

# What Child Is This?

Luke 2:41-52

Farmville Baptist Church

December 26, 2021

What's your favorite Christmas movie? Maybe you're a traditionalist and enjoy *Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street* or *It's a Wonderful Life*. Maybe you reach back to your childhood, or your children's childhoods, and like *Rudolph* or *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. Maybe for you a Christmas movie worth watching is whatever is showing on Hallmark – there are so many to choose from! Or maybe you like a laugh at Christmas, like *A Christmas Story* or *Christmas Vacation*.

In the Tyler house, we've been watching loads of Christmas movies. Cadance and I enjoyed our annual viewing of *Christmas Vacation*, we all watched the three *Santa Clause* movies and *Elf*, and a new favorite is the

recent retelling of *The Grinch*. But if there is one movie, or actually series of movies, that have gotten played over and over again this year, it's the *Home Alone* films.

If you haven't seen any of them – and, in my mind, none of them quite compare to the original – the premise of each movie is a child gets left alone at home by accident at Christmas and has to fend off robbers through a combination of booby traps and clever planning. As a kid, the hijinks involved made me laugh – just as my son gleefully does when he watches it. As an adult and a parent, though, the only thought going through my mind is, “How could the parents leave their kid home alone?”

Of course, kids have a tendency to slip away from parents or wander off. It wasn't so long ago, maybe a year or two, that I was at my former church after service, talking to a couple of folks, and my son just disappeared. I had

turned my attention away from him for just 30 seconds or so, and he wasn't anywhere to be found. Turns out he had slipped out of the front door and gone around the side of the church to the car, but I didn't know that. It's surprisingly easy to lose track of your child, especially in a crowd. When you realize they are missing, it sends a surge of adrenaline through your system, followed closely by off-the-charts anxiety.

I won't ask for a show of hands if anyone here today ever lost their child in a crowd, but if you have, don't feel too bad. After all, Mary and Joseph, chosen by God to take care of his own son, lost track of the preteen Jesus – and they knew he was the Savior of the world! And, really, can we blame them? When we look at the story, we find that they weren't irresponsible at all – what happened to them could happen to any parent.

Joseph, Mary, and Jesus – and probably the brothers of Jesus we hear about elsewhere in the New Testament – all went to Jerusalem for the Passover festival. This festival was a big deal. Scholar Scot McKnight painted a helpful picture when he compared it to the 4<sup>th</sup> of July – but if the 4<sup>th</sup> of July was celebrated while our country was occupied by a foreign, oppressive power.<sup>1</sup> It was a time when liberation was in the air, when the people of Judea and Galilee dreamed dreams of freedom, when the story of the great exodus from slavery was retold and hopes rekindled. And it was packed – people from all over would come back to Jerusalem for this religious, political, and ethnic holiday. Passover was a huge party, with huge crowds and lots of opportunities for 12-year-old boys to get in trouble.

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<sup>1</sup> Scot McKnight, *The Real Mary*, 52-53

As the festival ended and the family from Nazareth prepared to leave, they wouldn't have gone off on their own. Travelers, particularly travelers to religious festivals, typically travelled in groups, both for company and for protection. So Joseph and Mary set off with a large group of what were probably aunts and uncles, cousins and coworkers, friends and neighbors from Nazareth. It's small wonder they didn't notice Jesus' absence until the group stopped for the night's rest. Finally aware of Jesus not being there, back to Jerusalem Joseph and Mary went. I'm sure with each step their anxiety and their anger grew. What could have happened to him? Had he been abducted? Had he been injured? Was he playing a trick? Just where was their precious gift from God – all our precious gift from God?

Finally, after 3 days of searching, Mary found her son in the Temple courts. Now, the Temple of that day was huge.

It was a place of business, of meetings, and of conversation, not just religious education, so searching the Temple complex could have taken a long time in and of itself. But there he was, safe and sound. He was seated among a group of religious teachers, deep in conversation, asking questions, giving answers, and pretty much blowing everyone away with his insight, his maturity, his wisdom...you know, all the normal things that we expect from a 12-year-old.

Right?

Well, as any of us could expect, Mary's initial reaction was of relief – and her worries and frustrations came bubbling out as her anxiety ebbed away. “Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you.” Put another way, “Where have you been? We've been worried sick!”

I can certainly identify with Mary here. I mean, if I lost my child *for three days* and found him perfectly fine, hanging out with a bunch of professor-types debating the finer points of theology, I might be a little all over the place myself. Wouldn't you? Jesus certainly seems to have understood. He does have a little bit of divine backtalk – very gentle and perfectly correct, of course: “Why were you searching for me? Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?” But then he went back home with them and was the model child, obedient in every possible way.

