

# Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – December 30, 2018

## [Luke 2:41-52](#)

(Click on scripture above to link directly to each passage in the *NRSV* on [biblegateway.com](#).)

### Suggested Study / Prep

1. Read the passage(s) in several different translations and/or paraphrases (e.g. *NRSV* and *The Message*)
2. Read the provided commentary(s) below
3. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)
4. Reflect on the provided questions
5. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”

### Commentary on Luke 2:41-52 (From *Homiletics*; “Genius Jesus”, December 27, 2009)

The story about Jesus’ visit to Jerusalem at 12 years of age appears only in Luke among the canonical gospels. Interestingly, it is picked up almost word for word as the concluding episode of the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* (usually dated at around 125), with some expansion regarding the reaction of the temple teachers. That extracanonical gospel includes related stories about how Jesus’ knowledge far exceeded that of teachers in his hometown of Nazareth at the even younger ages of 5 (*Infancy Thomas* 6-7; see 2:1) and 8 (*Infancy Thomas* 14-15; see 11:1). In those stories, the emphasis on Jesus’ authority is even more heightened than here in Luke. Even though Jesus was only 5, the teacher exclaimed of him, “He is something great: a God, an angel, or what I should say I do not know.” When, three years later, another teacher chastises the child for his impudence, Jesus strikes him ill with a curse until a third teacher extols his wisdom, at which point Jesus heals the former teacher.

The *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* also includes a number of other stories about miracles of both blessing and curse that Jesus performed during his childhood. In doing so, it follows a well-established pattern among biographies of that period and culture. Such stories were widely told not only about famous and eminent figures of the past, such as Plato and Pythagoras, but also about historical and fictional humans who came to be understood as divinized beings, including Alexander the Great, Caesar Augustus and Herakles (better known by the Latin form of his name, Hercules). What is most striking in comparing Luke’s gospel with these works — as well as with the other canonical gospels — isn’t that he includes a story about Jesus’ precocious adolescence but rather the remarkable restraint he exercises in doing so.

Another interesting characteristic of Luke’s telling, as compared to this other literature, is his particular concern with Mary’s emotional state. Most characters in stories of this period tend to be portrayed as acting in accord with stereotypical patterns. So when Mary rebukes Jesus, saying that his unexplained absence led her and Joseph to search for him “in great anxiety” (Luke 2:48), the statement stands out both because it assigns the explanatory statement to the female character (as opposed to her husband) and because it continues Luke’s particular interest in Mary’s inner thoughts and emotional responses throughout his account of Jesus’ early years (cf. 1:29; 2:19, 51). More specifically, the attention given to Mary’s “anxiety” (οδυνωμενοι, intensified even further in some manuscripts by the addition of λυπουμενοι, “grieving, distress”) may be intended to connect this story with Simeon’s earlier prophecy that “a sword will pierce [Mary’s] own soul too” (2:35b).

Clearly Simeon's prophecy ultimately prefigures the opposition (see v. 34) that will result in Jesus' crucifixion (with the "sword" that binds together the fate of Jesus and his mother representing the power of the state to execute; cf. Romans 13:4). Other features of this story also serve to prefigure Jesus' climactic visit to Jerusalem at the end of this gospel. In the final days of his life, he will once again be engaged in debate with the teachers in the temple (Luke 20:1–21:38), and will likewise be found after "three days" (see 2:46) by those who have experienced tremendous anxiety and grief by his absence (24:13-24). These are all things that Jesus will then explain were "necessary that the Messiah should suffer" as part of God's plan (24:26), just as he already "must be in [his] Father's house" (2:49; both "necessary" in 24:26 and "must" in 2:49 translate the same Greek word, *δεῖ*).

Before considering what might be Luke's theological purpose in drawing these connections, we need to pause to acknowledge the ambiguity of two of these details within their immediate narrative context. When Luke states that Jesus was found in the temple "after three days," it isn't clear just how much time has elapsed. It's possible that it was only "three days" since Mary and Joseph had initially left Jerusalem (one day of travel before discovering his absence [v. 44], one day to return to Jerusalem, with Jesus located "after" the beginning of/on the third day). However, because Luke doesn't use the preposition "after" (*μετα*) when he places Jesus' resurrection on "the third day" (24:21), it's also possible that a total of five days have elapsed (two travel days followed by three days searching Jerusalem itself).

The other ambiguity regards just how one is to understand Jesus' response to Mary's rebuke. Translated quite literally, Jesus tells her that he must be "in/about my Father's things" (*εν τοις του πατρος μου*). Given the immediate context of the search that culminates in the temple, a logical understanding is that they should have known to look for him "in my Father's things," or, as it's more usually translated, "in my Father's house" (NRSV). Yet if that were Luke's intent, it is difficult to understand his use of the plural "things" (*τοις*); consequently, others prefer the translation, "about my Father's things/interests" (see NRSV margin note).

It is that second possibility that seems more likely if Luke is using this story to prefigure what is about to unfold with the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Luke Timothy Johnson (*Sacra Pagina* commentary on Luke, 60-62) has argued that this story of a "lost and found son" serves to both establish what will be the central purpose of Jesus' ministry ("to seek out and to save the lost," 19:10) and to point to Jesus' resurrection. The interrelationship between those two themes of Luke is captured vividly in the parable of the Prodigal Son, which concludes with the father telling the brother, "[T]his brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found" (15:32).

Johnson goes on to suggest that Mary and Joseph here model the path of all those who would be Jesus' disciples. Just as he himself "increased in wisdom" (2:52), so they, too, must "treasure all these things in [their] heart" (v. 51) until they can finally "understand what he said to them" (v. 50). For those who must learn "the Father's things," sometimes understanding comes only with hindsight when the connections between the Scriptures and the affairs of the world become more clear, just as will be discovered by those disciples on the road to Emmaus (24:27) in the story from the gospel's conclusion, foreshadowed by this story at the gospel's beginning.

## Additional Resources

- [The Text this Week](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for a given week...not all will relate to the passage(s) being studied, but many will. You will have to sift!
- Check out other commentaries available for these texts (and others!) at [WorkingPreacher.org](#).

## **Reflection Questions on Luke 2:41-52:**

- 1.** Given that this is the only anecdote about Jesus recorded in the gospels between his infancy and his baptism by John as an adult, included only in Luke, it seems reasonable to conclude that it held significant meaning for Luke for it to be included in his gospel. What is significant about this story to you? Why do you think this story was included when so many others must have been left out?
- 2.** Given that Mary and Joseph went to Jerusalem every year for the Passover festival (v. 41) and assuming that Jesus knew Torah well enough to engage in Q&A with the teachers for days in the Temple (v. 46), we can probably assume that this is not the first time Jesus was drawn to the Temple during such a trip. So why was this time unique? And why would it have taken so long for Jesus' parents to find him (he seems to assume they would know where to look – v. 49)?
- 3.** Do you think this was an event that really happened in Jesus' life? Or is it perhaps a legendary story that says something about the character and disposition of a hero without being actual history – like George Washington cutting down the cherry tree? If so, what does this story tell us about the character and disposition of Jesus, and the life he ultimately lived?

**What questions do you have?**

**What do you “wonder” about when reading these passages?**