

Name It

Scripture text: Luke 2:41-52
The Rev. Matthew McCaffrey
Center Church on the Green, January 3, 2021



For many years my two daughters and I would attend the annual First Night celebration in my hometown of Burlington, Vermont. As you may know “First Night” is an alternative celebration of New Year’s Eve. It offers a substance-free and affordable alternative to those who want to be out and about on the last evening of the year. It is a festival of the arts, music, storytelling, and food, all supported by a single inexpensive button as the price of admission.

It’s great!

When my girls were younger, bringing them to First Night involved a stroller and a very warm snowsuit. As they got older, we tailored more of the activities to their interests. They enjoyed face-painting and juggling lessons, and got a taste of live music they didn’t hear elsewhere.

It was still great!

There is one year in particular I remember. My older daughter Hannah had not made the 250 mile trek to Burlington that year, but Sara did. Sara was 13, and her interests had branched out in the

past year. Still, I was taken aback in our walk around the festival district when Sara opened her program, pointed to one event, and said, “I want to go to that.”

“That,” my friends, was billed as a “young people’s alternative music festival” in the basement of the city auditorium. It featured acts like “Grunge Kings” and “52 Not-Freeze.” I didn’t know what “52 Not-Freeze” was, but it might as well have been called “Parents Not-Welcome.”

And Sara wanted to go to THAT.

Was she...breaking up with us? Why didn’t she want to hear a jug band playing old Vermont tunes with us? Why didn’t she want to walk around and look at the white lights on Church Street like we had all those years past?

Was Sara...lost to us?

I don’t know. Sara went to the Young People’s Alternative Music Festival with a lot of instructions about how long she could be gone and where we would meet and we would ABSOLUTELY BE THERE waiting for her. And we were. And she met us. And she wasn’t humming any Grunge Kings tunes on the shuttle bus later.

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Other parents hearing this story probably aren’t very surprised. Being a parent is being open to a series of amazing discoveries,

some of them great, some of them mundane, and occasionally a few of them very painful.

Families have their own arc of experiences and activities. The nice little family outing on New Years' Eve one year becomes a "52 Not-Freeze" nail-biter the next year. The annual family reunion may slowly evolve from joy to dread, and as parents we are hard-pressed to pinpoint when that happened.

We all experienced it in some manner while we were growing up. It's part of the maturing process. As infants and children our very lives were devoted to just how much we were part of our family, how much like our parents we were. As late tweens and teenagers we move to an entirely different task: how DIFFERENT we are from our parents. The tense exchanges of "YOU WILL/I WON'T" ... "I SAY IT'S THIS"/ "I SAY IT'S THAT" ... "YOU'RE NOT GOING OUT OF MY HOUSE WEARING THAT" / "OH YES I AM"...if it's not YOUR kid engaging you in it, you recognize that's just how we figure out who we are.

And we mostly manage to survive it, and many of us still find a way to love our parents.

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So we have this story. While there is a manuscript called "The Gospel of Thomas" that claims to tell stories from Jesus' childhood,

this story in Luke's Gospel is the only place where we hear anything about Jesus between the ages of infancy and age 30.

Jesus and his parents had traveled to Jerusalem every year for the Passover festival. Don't skip over that part, because it's a major commitment. Nazareth is just about 100 miles from Jerusalem, and that's not in a car. A caravan of pilgrims walked the road over a week's time to get there, and when the festival was over they walked back another week. All devout Jews were encouraged to attend the Passover whenever they could, but Mary and Joseph made their plans in advance, bundled up their son, and did it every single year.

And like all families they had plans. They had plans for what they would do in the royal city. They had plans for where they would eat, for the sacrifice they would make, for where they would stay. And of course they had contingency plans.

“Jesus, look to your left and look to your right. Everyone who is wearing that band of cloth over their left shoulder is part of our group. If you lose track of where we are, look for someone from our group. Now, what are they wearing?...”

So it's not so remarkable when the parents leave Jerusalem after the festival. They had plans. They trusted someone **MUST** have Jesus along with them.

Their plans didn't account for the possibility that "52 Not-Freeze" would be playing at the Temple, and that Jesus was no longer interested in the sights.

The clashing expectations are not just between parents and child. Jesus is feeling another set of expectations pulling him...expectations that had reached him on wings of rumor and intuition...expectations voiced by ancient prophets and the angel Gabriel...expectations that had broken breathlessly into the makeshift shelter where he had come into the world...expectations that had tugged at the deep places where Mary had stored her observations and insights.

And in this moment—with frantic parents hoofing it back to Jerusalem against the stream of departing pilgrims, with scholars and teachers deeply interested in the questions he was asking and the answers he was giving—those two clashing sets of expectations are out in the open.

The hopes and fears of all the years are at perfect odds between scholars and parents.

It's probably wrong to simply say it all ended uneventfully. Yes, they found him. Yes, Jesus went back quietly to Nazareth and behaved himself. But, he was clearly becoming the man Gabriel had described, the man Elizabeth and her unborn child had

recognized, and the words that Simeon had offered to Mary all those years back tugged at the edge of her heart. Those words from Luke chapter 2 verses 34 and 35 were a painful foreboding:

“This child marks both the failure and the recovery of many in Israel, A figure misunderstood and contradicted—the pain of a sword-thrust through you—But the rejection will force honesty, as God reveals who they really are.”

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As we seek to make sense of our place in our own pilgrimage in the young days of this new year, we have a challenge to make sense of ourselves.

As the days lengthen and circumstances change, our own hopes are perhaps brighter. We are no longer dealing with some of the unknowns that dragged on us last year. There is at least the promise of vaccines even as the need for masks and isolation has become greater. We are no longer looking at a great unknown about our isolation time.

And our fears continue to lurk and gnaw at us even though our circumstances are more optimistic. Realizing how the social compact has frayed during this time is sobering. Knowing that there are people who have not just lost the social safety net but plunged right through the netting is concerning.

There's a conflict. But the story of the Boy in the Temple reminds us we don't have to let that conflict drive us half out of our minds with worry.

We are part of a community that can support each other. We are part of an ethos that takes the welfare of one another seriously. We can put ourselves out for the larger community while honoring our commitments to the bodies that we consider "family."

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Those are a set of tangible and urgent tasks in this coming season. They are the "things of God" that Jesus came to accomplish, and to teach us. They are upon us in this new year.

May the bread of life, and the companionship of this band of pilgrims, strengthen us for our journey this year.