And then, we find a word that struck me this week, a sentence I've read a hundred or more times, but this week hit me in a new way. “But his mother treasured all these things in her heart.” What things was Mary treasuring, considering, pondering? The pain and fear she felt when she realized Jesus was missing? The relief she felt when

she saw him safe and sound? The initial gut reaction of her exclamation, born of joy and worry, when she called him out in front of everyone? The words of her son gently chastising her because he, legitimately, wondered why it wasn't obvious to her where he must be? The sight that had greeted her when she came around the corner and found him, sitting, in the midst of the greatest religious scholars of the day – and blowing them away with his own understanding and wisdom?

I'd imagine all of these things swirled in Mary's heart, mind, soul. But it's this last one, I think – the picture of Jesus teaching the teachers – that may have stuck with Mary the longest. It's that tableau that maybe, just maybe, caused her to ask the question that came up in our first hymn just a little bit ago: what child is this? You see, just the physical description of what was going on when Mary

arrived told volumes about who Jesus was – just what sort of child this was before her. Jesus, when Mary showed up, was *sitting* in the Temple, with teachers around him. Sitting, as Scot McKnight tells us, was a posture of the classroom: students or disciples sat to listen to teachers or rabbis, and teachers or rabbis sat to listen to students or disciples.<sup>2</sup> In this case, sitting at the center of the group, amazing the theological experts with his answers, Jesus was the teacher. This twelve-year-old was opening the eyes of the most well-educated and most highly-regarded preachers and scholars of his day.

What child is this, indeed!

Maybe that day, as she saw these things and turned them over in her mind and heart, maybe on that day Mary began to look at her son, her child, her baby in a different

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<sup>2</sup> McKnight 58

light. Sure, she had known from the start that he was special. She had been the one who had heard the words of the angel, and she had been the one who raised her voice in defiant joy about the God-driven revolution that her son would usher in. She had known to her core that he was so much more than her little boy – but, and I can attest, it’s hard for a parent to look at their child and see them as more than the little one dependent on them for everything. We feel this as regular parents of regular children – how much more of an epiphany must this have been for the mother of the Son of God! Maybe that day was the day that Mary realized her song was coming true. Maybe, as Scot McKnight suggests, that day was the day when Mary realized that she, “as his mother, will learn to become a disciple of her son” too.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> McKnight 59

Yesterday, of course, was Christmas Day, the time each year when we think of Jesus coming as that babe in a manger, wrapped in swaddling clothes. And if we're not careful, we can get caught thinking that Baby Jesus is the entirety of Jesus, the totality of the good news of Christmas. We can become a little bit like Ricky Bobby in *Talladega Nights*, who lifted his prayers to the infant Jesus with a tremendous lack of awareness, choosing which parts of the Christ message to take to heart and which ones to toss aside. We like the baby Jesus, a cute little bundle of joy, seen through the nostalgic and sentimental haze of Christmas pageants past. Maybe that Jesus seems a little more controllable, a little more palatable, a Messiah who asks for nothing but affection and demands nothing but our *oohs* and *aaahs*.

My brothers and sisters, that Jesus is not the Jesus foretold in the prophets. That Jesus is not the Jesus serenaded by the angels. That Jesus is not the Jesus who taught by the Sea of Galilee and healed the sick in Capernaum and all around the countryside. That Jesus is not the Jesus who broke the bread in the Upper Room or carried the cross through the streets of Jerusalem. That Jesus is not the Jesus that Mary sang about while he was still *in utero*, and that Jesus is not the Jesus Mary saw teaching in the Temple. The baby Jesus is where the Good News began...but the baby Jesus grew up. As our passage says, “Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man.”<sup>4</sup> And as he grew in wisdom and stature, he continued to amaze those who heard him teach. He continued to inspire those who heard his call to discipleship.

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<sup>4</sup> Luke 3:52

He continued to challenge those who were out of step with the kingdom way of life Jesus embodied. He continued to walk a path of love and joy, hope and peace.

That Jesus is the one we pray to, the one we learn from, the one we commit to following. That way of life is much more challenging and demanding than if the good news could be contained in a manger-cradle; that way of life leads to life eternal, but only through a cross. Like Mary, we are invited to follow her Son – and like her, we need to learn how to leave the trappings of Christmas behind, because Christmas is only the beginning of the journey.

This first Sunday of Christmas, let us join Mary in pondering, “what child is this?” And with her, let us answer our own question: more than a child. Jesus is the Messiah, the Savior, our Lord. Let us follow him as our Master and King, wholeheartedly and with deep devotion, wherever he

leads us as we leave Christmas behind and head into a new year, together.