

## "The Journey of Awareness"

I was a very curious child. My mother has told me that I asked questions about *everything* and was inquisitive in nature. One day when I was three-years-old, my mother realized that my two-year-old sister and I were missing. She looked all over the house. Couldn't find us. She went outside and called our names. No answer. She went to the dog house to see if we were hiding. Empty. And then a phone call. She rushed into the house and frantically grabbed the phone. The voice on the other line was our next-door-neighbor's.

"Rea? I heard you calling Charles and Elizabeth's names, and I happened to look out the front window. They are walking up the road."

Although delighted to know the whereabouts of her children, my mother was also gripped with fear. We lived on a two-lane state highway out in the country.

She rushed outside and through the neighbor's yard and found her two children dressed in some of their *parent's* clothing and shoes. When asked what we were doing, as a three-year-old, I replied, "Going to the store."

My mother, frantic with fear, was relieved to find us, and to find us safe. Today's New Testament Lesson reminded us that Mary and Joseph had a scary experience when Jesus was a boy.

The Law ordered every male to go to Jerusalem to participate in the Feasts of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. Because many Jews no longer lived in Jerusalem, it became an acceptable practice for Jewish males to venture to Jerusalem once a year for a major feast. Many of them, like Joseph, chose Passover. Nazareth, Jesus' hometown, was just over 60 miles from Jerusalem, which in those days was quite a distance. Many of us think nothing of traveling around 70 miles to go to the Richmond airport, but few of us would attempt this journey on a regular basis if we had to walk or ride a donkey.

At puberty, a Jewish boy became a son of the Law, meaning he was obligated to fulfill the Law's requirements. So for Jesus, this may have been his *first* Passover in Jerusalem. We can imagine how the Temple and all the sacred rituals may have fascinated the twelve-year-old. The Passover celebration was a big deal. This was the celebration of the release from Egyptian slavery.

You remember the story: Moses had pled with the Pharaoh to free the Children of Israel from Egyptian enslavement. God had even sent eleven plagues upon the land of Egypt, and although Pharaoh promised to release them if the plague was lifted, he reneged on his promise each time. The final plague was the slaying of the first-born in each household. The Israelites were to place goats' blood on their door frames so that death would pass over their house. This turn of events led to their emancipation and adventure through the wilderness to a land promised to them. The observance of Passover celebrated their God-given deliverance after the release from slavery.

After a brief stay in Jerusalem, the caravan from Nazareth started their long journey home. They gathered the souvenirs from the capitol city and loaded up for the trip. The women generally left before the men, because they traveled more slowly. The men left later, and the two parties sometimes did not meet until they set up camp for the night. (William Barclay. Commentary on Luke. Philadelphia: Westminster Press. 1975. p. 29) My guess is that when Joseph arrived, he went to Mary and asked her how Jesus had enjoyed his first Passover. And with shocking trepidation in her eyes, Mary would have responded, "I thought he was with you."

The caravan was apparently large enough that it took some time to ask everyone if they had seen Jesus. With every negative answer, the hearts of Mary and Joseph must have sunk deeper and deeper. How could they lose their son? Their oldest son? The Son of God?

Can you imagine how they must have felt? They must have been frantic! Both Mary and Joseph knew of Jesus' identity and the manner in which he had been born. As parents, they were probably very meticulous when it came to Jesus. After all, he *was* the Son of God; they wanted to do

everything right. They certainly did not want to place him in any danger. Yet, he was nowhere to be found, and no one seemed to have a clue of his whereabouts.

Many of you have seen the movie, "Home Alone." The story line is that an extended family is going to France for Christmas and in a frenzied rush, they board the plane, all the while the mother is thinking that she has forgotten something. On the plane as they are crossing the Atlantic Ocean, she realizes that what she forgot was her youngest child, Kevin, who was about eight-years-old. The mother cannot reach Kevin by phone because of a tremendous storm, and she almost becomes delirious in seeking to return to Chicago from Paris to check on her son.

I don't know if there is a job description for mothers anywhere, or if there is a gene that invokes worry. But most mothers *worry* about their children. And some worry for good reasons. Jesus probably had not put Mary to the test very often.

As a mother, Mary may have wondered, "I hope he is not in a ditch somewhere. I hope he is all right." Jesus was probably a well-behaved child. He just wouldn't run away; something terrible must have been wrong. Jesus was missing, and even worse no one could offer a clue about his absence.

So, Mary and Joseph decided to retrace their steps; they decided to go back to Jerusalem, which of course was another day's journey. I imagine that Mary wept hot, salty tears as they ventured back to the capitol city. The guilt of losing her son may have overtaken her to the point that she wept uncontrollably at times.

When someone is faced with such a distressing situation, no food tastes good. One cannot get comfortable enough to sleep. Tossing and turning prevents energy-renewing rest, and when one happens to dose off, the horror is relived in the dreams. Mary and Joseph must have been devastated.

