in most mothers who have been searching for their child for three days, to the rather curt, *Child, why have you treated us like this?* These are the words of a pained and rather grieved parent who has been worried sick over the welfare of her lost child. Behind them, we can sense something of a rebuke to the emerging adolescent who now inhabits that liminal territory between childhood and manhood. In fact, in contemporary Judaism, he is of the age that most boys engage in the ritual that marks the transition to adulthood, known as the bar mitzvah. But my guess is that most of us, who remember at all our own trajectory at about this point in our lives, are probably also recounting one or more of our own misadventures that elicited a similar parental response. The narrative is only jarring for us because it concerns the Savior of the world. Had it been any other person, we would understand immediately the typical mother-son standoff that occurs around this time of puberty.

The text goes on to describe their primary reaction as one of anxiety. The story, itself, has already described for us how people travelled in caravans or groups in order to maintain protection and security. Alongside the roads of those times, one would expect bandits, or worse. And in the environs of the city itself—heaven knows what might have happened! Jesus responds rather sharply with two questions: *Why were you searching for me?* and, *Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?* His parents' response is one of utter bewilderment. What kind of a young man acts and talks like this? And we, as readers, are equally struck by the boy's set of assumptions that are clearly different from those of his parents. In fact, like those hearing this in an earlier culture, where disrespect shown to parents might be punishable by death, Luke is quick to conclude the story by emphasizing Jesus' obedience to his mother and father, despite his somewhat enigmatic response. And then, just as at the end of the manger scene earlier in the chapter, we are told that Mary, once again, ponders these things in her heart.

Yet Mary is not the only mother featured in this morning's texts. In fact, as the late Fr. Raymond Brown pointed out a generation or so ago, Luke is clearly modeling his writing on the previous story of Samuel—including his transitional statements regarding the child's own growth and development. Samuel's birth, like that of Jesus, had been miraculous—the response of a gracious God to the suffering outpourings of a barren woman. And just as Jesus had been presented in the temple, so was Samuel. Also, just as Jesus had taken up residence inside the temple precincts, so did the young Samuel, as apprentice to the priest, Eli. Shiloh, like Jerusalem, became the destination for Elkanah and Hannah, his parents, on a yearly basis, and it was there that Hannah would get to see her son and bestow her mother's love upon him. In today's narrative, that gesture of affection is demonstrated through the gift of ceremonial clothing in order to further his work in a sacred setting.

You see, though mothers wish for their firstborn sons to be able to exercise some choice in their sense of vocation, they oftentimes believe that they know best and seek to direct that choice. I see this all the time at the university, where Velcro moms insist on putting together their son's

schedule and being the first line of defense if he shows any signs of struggling in the classroom. Others, as with Hannah, seek to guide through a choice gift. This was the case for my friend, Dr. Randall Balmer, who received, on his fifth Christmas, the gift of a miniature pulpit from his parents. For many of us, though, it may be something as simple as the gift of a Bible, delivered into our hands as the guide for life. I had my first given to me at about the age of five, like Randy. I knew, early on, from my mother that my vocation would somehow be attached to these sacred texts. In fact, it is hard for me to read these stories without reading myself into them.

For just as Samuel and Jesus found a sense of belonging among older and wiser men in the precincts of the temple, I have gravitated towards mentors who have been “men of the cloth” and have served God through ordained ministry. There is no place where I feel quite so much at home as I do when saying prayers in church, consecrating the elements, or listening for God’s voice to elucidate the written word. From the moment my grandfather baptized me as a baby into a little Free Methodist Church in Arkansas, I have not known, nor experienced, life as an outsider to the things of God. The reality is, I have largely my mother and family to thank for that.

But it is really Mary’s story, not that of Samuel or Jesus, which is of primary importance to us today. And I want to suggest that Mary provides for us the very best example of what it means to follow Christ as we begin to make our way away from the manger and towards the cross in the coming new year. For you see, Mary is the only one of the primary characters in these opening birth narratives who is also present at the advent of the church. Mary stands as onlooker to her oldest son’s life of ministry and healing. But it is also Mary who stands silent witness to his death on Calvary. We don’t know for sure if she was there after they took his body down from the cross and carried it into the tomb—though the Gospels hint at this. But we do know that she was one who came to believe and even to follow him, as an integral member of the church that he would come to lead. As such, surely she was one of the few who knew him best, from the beginning of his earthly life until the end. No one could have seen and heard all that she came to see and hear. And despite all of the evidence that might be marshalled against such an improbable destiny, she, of all people, as his mother, knew beyond a doubt that God had raised him up to begin a new chapter in the redemption of God’s people.

How could she ever have reached such a conclusion? Unfortunately, the Scriptures never attempt to sketch out the line of logic that took her from here to there. The narrative does not yield to our demand for a mother’s reasoned apologetic in black and white. What it does, however, describe for us is the journey of a young peasant woman through ridicule and wonder to discipleship. And that mother’s instinct, forged through countless moments as she *pondered these things in her heart*, gave birth to a story almost beyond all belief, that came to fruition in her son.

It was a story begun in the very heart of God that would come close to ripping her very heart out by the roots. And, like all mothers, there were probably those moments, like the one in today’s story, where she failed to understand him and thought he would be the very death of her. But he wasn’t. Instead, those around her became the death of him. And so, it is her story, a mother’s story, and their story, the story of a mother and her eldest child, that we rejoice in on this first Sunday of Christmas.

And, if you so desire, it can be your story, too, and it can bring life and hope and love to the most broken-hearted of us all. For it is no longer either a mother's or a son's story, but God's story—the greatest story of all. And it is in that story that each of us may find ourselves and experience, as Mary did, nothing less than the very love of God.