

Free Range Jesus

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, December 30, 2018, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scriptures: [Luke 2:41-52](#) and [1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26](#)

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As I wandered into Panera for a late lunch and the task of weaving together the threads I'd been collecting all week into a sermon, a man I took to be the grandfather pushed a stroller toward a table. In the stroller was a child, perhaps seven months old, staring intensely at her grandfather with big, beautiful, brown eyes. I wondered how this child's parents ever got anything done when they have such beautiful eyes to look at, such a precious child to smile and babble and sing to.

Maybe the looking and the smiling and the babbling and the singing gets old. Or simply too tiring. Or maybe the need to have a moment to eat or pee overcomes the amazing delight present in an infant and handing the baby off to a partner or a grandparent is exactly what a parent needs.

I'm reminded of a 15th century illustration I saw a photo of this week. Joseph sits on the floor, tending to the infant Jesus. Mary is sitting up, studying a book, scripture, we assume. I assume the painting was influenced by a tradition that Mary was sufficiently learned that she could teach Jesus what he needed to know to grow up and fulfill his ministry.

I'm not sure why this tradition decided it was Mary and not Joseph who was Jesus' teacher. It's certainly counter-cultural – both in the context of ancient Palestine and in the context of 15th century Europe – for a woman to be the learned one in a household. I don't know what generated this tradition, but it won't surprise me if today's gospel lesson had something to do with it. Jesus had to have a teacher if he was going to hold his own in a theological discussion with his elders. Maybe it was his mother. And if it was his mother, she would have had to have learned at some point. And so there are paintings of Mary studying.

They are, of course, anachronistic: Mary dressed as a wealthy European, when historically she was a peasant Jew from Israel. And historically, she was almost certainly illiterate. If Joseph was able to read, it would most likely have only been enough to read a passage or two of scripture. Being able to read a passage of scripture is the level of literacy Jesus is depicted as having in Luke's gospel. He was able to find a passage and read it from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah.

Still, it's fun to imagine what Jesus' childhood was like. There's actually a very short, non-canonical book about Jesus' childhood called, "The Infancy Gospel of Thomas."¹ It includes a story of a 5-year-old Jesus playing in the mud, forming sparrows. When an adult saw it, he complained to Joseph that Jesus had made clay – which would have been okay, except it was the Sabbath, and making clay is a form of work and Jews aren't supposed to

¹ See <http://www.tonyburke.ca/infancy-gospel-of-thomas/the-childhood-of-the-saviour-infancy-gospel-of-thomas-a-new-translation/> for a recent English translation.

work on the Sabbath. When Joseph scolded Jesus, Jesus clapped his hands and told the sparrows to fly away, which they did. Impressive stuff for a 5-year-old.

As I imagine Jesus' childhood, I imagine Mary and Joseph practicing what today would be called "free range parenting." I suspect you've heard of "free range parenting." It's a counter movement to "helicopter parenting."

In helicopter parenting, a parent (or a trusted adult) is always keeping an eye on things. The helicopter parent makes sure the child has activities to participate in, so there is soccer practice to go to, and swim lessons to attend, and piano lessons on Tuesdays, and dance class on Thursdays.

Helicopter parenting started in earnest in the 1980s. The primary motivation was protecting children from harm. If you keep the children busy, they can't get into trouble. And if you know where the children are, they can't come to harm by some stranger.

More recently, however, the primary motivation has shifted. According to a recent article in *The New York Times*, "While this kind of intensive parenting – constantly teaching and monitoring children – has been the norm for upper-middle-class parents since the 1990s, new research shows that people across class divides now consider it the best way to raise children, even if they don't have the resources to enact it."²

According to the article, the primary motivation for this style of parenting is no longer safety. It's economic anxiety. "For the first time, it's as likely as not that American children will be less prosperous than their parents," the article says. "For parents, giving children the best start in life has come to mean doing everything they can to ensure that their children can climb to a higher class, or at least not fall out of the one they were born into."³

I understand the perceptions that led to helicopter parenting. In the 1980s and 90s, there were a number of high-profile child assaults and abductions, and it was scary. The reality is that they were and are exceedingly rare⁴ and helicopter parenting out of a sense of fear was not and is not warranted. This new anxiety, this economic anxiety, does have some basis in reality. How much, is not exactly clear to me. Nor is it clear to me how much of a hedge against it helicopter parenting is.

What is clear to me is that something is lost in this kind of intense parenting. The elementary school my niece and nephew attended is three blocks from their house. When they were in kindergarten and second grade, my sister would have gladly had them walk to school, if the other kids in the neighborhood walked to school and there could be a little herd of them. She tried to make this happen, but all the other parents walked their kids to school, so that forced my sister to walk her kids to school. So my niece and nephew never

² Claire Cain Miller, "The Relentlessness of Modern Parenting," *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/25/upshot/the-relentlessness-of-modern-parenting.html> (posted 25 December 2018; accessed 26 December 2018).

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Janis Wolak, David Finkelhor, and Andrea J. Sedlak, "Child Victims of Stereotypical Kidnappings Known to Law Enforcement in 2011," *U.S. Department of Justice*, <http://unh.edu/ccrc/pdf/Child%20Kidnapping%20LE%20Report.pdf> (posted in 2016; accessed 29 December 2018).

got to negotiate those unsupervised childhood relationships that happened for me when I walked to school.

