

Text: Luke 2: 41-52
Title: Losing Jesus
Date: 12.30.18
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Full disclosure ~ this is a substantial rewrite of a sermon from 2015.

When I was 10 and my brother was 8 we went to visit my grandparents. My grandfather was in the hospital for heart surgery. My parents went to the hospital; we stayed with my grandmother....

As the afternoon melted into early evening we played in the park at the end of the street, until finally, all tuckered out, we walked back to grandma's house. We walked out of the park and up the tree-lined street. We walked, and we walked, and we couldn't find the house. So, we kept walking....

Surely it was on the next block....
Streetlights came on....
Cars whizzed past with headlights on...
There wasn't any more sidewalk...
It kept getting darker...
It was all unfamiliar...
We kept walking....
We were lost in Flint, Michigan....
Did I mention we were 10 and 8....

Eventually we saw a Woolworths store ~ a "five and dime" that smelled "like popcorn and chewing gum rolled around on the bottom of a leather soled shoe." I thought that if someone there could tell us where the hospital was we could find our way back. So, we went into Woolworths to ask for directions.

This is where my memory gets blurry.

I know we ended up in the back of a police car. My brother remembers that the police officer said that we were in "hot water." As an 8-year-old he took this literally. He thought he was going to be boiled. What I remember is the lobby of the hospital, my mom's hug, my grandmother's wrath, the dark night sky, and a flood of tears as all the worry melted into relief.

That was 49 years ago,
before "stranger danger," Amber Alerts, and helicopter parents,
before kids wore helmets and elbow pads to play outside,
before cell phones and GPS tracking devices.

But, 49 years later I'd like to know what my folks felt. We were lost for hours. We were lost long enough that the police were called. We were lost long enough that when the police found two little boys they knew hot water was going to be involved.

There is something about our text this morning that is remarkably human and almost mundane. My guess is that every parent has had a fleeting moment of panic when they didn't know where their child was. At some point most parents lose their children.

And with that, our text still seems to signal a remarkably abrupt transition.

At the beginning of the chapter there's a baby in a manger with angels singing glory to God above Bethlehem; by the end, a 12-year-old Jesus has slipped through the cracks in Jerusalem. The beginning reads like a fairy tale; 43 verses later there's a hint of terror. Mary and Joseph have lost Jesus. It is a curious jarring transition.

The Hebrews in first century Palestine were expected to make pilgrimage to the temple in Jerusalem for the festivals of Passover, Weeks (Pentecost), and Tabernacles. It was part of how Jews carved out identity. Our text reads that at least for Passover, Mary and Joseph lived into that obligation.

It is probably worth noting that this is the only story of Jesus' childhood.

For Hebrew lads the twelfth year was the final year of preparation before entering into the religious life of their community. Up until then parents, especially fathers, would teach the commandments. But at the end of the twelfth year the child participated in a ceremony in which he formally took on the yoke of the law and becomes a *bar mitzvah*, a "son of commandment." 12 was the last year of childhood...

So, some scholars think that Jesus staying behind in the temple demonstrated that he would be more than an ordinary *bar mitzvah*, that his insight into the law was more profound than ordinary men, and that his relationship to God was unique.

Other scholars draw our attention to the similarity between this vignette and the conventions of contemporary Greco-Roman biographies. For example, Augustus, received an exceptional education and at the age of 12 gave the funeral oration for his grandmother Julia Caesaris, the sister of Julius Caesar. It could be that Luke, the gospel writer, is using a familiar form to demonstrate that Jesus carried the qualities of exceptional leaders.

Who knows?

I do like that there's a plausible explanation for how Jesus slipped away unnoticed.

If Mary and Joseph were traveling from Nazareth to Jerusalem (sixty to seventy miles) they would have traveled with an entourage of aunts and uncles, cousins and kinfolk, young and old. It would have been a moving parade of people and animals and supplies. The trip itself was a festival. They were leaving behind daily chores and going to the big city. They were traveling in a caravan to commemorate who they were. Think of it as a family reunion, the Fourth of July, the south side Saint Patrick's Day Parade, and Christmas all rolled up into a couple weeks of celebration.

So, it's conceivable that Mary and Joseph may have been at different places in the procession. "I thought he was with you..." Or, maybe they thought Jesus was running around in the back of the pack with those naughty neighbor boys. Whatever the reason, imagine Mary's prayer as they

double back to look for him, “Dear Lord, so about that special baby you sent Gabriel to tell me about. Well, funny story....”

When they find Jesus Mary blurts out that he’s in hot water, “Son, why have you treated us like this? (You are so grounded!) Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you.” The word translated here as “anxiously” has more of a sense of pain or suffering than we associate with anxiety. Mary was pierced to the core. Three days of terror.

