

The Lost Years
Luke 2:41–52
C05: The First Sunday after Christmas Day
December 26, 2021

The “Lost Years”... sounds like a suspense TV series, like the old sci-fi classic, *Lost in Space* (“Danger, Will Robinson”) or the more recent six-season, 121-episode blockbuster, *Lost*, featuring stranded survivors of an airplane crash. I “lost” interest somewhere mid-season 3. But it was a compelling drama.

“The Lost Years” can also refer to a big chunk of Jesus’s life. Matthew and Luke start out focusing on Jesus’s birth and infancy, but then, like the other Gospels, leap ahead to Jesus’s public ministry launched at around 30 years of age.

In between, from infancy to 30, we know almost nothing about Jesus, beyond his being raised in the village of Nazareth in Galilee and working with wood in some fashion. Later, the apocryphal infancy Gospels, as they are known, attributed to James and Thomas, tried to fill in the gaps with eye-popping exploits of Super-boy Jesus from ages 5–8—like magically extending a short plank of wood to fit a bedframe or healing little brother James’s snake-bit by blowing on it. But these are clearly fantastical tales.

Bottom line: a lot of Jesus’ history remains “lost” to us. Did Jesus go through a “terrible two” phase? Sudden growth spurts? Teenager issues? Youth directors would love to know!

All is not entirely “lost,” however. We do have one fascinating incident from Jesus’s youth—at age 12, on the cusp of manhood in his culture. It only appears in Luke’s Gospel, though the later Infancy Gospel of Thomas also has a version.

Ironically, this lone incident from Jesus’s “lost years” features, among other things, his being *lost* for three days. He doesn’t think he’s lost. He’s in the Jerusalem temple, right where he aims to be. But mother Mary and stepfather Joseph don’t know where he is and become utterly frantic, as any parent can understand.

The story is a well-known Sunday School favorite. I’m going to suggest, however, that over time we’ve “lost” sight of some key details and their significance. It’s worth revisiting the story.

While Luke’s account showcases young Jesus as an “amazing” genius-style Wunderkind, he’s careful to place this extraordinary picture in a normal frame of intellectual, spiritual, and social development in Nazareth before and after the temple episode.

Here’s the top frame: “The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.”

And the bottom frame, after Jesus returns home to Nazareth with his parents: “Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.

In short, Jesus's extended "home schooling" in Nazareth proves as formative for Jesus's maturation as a human being and divine agent as his intensive three-day seminar with the temple scholars in Jerusalem. While Jesus receives special insight from his heavenly Father that his earthly parents do not completely grasp, his full knowledge of God, self, and others requires both divine and human nurture across the developmental stages of life.

For eighteen more years, ages 12–30, Jesus continues to grow physically, psychologically, spiritually as a human being in his small hometown with his earthly parents before he's ready to begin his messianic work as God's Son.

Let that sink in for a bit . . . and let's consider this "amazing" incident more closely as it unfolds in four short scenes.

Scene 1: Searching for Jesus

As was their annual custom as faithful Jews, the villagers of Nazareth journeyed the 70 or so miles south to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover week. It was the high holiday season for Mary, Joseph, and their family.

Presumably, they all had a great time—until at some point on the return trip, Jesus's parents discover he's *not* in the caravan group heading back to Nazareth. (sort of like Kevin's mom realizing he's not on the plane in *Home Alone 1*—"Kevin!").

While we know that Jesus purposefully "stayed behind in Jerusalem," Mary and Joseph "did not know it" for a whole day!—which would not have been unusual. In their tight-knit community, they would've assumed Jesus was somewhere among "relatives and friends" in the Nazareth travel party. In a smalltown network, parents didn't need to know where their children were every minute of the day.

In any case, the narrative doesn't blame Mary and Joseph for losing Jesus. *He chooses* to stay in the temple without letting his parents know.

Once they become aware Jesus is missing, however, they diligently "search for him" until they find him three days later in Jerusalem. Festival traffic would still be heavy in the city, making it difficult to find a lost boy, especially one who's not that concerned about being found. But Mary and Joseph press on until they find Jesus.

On one level, this story models an important biblical theme of diligently *seeking and searching* to find and know God: "Seek the Lord while he may be found," Isaiah exhorted his exiled people. "Search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us," Paul encouraged the skeptics in Athens.

There's a lot Mary and Joseph don't know at this stage about their unique son and his intimate relationship with his Father-God. But they know enough to keep seeking and searching.

There's also a significant flip side to this seeking-searching business. Luke especially portrays the adult Jesus as the Divine Seeker of the lost—as in the famous trio of parables in Luke 15 about seeking-and-finding the lost sheep, coin—and *son*. This defines Jesus' mission: "I have come to seek and to save that which was lost." God-in-Christ seeks us as we seek him—and even when we don't seek him.

Ironically, though, the twelve-year-old Jesus plays the reverse role of the "lost son" his parents must find, and when they do find him, he seems less than sympathetic to their efforts: "Why were you searching for me?" he quips. Is this one of those matters he needs to grow into, or is the problem all with his parents?

Let's keep searching the story, on to **Scene 2: Finding Jesus.**

Mary and Joseph find Jesus not wandering the streets in a panic, but rather sitting comfortably "among the teachers" in the temple—not sitting at their feet but "in the middle of" them, "amazing" them with "his understanding and his answers." At age twelve, Jesus holds his own with learned elders.

Such precociousness begins to confirm the grand promises Jesus was born to fulfill and portends greater things to come. Yes—but remember, this is only scene we have from Jesus's promising youth, which urges us to note precisely what this scene highlights about him.

