

# Our Central Task

By

The Reverend Dr. John M. Willingham

From the Pulpit of

Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

January 18, 2026

## **Luke 2:41-52**

Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents were unaware of this. Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him they were astonished, and his mother said to him, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously looking for you." He said to them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" But they did not understand what he said to them. Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was obedient to them, and his mother treasured all these things in her heart.

And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years and in divine and human favor.

As part of the Session meeting Tuesday night, I shared a list of some things I have noticed in my first month as your Interim Senior Pastor. I mentioned in a recent sermon that the role of an interim involves intentional listening and observing patterns. Here's some of what has stood out for me thus far that I shared with our governing body a few days ago.

First, there is an incredible staff here. Most of you already knew that to be true, but I've been so impressed with the women and men, pastors and non-ordained individuals who serve you with creativity and commitment. I've been struck by the warmth and devotion of members to the Bryn Mawr church, too, and how many of you have been part of it for decades. I've appreciated the ways you have made connections to aspects of my journey, as I think I've met every Davidson College graduate here and was reintroduced to a member at whose wedding I officiated 20 years ago. I've also learned that being a friend of your former Associate Pastor, Frank Pottorff, has great cache, as so many of you speak with great fondness for him still.

None of those pieces has been surprising, but there is another pattern that has been unexpected. For I've lost track of the number of times someone has extended a hand, shared their name, and then said, "I'm on the Hunger Committee" or "I'm passionate about our refugee ministry." Others have shared how long they've been part of the music ministry or a Sunday School teacher, that they are a Confirmation Class mentor, or a member of the LGBTQ@BMPC team. It has happened often enough that I have almost begun to wonder if the congregation had been given a set of suggestions for how to introduce themselves to me. I know that isn't the case, which leaves me to conclude instead that instinctively members are signaling their pride in the diverse ministries of, and the smaller community formed, at this church.

I deeply appreciate all of those acts of welcome and look forward to continuing such conversations in the months ahead. Yet on this day, I want to stop and remind you of something you already know; namely, the central thing that stands behind all that we do as a body of faith. It's a truth spoken in a beloved Psalm that calls all people and nations to "Make a joyful noise to the LORD," and in an account of a missing 12-year-old boy from the first century

That reading from Luke tells of a time when Mary and Joseph took Jesus to Jerusalem. It is the only passage in the gospels that describes anything that happened with Jesus between the time of his birth and the start of his ministry. It also highlights two acts of devotion.

The first was an annual trip Mary and Joseph would take to the city for the Festival of Passover. After that week-long event concludes, the couple begins a four-day journey back to Nazareth. A large gathering of family and friends travels together, and it's only when his parents stop after the first day that they realize Jesus is not present. They frantically retrace their steps and search for three days until finally they find him in the Temple, seated among the teachers.

Mary says, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." Any parent in that situation would have been upset, and some not as restrained. Yet that boy replied in a way that both silenced and mystified them. "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?"

One of the things that intrigues me about his response is how it reveals that Jesus, by the age of 12, knows that God is his father. How did that come about? Scripture doesn't tell us. My imagination leads me to picture a moment when Joseph and Mary, or only one of them, broach the subject and begin, "Uh, Jesus, there is something we need to talk about..."

However, such awareness came to him, Jesus' response to their agitation names our need to gather with other believers, too. Not just being physically present in a religious building, but also being engaged in times of worship. Technology permits us to do so in ways that were unimaginable just a few years ago. It expands the reach of this body of faith far beyond these walls as well. What a blessing. Yet those words from the Son of God declare that our need for in-person worship remains, despite other perspectives often voiced.

As sometimes persons will say, "I don't need to be in church to worship God as I can do so while hiking a mountain path or listening to the ocean waves pound the sand or gazing into the Grand Canyon." There is no doubt that such settings and others allow one to experience the beauty of God's creation and put us in a reflective state. Such settings offer a clear reminder that there is one who is greater than anything we can imagine and feeds the spirit as well.

Yet worship is different as it occurs when persons intentionally remove themselves from other events or distractions to be still in God's presence and to sing God's praise. Worship occurs when persons focus on God's Word and are reminded of the divine call upon them, when one names how she/he has fallen short of God's instruction and are assured of forgiveness; when one gathers for prayer and hears a message that encourages or challenges or both. All of that can occur along a riverbank, but usually does not, as worship happens when persons intentionally place themselves before God in a posture of praise.

