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Special Children
a totally fictional story that might have happened
inspired by Luke 2:41-52
and by stories of two special children
a soliloquy by Mary, the mother of Jesus
by Ralph Milton

It is hard to be the mother of a special child.

My friend Naomi next door has a child with strange eyes, who smiles constantly and drools. He has never learned to talk. Naomi is ashamed of her child, but she loves the boy dearly. It breaks her heart when people laugh at him.

Naomi named her child Moses, after the great prophet of our people, because when he was born, she said every child might be the promised one who would lead our people out of slavery and into hope. She still calls him Moses, but she no longer speaks of that dream.

My child is special too, in a different way. Joseph and I named him Jesus, because we too had a dream that God would come to our people – that a great leader would be born among us. That's why we called him Jesus: "God is our salvation."

Every mother dreams for her child. Naomi called her child Moses and I called my child Jesus, and so did many others in Nazareth. They were the two most common names in the village.

I thought my child was slow too, like Moses. He was so far behind the other children in our neighborhood. He seemed awkward and clumsy. Jesus never learned to crawl, but in his own good time he did learn to walk. Much later than the other children, but he did learn. And when all the other boys had learned how to use the toilet, I still had to wrap the diapers around Jesus. So Naomi and I would comfort each other. It's hard when you have such special children.

Joseph went to work every day over in Sepphoris. He was employed by the King who was building a new city just four miles from Nazareth, with a huge theater and many stately buildings.

Sepphoris was a very sophisticated city, although Joseph was simply an artisan who worked the stones – one of many workers who walked every day, four miles from Nazareth and four miles home at night. Joseph was always tired when he came home,

but he never seemed too tired to play with Jesus, and sometimes he would trace the Hebrew and Greek letters in the sand of the floor, and teach Jesus how to say the words.

Joseph learned those letters and those words while he worked at Sepphoris. His hands were busy chipping stone, but his eyes took in everything around him. Unlike most of the villagers, Joseph taught himself to read, and he was determined that Jesus would go to school.

Jesus loved to play with other children, but on the Sabbath, Joseph would take him to the meeting place where the men gathered to read the books of the law and discuss them. The other children played in the street, but Jesus sat on the floor near Joseph's feet and seemed to listen. And often he would look over the shoulder of whoever was reading the scroll, and some of the men wondered if he was reading along with them.

Sometimes Joseph would come home from the Sabbath meeting shaking his head. "Jesus was looking at one of the scrolls left open on a bench," he would tell me. "He was looking at the words, Mary, almost as if he could read them."

"But he's only two years old, Joseph," I said. "He can hardly talk. And two-year-olds can't read."

One evening, Joseph traced the Hebrew letters YHWH in the dirt on the floor. Jesus looked at the letters, looked up to Joseph and then said, "Yahweh."

"Mary," said Joseph. "The child can read."

"The child is strange and wonderful," I said to Joseph. "Strange and wonderful." I thought about these things late into the night. The next morning Naomi sat in my kitchen and said, "Well, we both have slow children, Mary. It is a pain we can bear together." I didn't tell Naomi that Jesus could read.

It is so hard sometimes to have a special child – an unusual child. Sometimes I longed for Jesus to be normal, to be able to kick a ball and climb and run with the other children his age. Even his younger sister, Eve, could out-run and out-talk Jesus. She was a year and a half younger, but before she was six or seven she could do almost everything better than Jesus.

Except read. Except think.

I worried about Jesus. Sometimes I would look out the windows and see him standing apart from the children his age. They would be playing, but he would simply be watching. I could tell he was thinking, but I had no idea what he might be thinking about.

A boy should not spend so much time thinking. Boys should be running and playing and getting into trouble. Jesus couldn't keep up with the other boys. He was slow and awkward and clumsy, and was often excluded from the play because he did things so badly. Sometimes he would come home crying and humiliated. My heart ached for my boy.

School was something else. The rabbis ran a school for young boys, and Joseph saved his shekels to pay for it. "That boy is most astute," the rabbi would say. "Most astute! But you might remind him that sometimes he should let the other boys respond first to the questions."

Jesus was the worst at the games young boys play and the best at school, and those two facts made him the least popular child in Nazareth.

Jesus always looked forward to our annual trip to Jerusalem. Almost everyone in Nazareth would go, in fact almost everyone within three or four days walking distance of Jerusalem. The place would be packed.

When Jesus was twelve years old, we made a bit of a fuss about the trip because at 12, a boy becomes officially an adult. Mothers know it takes a lot longer, but the rabbis say a boy becomes a man at twelve and so we had his *bar mitzvah*, which made him a "son of the covenant." And we arranged for the special temple blessing for Jesus and the other boys who had become men.

A man! Jesus was a teenager. Like all teenagers, never really wanted to be with his parents, so on the way to Jerusalem he walked with the other boys, and that's where we thought he was on our way back. We'd had a good time at the Passover in Jerusalem, and then the whole village started the trek home. It was no surprise that we didn't see much of Jesus. But when he didn't show up at night, we got worried.

It didn't take long to find out he wasn't in our group. So we rushed back to Jerusalem and searched frantically, all over, till we found him in the last place we expected to find a twelve-year-old. But considering this peculiar twelve-year-old, I suppose we shouldn't have been surprised. He was in the temple. Talking with a bunch of rabbis! They seemed to be astounded at what he knew and how well he answered.

Well, they may have been impressed, but I was livid.

"Jesus! We've been looking all over for you. We've been worried sick. Don't you have any consideration for us? The least you could have done is told us you weren't going to come home with us. Don't you think of anyone except yourself?"

Well, Jesus did what every twelve-year old does. He blamed the problem on his parents. "Didn't you know I had to be about my father's business?" he said. I didn't know what he was talking about, and that made me even angrier.

"You may be smart and you may be twelve years old," I yelled, "but you are coming home right this minute. Say good-bye to these professors and let's go."

Jesus looked sheepish. Embarrassed. He followed Joseph and me out of the temple and through the streets into the countryside. It was a couple of hours later, a couple of long silent hours later, when he walked beside me for a while, and then said, "I'm sorry, mom."

"Oh Jesus," I said. And I cried and gave him a hug. "You have no idea how hard it is to be the mother of such a special young man."

Jesus didn't say anything, but I saw tenderness in his eyes. And that night, as I have done so many nights before and since, I cried and wondered and prayed and pondered.

I tried to tell Naomi about it when we got home. "I just don't understand that boy – all right so he's a man now – but I don't understand him." Then I remembered Naomi and her child, and I wished I hadn't said that.

She came and hugged me. "God has sent us very special children, Mary. You don't understand your Jesus and I don't understand my Moses. All we can do is love them, and let God's promise grow through them."

Naomi is very wise.

**Ralph Milton has written a number of books,
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