The young Jesus demonstrates no brute superpowers, as does the lion-striking and Goliath-slaying boy David, and no plank-lengthening or viper-vanquishing miracles, as in the apocryphal stories.

Moreover, twelve-year-old Jesus delivers no stunning public oration, as the youngster Octavian (destined to be Emperor Augustus) reportedly did, drawing loud applause from Roman elders and people. This is not to minimize Jesus's prowess or the audience's wonder. But he doesn't grandstand or speechify.

Rather, he attends to the teachers' instruction and adds his own questions and answers—politely, respectfully. No hardnosed interrogation of the temple scholars, as the Infancy Gospel of Thomas presents.

Luke emphasizes young Jesus's intellectual and spiritual acumen—his *wisdom*—beyond his years. But with his giftedness, Jesus demonstrates his willingness to humbly learn from teachers and to "grow in wisdom," even as he receives direct insight from "my Father," as he calls God.

But there's more to the story: **Scene 3: Challenging Jesus.**

Although young Jesus elicits "amazement" from the temple teachers and assembly, his parents are not so impressed when they arrive after their three-day search. While an idyllic family tale might portray Mary and Joseph as, first, relieved to find their missing son and then,

bursting with pride at his brilliant display (that's our boy!), in Luke's more realistic story, they react with considerable paternal angst.

They are more "astonished," we're told, than "amazed"—the term suggests being "dumbfounded," "shocked," even *ashamed* at their son's behavior. In this culture, a displaced son was a disgraced son, who brought shame on the family. Independence represented insolence, rather than go-getting initiative we tend to admire today.

Mama minces no words about her frustration with Jesus: "*Child* [she reminds him of his place], why have you treated us like this? Look [here], your father and I have been searching for you in *great anxiety*."

Elsewhere in Luke's writings, the term for "great anxiety" describes a rich man's "agony" in the flames of Hades and a group of elders' deep "grieving" over the departing Paul, whom they thought they'd never see again. We might rephrase Mary's intense distress: "Child, why have you put us through hell? We feared you were lost for good!" Again, any parent can relate to the feeling.

So what does Jesus have to say for himself? As it happens, he coolly counters his mother's question with two of his own: "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be about my Father's interests?"

On one level, Jesus's response reflects typical adolescent chafing against parental authority; but on another level, it reveals Jesus's emerging, self-conscious loyalty to a higher power and wider family: that of his Father God. He's beginning to feel the pressure—the "must-ness"—of his divine Father's claim on his life. "My Father's interests" all but erases stepfather Joseph and puts mother Mary in her place, too.

We're told that Mary and Joseph "did not understand what [Jesus] said to them." I imagine not. That's a lot to take in. So what happens now? Is Jesus done with them? Moving on to bigger and better things?

Mary, in particular, is no spiritual novice. Since the angel Gabriel appeared to her twelve years ago announcing that she would conceive God's Son by the Holy Spirit, she's been *pondering* the deep things of God—growing with Jesus in understanding. But spiritual growth is a lifelong challenge with lots of bumps and blocks, twists and turns, along the way—as both Mary and Jesus will continue to discover.

But we're not quite finished with the present story. Don't miss the finale—**Scene 4: Training Jesus**

While we might expect the "amazing," self-assertive Jesus to launch out now on his messianic campaign, he returns home with his "misunderstanding" parents and submits himself to them as a dutiful, "obedient" son.

For all his advanced knowledge and dawning awareness of his Father’s business, he still has much to learn. He still must grow into his demanding roles of Savior, Christ, and Lord.

As he must heed the word of his divine Father and the teaching of temple scholars, he must also keep learning from flawed earthly parents whose ignorance about some things doesn’t mean they know nothing. Jesus surely has more to learn from mother Mary, who was about the same age Jesus is now when she began her advanced course in spiritual formation, as the Spirit formed Jesus in her womb.

After twelve years, there remains much she doesn’t know, as the temple incident exposes. But she persists in her journey of “faith seeking understanding,” as St. Anselm puts it. She continues to [quote] “treasure all these things in her heart.”

Actually “treasure” misleads here, with its implication of precious, misty-eyed memories. The Greek term more connotes *clear-eyed thinking-through* an issue—mulling it over. Again, Mary is a *ponderer*, a *seeker*, a *searcher* of the things of God. Her anxious search for the missing Jesus led her to find him. But then his puzzling, dismissive response gives her more to search for, sift through, struggle to understand.

And Jesus, too, still has much to think and work through with Mary over the next eighteen years. More than that, he willingly submits himself to his earthly parents in *obedience*—as part of his obedience to God and preparation for service to God.

Prodigious power, even in God’s service, remains susceptible to pride and abuse. Hence, Jesus must learn and grow into faithful obedience through the ups and downs of daily life. The writer of Hebrews states: “Although [Jesus] was [God’s] Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered, and having been made perfect [mature], he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.”

This text seems focused primarily on Jesus’s intense prayer struggle with God in Gethsemane over his impending death. But Luke pushes back Jesus’s rigorous curriculum to include those “lost years” from twelve to thirty—through which Jesus *gained* much wisdom and understanding.

The one Gospel story of Jesus’s youth ends with his walking back from his dazzling performance on the Jerusalem temple stage to backwater Nazareth with Mary and Joseph to live in quiet obscurity with them and diligent obedience to them.

Humble origins (remember the manger), humble upbringing, humble faithfulness in the joys and sorrows of everyday life: that’s how Jesus came to know God more deeply, serve God more fully, and live out a key principle he twice announces:

All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those humble themselves will be exalted.
Amen.