The Scripture says that three *days* passed before they found Jesus; two of those days were spent traveling. The third was searching Jerusalem. The city had to have been bustling. Historians tell us that at Passover, two and a half million Jews flooded the city for this most important celebration. It is no wonder that it took Mary and Joseph a full day to find Jesus.

And where did they find him: in the Temple, sitting among the teachers, asking questions and listening intently. It was customary during the Passover season for the noted scholars of the day to meet in public in the Temple court to discuss religious and theological questions. *Anyone* could participate in the discussion. Instead, Jesus was *learning* from his teachers. He was not *doing* the teaching; nor was he *dominating* the conversation by explaining the fine points of the Law to the learned. Instead, he was a student eagerly seeking knowledge. For three days, Jesus had asked and answered questions and listened intently to those who had been educated concerning the Law. This was probably Jesus' first opportunity in a theological school outside of the local synagogue to hear great rabbis expound on the problems of life.

The rabbis were continually amazed at the young boy's interest and aptitude. Most twelve-year-olds were not nearly as concerned nor as well versed as Jesus was. I am certain that Mary and Joseph had taken seriously their role in educating Jesus concerning their faith. But these rabbis took Jesus to a new plane, and they marveled at his response.

As the teachers were being overwhelmed with this lad's thirst for learning, Mary and Joseph entered the scene with a different agenda. Mary's first question was, "Why?" Many of the mothers present today can relate to the situation. When your children have disappointed or worried you, "why" is a question that rattles around in your head.

Mary undoubtedly was relieved that Jesus was ok physically, and now she turned her attention to the root of the dilemma. Today, the question would be "Why didn't you call us, and let us know where you were?" Her concern was how Jesus could have totally disregarded the feelings of Joseph and herself. And notice that she referred to Joseph as "your father."

William Barclay calls this experience a dawning realization for Jesus, who sets the record straight by removing the title of father for Joseph and applying it to God. (Ibid., p. 28) Individuals gain the ability to think abstractly at age twelve. Up until that time, children only think in concrete terms. So at this stage of his development, Jesus was able to realize fully his relationship with God as his Father.

Jesus was completely God, but he was also fully human, which meant that Jesus had to grow and mature as other boys. I simply do not believe that Jesus was a *wonder baby* with supernatural powers. I do not think that as a two-year-old, Jesus could have magically created a baby bottle with milk. Instead, Jesus had to grow up as all boys do. It's somewhat hard to imagine, but as Jesus spoke to his mother in the Temple, his voice very well could have cracked because of the physical changes accompanying puberty.

Because of Jesus' humanity, he had to learn just as everyone else does. And as he sat at the feet of those great Jewish teachers, he must have glowed realizing that he was the fulfillment of the prophecies. The more they talked, the more inquisitive Jesus became. And through the questions and answers, slowly a light bulb was beginning to glow inside Jesus. I believe that Jesus found what he was looking for: he found the answers that confirmed his identity. At his first Passover, there came a dawning realization that he was in a unique sense the Son of God. And all this happened at the Temple. Without his parents present. All this happened at church.

Many of us have gained incredible awareness through the teaching found at church. Most of us sat in small oak chairs around a small table in Sunday School and listened to saintly women tell us the story of Jesus. I can remember Mrs. Cantrell and Mrs. Caldwell telling me the gospel stories in such a loving manner. Their affirmation of me and their patient willingness to answer my questions provided a setting in which the foundation for my salvation was laid. You see, these ladies taught me in preschool Sunday School, or as we used to call it, "beginners."

And I would be remiss without mentioning the influence that my parents and home-life had on my formative years. Saying the blessing at each meal communicated that God was truly great and good for providing food. Having loving parents that went to church with me conveyed how important church was. Having Bible stories read to me, before I could read, and then receiving my very own Bible and helping me with the obscure names of people and places, communicated how important the Scripture was. Although the final decision to follow Christ was my own, *many* parties were influential for me to make that decision.

Most all of us have taken a journey of *awareness*, a trip that motivates us to find out who God really is. As a matter of fact, once we have started down this road, we never leave it. The quest continues as we grow spiritually. At whose feet did you sit as you began your journey? And where did you have to travel to realize your place before God?

Some of us can re-trace the steps of our conversion experience as I have done, recognizing influences in early childhood. Others can point to a specific individual who, by their warmth and lifestyle, shared the good news with you. And today, there may be others who have never embraced this Jesus. The story of Jesus doesn't stop with the boy in the Temple at age twelve. Jesus, as God's Son, showed the world what God was like. And then, to prove his love for all people, he died on a cross and rose again.

Today, reflect on the route that led you to a relationship with God. Be thankful for those along the way who gave you direction and instruction. Realize that the journey of fully understanding and comprehending God is a lifetime trek, and acknowledge that it is God's presence that encourages you to stay on the path.

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And for someone who has never embarked on this journey, the invitation today is this: Jesus still wants you to come to him and to get to know God in a personal way. Won't you begin your own journey of awareness today by accepting Christ as your personal Savior?