

Where Are You...?

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By Rev Paul Graham

Read Luke 2:41-52



We've all been there, I'm sure. Even one of our former Prime Ministers was not immune from leaving a family member in a public place^[1]. All it takes is to get embroiled in a conversation with some friends, a few hours pass where you assume that the apple of your eye is being cared for by others and all of a sudden, you're a day into your journey and you suddenly realise that there's still an empty place on the picnic rug.

The pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem is one that all Jewish people were commanded to do. In fact, the rule was to attend annually on three occasions, fitting in with the major festivals of the year. However, in deference to the current state of occupation that the country was under and the disparate spread of the population which made travelling difficult as well as dangerous, most of Jesus' contemporaries only made the trip once a year. It would seem that Passover was a popular choice for the residents of Nazareth, because the family were part of a sizable troupe making their way home having paid their dues and carried out their sacred duties.

The good news about this particular story is that Jesus wasn't irretrievably lost, nor was he harmed in the strange city of many potential dangers. In fact, he was in good company, listening attentively to what was being taught and asking perceptive questions that belied his tender years.

Of course, we might want to suggest that he wasn't the most understanding of children, seemingly unconcerned about his parents' panic or their frantic searching. Though, it has to be said, I find it surprising that it took them three days to find him once they returned to Jerusalem; surely they would look first in the very place where they had spent their last time together (unless Luke is trying to ramp up the tension by exaggerating this, or trying to make a theological connection with Jesus' death and resurrection – sadly we can't ask him).

It's interesting that of all the gospel accounts and all the detail that all four writers put into their biographies of Jesus' life, we don't get any more than this short vignette about Jesus' childhood. Matthew details some of the very early years of Jesus' life with the visit of the Magi (which could have taken place at any time during Jesus' toddlerhood), the tragic slaughter of the innocents due to Herod's selfish rage, the family's fleeing to Egypt to escape the bloodbath and their subsequent return to their hometown. From there, we go rapidly to John the Baptist's best "fire and brimstone" preaching style to next meet the adult Jesus by his baptismal river. There is no mention of the intervening years at all.

At least that's more comprehensive than Mark and John; for in Mark, we first encounter Jesus at the same point as we leave Matthew's account, on Jesus' meeting with his cousin for a sacramental splash-around. John messes with our heads for a while with some light word-play (see what I did there?) before again focusing on our angry Baptist friend, and finally introducing us to an already-baptised Jesus about to start gathering his disciples around him.

So, we have to ask the two-fold question, why did Luke only record one story of Jesus' early life and why this one in particular? Again, he's not around to answer these questions, so it's left to theologians and commentators to speculate. I'm neither of those, so I'll leave you to do the research for yourselves if you're interested.

However, what I am interested in is how we encounter this story today and what relevance it might have for us, particularly in these times when travelling anywhere seems like a distant dream, let alone a regular trip with friends and neighbours.

The pilgrimage was a requirement derived from the law of Moses (Exodus 23:14-17), set down centuries before the Romans invaded and enacted by those since the rebuilding of the Temple after the return from exile. And the destination of their journey, the Temple, represented so much to do with rescue and restoration; it was the ultimate symbol both of the covenant promise made by God to Abraham but also of the resilience of the Jewish people who refused to be defeated. I remember hearing a Rabbi once saying that the reason that there is so much eating at Jewish festivals is as a celebration that there are still enough of them around to eat together. Battered, beaten, but always bouncing back. There was also hope woven into the fabric of the building; the original Temple was built during the Golden Age of King Solomon, when the Jewish people were as near to top dogs as they could become. Each pilgrimage was another one closer to the possibility of that becoming a reality again.

But the Temple was more than that, it was also the sole location for the presence of God, mediated only through a certain level of priesthood, attainable only by a certain section of humanity. That was the way the original instructions were phrased; the men were to appear before the Lord, so that had to be at the Temple.

The Romans fully understood the significance of all this, which was why the Temple was destroyed by them some four decades after Christ's time on earth. Though the city was also flattened, it was the Temple's demolition that cut deepest into the hearts of the remaining Jewish population. With the Temple destroyed, what hope was there for them and where could they go to find their God?

Though we might think that the Temple being front and centre of the story means that our church buildings deserve the same status today, I would caution against that; we worship the same God as those

in the story, but our means and manner are as far apart as the centuries that separate us. The Temple curtain was torn in two when Jesus breathed his last (Luke 23:45) and the Spirit was given in an upper room somewhere in the city at Pentecost (Acts 1:13, Acts 2:1), bringing the presence of God outside the Temple walls.

Jesus reminds us of this in today's story. When he calls the Temple "my Father's house" (Luke 2:49), he is reminding both his parents and us about what is important here. Or, to be more accurate, *who* is most important here. It's probably as helpful to consider the alternative, equally valid, translation of Jesus' words here, that he was "about my Father's business" (Luke 2:49, as per the King James Version). Wherever the Father needed him to be, that's where Jesus was to be found. It just happened to be in the Temple on that day.

The danger that the Jewish people faced in their pilgrimage is one that we also face. If the reason for the Jewish pilgrimage to the Temple was to reiterate their identity as a special group of people, and to dream the seemingly impossible dream of freedom, they risked marginalising the one for whom the Temple was built.

Equally, if we worry so much that our buildings are closed to worship, we risk portraying God as trapped within those walls, unattainable until government guidance or denomination advice allows. We understand that gathering for worship is the ideal, and that the more time we spend apart, even with the advantages that online access gives us, the further we can feel from each other.

But Jesus is reminding us that our focus should be on the Father, not just his house. Jesus was spending time in the company of others talking about the one who sent him to break down the barriers to show that the Father can be found anywhere. So too for us; we are choosing to keep our buildings locked for the health of our neighbours and of ourselves. We are not locking God in, though. To be in his presence, as the song goes^[2], must surely be our focus as well. And that could be anywhere.

Amen.

^[1] David Cameron's daughter Nancy was left behind in a Buckinghamshire pub in 2012 following a Sunday lunch trip.

^[2] *To Be In His Presence* by Noel Richards, 1991

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