Free range parenting has a very different philosophy from helicopter parenting. In free range parenting, parents willingly step back and allow their children to explore the world without constantly hovering. No doubt, some of my support of free range parenting is nostalgic. I quite enjoyed my childhood, when my friends and I were allowed to ride our bikes in the neighborhood for hours on end, provided I was home by six. Or in the winter, I could go drag my sled up Edgewood Road and zip down the sidewalk and over the jump we made of the piled-up snow at the end of Joan Fox's driveway, until my fingers were just too cold for one more run.

I also support free range parenting because it instills a sense of freedom, self-reliance, and resilience in kids. I'm with the proponents who say free range parenting increases self-confidence and self-sufficiency, increases levels of active play (which helps combat the negative health impacts of childhood and adolescent obesity), and improves social skills.

Yes, the absence of the village, the absence of that sense of community support parents once had, make free range parenting harder than it was a generation or two ago. And yes, there is always the possibility of a concerned neighbor, rather than being part building that missing village, will call the police or CPS. Still, I say "yes" to free range parenting. I'm not alone in this. There are playgrounds in Great Britain where they are bringing back risk to playgrounds to build childhood resilience.⁵

I bring all this up because I don't want anyone reporting Mary and Joseph to Child Protective Services. It could be that Mary and Joseph practiced free range parenting. He was 12, after all. He knew (I think we can safely assume) what the plans were, when the group they were traveling with planned to leave. Of course he'd be where he was supposed to be. When they discovered that Jesus wasn't where he was supposed to be, they went looking for him.

When they found him, when they tracked him down at the Temple, Luke describes a very human interchange. I can hear the exasperation in Mary's voice. "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." Hardly "Mary, meek and mild." And Jesus response – I know my parents would have considered it "talking back."

But then, I think one of the things Luke is doing is marking the beginning of the shift in relationship between Jesus and his parents. At the beginning of the story, Mary and Joseph go to Jerusalem with Jesus to celebrate the Passover. At the end of the story, Jesus returns to Nazareth with his parents. By the end of the story, Jesus is the subject of the sentence about journeying.

Another shift that happens in the narrative is that Jesus is starting to reach out beyond his family. When his parents finally track him down, they find him in the Temple in

⁵ Ellen Barry, "In Britain's Playgrounds, 'Bringing in Risk' to Build Resilience," *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/10/world/europe/britain-playgrounds-risk.html> (posted 10 March 2018; accessed 29 December 2018).

the middle of a gather of adult men. He is not giving them all the answers to their questions. Rather, he is engaging with them in an adult conversation about the questions they're discussing.

William Herzog writes that Luke “does not assume that Jesus is engaged in a contest and besting his opponents as though this were some first-century version of Jeopardy. Rather, Jesus is engaged in a lively and respectful conversation and demonstrating a wisdom well beyond his years.”⁶

Still, I think it is the answer to his mother's question that is most important here. “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?” There are echoes of the end of the story right here at the beginning. “After three days” of looking for Jesus, they find him. “After three days” – this is an allusion to the three days from Good Friday to Easter. Whenever you hear “three days” in the gospel, you need to think about the resurrection. They find him at the Temple. In the days leading to his crucifixion, Jesus will return to the Temple and drive out the money-changers.

“My Father's house,” he calls the Temple. Borg and Crossan say that this is the most important part of this story because it identifies who Jesus is. In chapter 1, Gabriel tells Mary that her child will be called “the Son of the Most High” and “the Son of God.” In chapter 3, at his baptism, God announces from the heavens, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” In between these two heavenly pronouncements, here in the Temple, in chapter 2, Luke places the statement in Jesus' own mouth. Luke's Jesus is fully conscious of his divine status. He's talking to his parents when he says it, but he's saying it publicly: he is the Son of God.⁷

Luke doesn't craft an additional story to help us understand how Jesus came to that self-understanding. I can't help but wonder if being free to explore who he was in his childhood might not have been key to that. If Mary and Joseph were free range parents, might not Jesus' own exploration of the world help him reflect on his place in it?

I think the freedom to make choices, including bad ones, and still experience God's love is an important part of my spiritual journey. I think having and taking the opportunity to explore – to explore nature and culture and my own psyche – has helped me understand who I am in relationship with God. And while “Father” isn't my personal favorite term for God, I'm thankful that I've never experienced God the Father as a helicopter parent.

Anyway, that's the sermon cloth I've woven this week. That's what I've been pondering. Maybe you'd like to think about it for a little while, too.

A question for reflection: How have you benefited from God allowing us to be free-range children? Consider especially how this has impacted your spiritual growth and your ability to love.

⁶ William Herzog, *New Proclamation Year C 2006-2007*, quoted by Kathryn Matthews, “Sermon Seeds,” *United Church of Christ*, http://www.ucc.org/worship_samuel_sermon_seeds_december_30_2018 (accessed 26 December 2018).

⁷ Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The First Christmas* (New York: HarperOne, 2007), 254-255.