In response Jesus seems a little lippy. “Why were you looking for me? Didn’t you know.....”

And look, I know Jesus is like us in every respect except for sin, but at my house if a 12-year-old disappeared for 3 days and when he’s found suggested that the problem might be with the parents? I’d be inclined to do more than “treasure all these things” in my heart.

So, dear friends, what are we to make of this curious little story?

Let’s come at it this way.....

While on vacation we lost Lauren (our daughter).

We were staying in a condo on the shores of northern Lake Michigan with little but woods and water for miles and miles. When, in the middle of a nowhere, on a brilliant summer day, we couldn’t find Lauren. We searched the condo, walked the woods, scanned the lake, drove the two-lane country roads, fretted, freaked out, and begin to imagine all sorts of possible scenarios. We had recently moved back from New York, Lauren was not happy, and running away to get back to New York was entirely plausible. She was lost ~ physically and metaphorically.

As a pastor I’ve discovered that there are lots of parents who are concerned about their children’s faith. Some think their kids are lost – physically and metaphorically. Their children wandered, wandered, and walked away. Whether through disinterest, disappointment, or profound struggle they just can’t buy the faith expressions or experiences of their parents. I’ve seen the worry in parent’s faces, heard their voices crack, and felt their pain. When the fastest growing religious demographic is the “nones” (those with no religious affiliation), there are plenty of parents who worry about losing their children. And, it’s easy to get lost in this world...

But! But, the staggering claim of the gospels is that God slipped in among us as one of us. God took on the very nature of humanity. God as a baby and as a 12-year-old

who thought the humus was too spicy,
who giggled when his buddies broke wind,
who asked rabbis questions about scripture,
who snuck away without telling his parents.

And as that is true, as Jesus is the incarnate expression of the eternal of love of God, then I’m reticent to put boundaries on how far God goes to find and hold the lost. As God would seek after us in love, even unto death, then who are we to lose faith in the faithfulness of God. As God is “Immanuel” (God with us) then who are we to give up on anyone. Our faith is not that we don’t lose Jesus, but that Jesus will never lose us.

As Marjie often sings as part of a baptism:

You will lose your baby teeth, at times, you'll lose your faith in me. You will lose a lot of things, but you cannot lose my love.

You may lose your appetite, your guiding sense of wrong and right, you may lose your will to fight, but you cannot lose my love.

You will lose your confidence, in times of trial, your common sense. You may lose your innocence, but you cannot lose my love.

Many things can be misplaced; your very memories erased.

No matter what the time or space, you cannot lose my love.

Is that a bridge too far?

Is that beyond the reach of scripture and confession?

Is that suggestive of too much confidence in God's grace?

My point is, that as the incarnation is true, then the fluctuations of faith, the subjective quality of our wondering and wandering, even doubting and denying, are secondary. The primary reality is what God has done in Jesus Christ. Ours is simply to join Mary in "treasuring" these things in our hearts.

And, the word translated here as "treasure" has the sense of guarding or protecting. That is not suggestive of intellectual assent or full understanding, but she tends to the mystery, she holds it gently. She can't fully explain it, contain it, or restrain it. She doesn't know what to make of it, so she wonders, she waits, she wrestles, she loves, she keeps, she ponders, she treasures Jesus in her heart.

And even as our children treasured Jesus when they were children – God would not lose them. Even as our parents, and those we love the best, lose what they remember or know – God would not lose them. Even as we go through seasons of denial, despair, disinterest, and distance – God would not lose us.

Sure, I want our children more firmly rooted in the riches and responsibilities of the church. Sure, I want our children more actively involved in the struggles and joys of a faith community. Sure, I want those we love to know a robust faith. But, the absence of those realities should not be equated with losing Jesus....

We found Lauren. It turns out that there was a basement back bedroom that we didn't even know existed. Lauren found it, curled up in the quiet, and fell asleep. There was great celebration that she was found. But, no matter how she was lost ~ physically or metaphorically ~ I can't imagine any way in which she would lose our love.

The Canons of Dordt (1618-1619) puts it this way:

With respect to us this not only easily could happen, but also undoubtedly would happen (forfeit faith and grace and remain lost); but with respect to God it cannot possibly happen. God's plan cannot be changed; God's promise cannot fail; the calling according to God's purpose cannot be revoked; the merit of Christ as well as his interceding and

preserving cannot be nullified; and the sealing of the Holy Spirit can neither be invalidated nor wiped out.

May we join Mary and treasure all these things in our hearts.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.