

Where's Jesus?
(Context: Luke 2:41-50.)

Head counts help keep families together. Most parents do a subconscious count when they set out. Even with a largeish family squeezed into an SUV, that's straightforward. However, it was easy to lose a dusty child in a convoy of relatives, friends, and animals strung out on a rough road through the Judean hills long before cell phones.

It happened to Jesus when He was twelve years old. His parents had taken Him to Jerusalem. One day's journey toward home, they realized He was missing.¹ They returned and eventually found Him in the temple—three days later.

Most twelve-year-olds would have missed their parents after a day. Not Jesus. He was happy hanging out with the temple teachers. Mary and Joseph were hurt. Apart from the anxiety of losing Him and imagining what might have happened to Him, there was the embarrassment of admitting to everyone that they had forgotten to count their kids. Four brothers and at least two sisters are a lot, but they still fit on the fingers of two hands.² Once the tears of relief had subsided, there were questions.

[Jesus'] mother said to Him, "Son, why have You treated us this way? Behold, Your father and I have been anxiously looking for You!" And He said to them, "Why is it that you were looking for Me? Did you not know that I had to be in My Father's [things³]?" (Luke 2:48-49)

In situations like this, assumptions are often the source of the tension. Parents assume the worst and think their fragile offspring are insensitive to their concerns. Kids think parents will pay attention to more changes than the growth lines scratched on the door jamb, dated, and never painted over.

Jesus was surprised they had spent three days scouring Jerusalem. Apparently, twelve-year-old Jesus saw life differently; it was obvious where He would be. His identity was already in His relationship with the Father; that was natural and the priority. Of course He would be in the temple.

But why the temple? After all, Jesus said later that the Father is not restricted to sacred spaces; He is spirit (John 4:21-24). Also, 75% of the recorded visits of Jesus to the temple or synagogues ended in conflict. So He wasn't there for the location; rather, He sought the "things" of His Father. In this case, that meant discussing Jewish Scriptures—our Old Testament—with the teachers. And He wasn't soaking up sermons. Jesus was in their midst, stunning them with His questions and answers (Luke 2:46-47). Was He learning, or were they?

Jesus never fits expectations well; He thinks and behaves differently from us. We often have a hard time figuring out where He's coming from. He longs for everyone to embrace His ways because that's what God designed us for. Still, change is hard for us; some sort of tension is inevitable. That difference is a theme throughout His life. It's the reason for most of His questions, and His answers to other people's questions. Already, as a boy in the temple, Jesus was in business with His Father—challenging and changing thinking.

Perhaps His parents should have known Him better. Anyway, it's good for us that they didn't count heads before returning home.

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¹ According to custom, Mary may have traveled with women while Joseph went ahead with men. Perhaps they each assumed Jesus was with the other, without checking. However, the same ideas expressed in this piece could still apply.

² Matthew 13:55-56 tells us about Jesus' siblings.

³ Forget the word "house"; the Greek simply reads, "*en tois tou patros mou.*" No houses anywhere!

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