Many years ago, I had the opportunity to worship in the church of my growing-up years. Since becoming a pastor, that kind of opportunity is extremely rare, and I looked forward to that morning. My mother and stepfather were still part of the congregation then, and, as was our family

pattern, we arrived a bit early that day. We walked into the fellowship time between the two services, giving me the chance to visit people I had not seen in many years.

Among them were the parents of my high school girlfriend. They greeted me warmly, a response on its own that suggested time truly can heal many wounds! As I talked with the father, he mentioned how usually he attended the early service there, but on that morning was an usher at 11. He added that he preferred the early service, as in his words, "I can get it over with sooner."

When I teased him about his words, he laughed and said something to the effect of "You know what I mean," and I did, while also knowing that there are other members of other communities of faith who do not see worship as essential, but as one of many worthwhile things to do if time permits. There are people who feel that the sooner worship is over, the quicker one can get on to truly important things, the better, and individuals who feel that worship must fit into our over-scheduled lives instead of being the hub around which all other things thrive.

As you might guess, I come at worship from a different perspective and believe that our life of faith starts here. It doesn't end here, to be sure, for once the final note of the postlude is silenced, we begin that hard work of putting into practice the things heard or experienced in a time of worship. Worship is designed to equip us for life outside these walls; a central part of the Christian life that naturally makes its patterns and style a source of impassioned debate.

Tom Long, a preaching professor of mine at Princeton Seminary, wrote a book years ago entitled *Beyond the Worship Wars*. In it, he named how the style of worship and its components have often been an area where members are willing, in a figurative sense, to go to war to hold onto what

they believe to be the correct approach. Many times, that conversation falls into a preference for “traditional” or “contemporary” worship. The styles can be different in many ways, but usually the issue is whether the music is supported by an organ or a praise band.

In the book, Tom speaks of congregations that model a third way that is both vital and faithful. By “vital,” he means churches that are growing and finding persons drawn to them, and in the term “faithful,” he is speaking of bodies of faith that have remained true to their own worship heritage. He studied twenty congregations he considered to be examples of this third way, and in the book describes nine traits those churches have in common.

Here’s what he found. Those congregations make room in worship for the experience of mystery, they have planned and concerted efforts to show hospitality to the stranger, they have recovered and made visible the sense of drama inherent in Christian worship, they emphasize congregational music that is both excellent and eclectic, they creatively adapt the space and environment of worship, they forge a strong connection between worship and local mission, they have a relatively stable order of worship and a significant repertoire of worship elements and responses the congregation knows by heart, they move to a joyous festival experience toward the end of the worship service, and they have strong, charismatic pastors as worship leaders. (Long, Tom. *Beyond The Worship Wars*. Washington, D.C.: The Alban Institute, 2001, p. 13)

Aside from that final trait, where you will have to evaluate if the characteristic is present or not in your Interim Pastor, all the other pieces are ones about which we can do something. Part of my work here will be one of observing and pondering such worship traits with you.

Weekly worship is the one thing we do that is not found anywhere else in

our culture in the same way. People can go to other places to work on the eradication of hunger, support refugees, or our LGBTQ friends. They can study the Bible and be involved in teaching children and youth outside these walls, too. One can donate money or volunteer their time to many worthy efforts, sing in a choir, and participate in mission trips with all kinds of organizations. If looking for motivational talks, those can be found via TED Talks, and if seeking strength in the face of life's trials, there are wonderful support groups to be found in virtually all communities. As a church, we are involved in each of those tasks, too, as they reflect our understanding of a sovereign God who is deeply concerned with the full human experience.

Still, the worship of God, the intentional stepping back from one's week to be still before God, only happens regularly in the context of a faith community, which is why it remains our central task. To gather week-after-week from all that has been happening in our lives to offer our praise and hear God's word. To claim week-after-week, in the midst of an ever-changing culture, the unchanging truth of God's love and grace. To seek week-after-week ways to grow in our response to the teachings of God and serve our Maker in ever-more faithful ways.

A 12-year-old boy once asked, "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" The same is true for us.