

## ***Finding Jesus***

Luke 2:41-52

January 4, 2009

### **I.**

Today's Gospel reading is the only account of Jesus' childhood in the entire Bible, except for stories related to his birth. And we might wonder why this one is even there. To find the next biblical reference to Jesus we must fast forward eighteen years to the beginning of his ministry when he was thirty.

And the rest of the New Testament focuses on Jesus' ministry as an adult, and on his death and resurrection. What then is the theological significance of this story about Jesus as a twelve-year-old boy in the temple? How are we supposed to understand it?

Some scholars and experts emphasize that it showed Jesus' awareness of his relationship with God the Father at an early age. Others suggest that it foreshadowed his thorough and intimate understanding of Scripture. Still others believe it was evidence that Jesus had special powers even in his youth.

You might have heard fanciful stories about some of these so-called special powers. Many of them are described in a fictional work, written anonymously in the second century, called the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*. It contains imaginative tales about Jesus making birds of clay and bringing them to life, healing his brother when he was bitten by a snake, and doing many other things normal boys could not do.

Obviously, those stories were not written by our patron saint, Thomas the Apostle, who died decades earlier. And they were not offered by the authors as anything other than amusing and entertaining literature. People wrote fiction in those days just as they do now. In fact, several books from that early period are titled as gospels of various saints, even though not written by those saints, and they consist of stories taken entirely from the authors' imaginations.

### **II.**

So let's go to the actual story about Jesus in the temple. Doesn't it raise a lot of unanswered questions? Why, for example, did it take Joseph and Mary an entire day to realize that Jesus was not with them? Wouldn't you think they would have checked before they left Jerusalem?

And where did Jesus sleep and eat during the three days they were looking for him? How did he explain his presence to the teachers in the temple with him? Wouldn't you think those teachers would have asked about Jesus' family and where they were? And how would Jesus have answered those questions?

Also, why were Mary and Joseph so surprised to find Jesus in the temple? Both of them had been visited by angels who explained exactly who Jesus was (Lk. 1:26-33, Mt. 1:20-25). Why didn't they think about the temple sooner? Where else did they think he possibly would be?

In many ways we can identify with Mary and Joseph. Most of us have been in scary situations where we thought our children had become lost. And didn't our anxiety sometimes turn to anger after we found them, just as happened to Mary in today's reading? Perhaps what she said in the reading was the first century equivalent of "Jesus, you're grounded!"

This might remind us of another mother who was asked if she had it to do all over again, would she still have children? "Yes, of course," she answered, "just not the same ones." Obviously, Mary and Joseph would not have given such an answer since they both knew that Jesus was no ordinary child, but it was clear that they were frustrated.

Or were they? Maybe it just appeared that way. Perhaps they thought they had to protect Jesus. As I just mentioned, Mary and Joseph both knew from the angels that Jesus would have a special destiny as the Son of God, and maybe they didn't want to raise any suspicions by treating him in any way other than as a normal child.

If so, it would not have been the first time they acted to avoid danger. We recall that the family fled to Egypt after Jesus was born in order to escape the wrath of King Herod. Even though Herod was dead by the time of today's story, perhaps Joseph and Mary still were cautious and did not want to give the authorities any reason to suspect that Jesus would be the Messiah.

But if that was the case, then didn't Jesus almost let the cat out of the bag, so to speak, when he asked why Mary and Joseph did not understand that he must be in his Father's house? And note here that Jesus used the word Father with a capital "F." Both Mary and Joseph knew that he was not referring to Joseph. Jesus at age twelve was claiming his own divinity, and apparently he did not sense danger.

In any event, the reading raises a lot of questions, and I don't have definitive answers. There are some things that the Bible does not explain, and this little escapade of Jesus in his youth is one of them. We just take it on faith that it happened as the Bible says, and we are left to interpret it on our own.

### **III.**

And perhaps the real purpose of the story is to make us think about what happens in our lives today when it seems that Jesus has gotten lost. What do we do when we're walking down the road and feel that he is not with us. How do we find him again? Where do we look?

Well, the first thing we might do in those situations is realize that Jesus is not lost, we are. He didn't go anywhere, but we probably did.

This causes me to think about the Hertz car rental company. Don't look surprised. If you recently have rented a car from Hertz, you might have noticed that the company gives you an option called "Never Lost." It's a global positioning satellite system in your car that enables you to find just about anything you want, from directions, to hotels, to restaurants. If you're in a strange city and have a craving for sushi, "Never Lost" will find the place for you.

And just as Hertz offers a satellite-based never lost option, our faith offers a spiritually-based never lost option. All we have to do is ask for it and we get it, no extra charge. It comes in the form of the Holy Spirit, and it's always there for us.

Let's briefly review how that never lost option works. We know Jesus' ministry did not end when he died. God intended that future generations would be able to know Jesus just people alive knew him when he walked among them. That's why Jesus told the disciples when ascended to heaven that God would send a comforter, a counselor to be with them and guide them (Jn. 14:16).

That comforter is the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit can prevent us from being separated from Jesus. The Spirit reveals Jesus to us, and enables us to know him as the apostles knew him when he was in their midst. We can experience Jesus' love because it is expressed in the work of the Spirit. We are able to understand his teachings in Scripture because the Spirit leads us in truth. And we have faith in salvation through him because of assurance given by the Spirit.

However, there is a subtle but important distinction to recognize at this point. God wants us to know that the Holy Spirit is a divine person as part of the Holy Trinity, not some mysterious invisible power or force. It's not like Star Wars. If we think the Spirit is a power or force rather than a person, we might believe that as good Christians we should try to get more of the

Spirit. But that would be the wrong approach. If we think about it, we realize that we cannot have more of the Spirit, but we do want the Spirit to have more of us.

This means that if we attempt to acquire the Spirit through our own efforts, we make the twin errors of misunderstanding both the nature of Spirit and our own place in God's creation. We cannot acquire the Holy Spirit any more than we can acquire the Father or the Son.

On the other hand, if we give ourselves to the Spirit, then we can love God as we know his love and extend it to others. The difference is more than just a matter of perspective.

But then, what then do we mean when we pray, "Come Holy Spirit"? What do we mean when we say we want to be filled by the Spirit? Doesn't that sound like trying to get more of the Spirit into us instead of giving more of ourselves to the Spirit? And what about receiving the Holy Spirit at baptism? We will hear more of that next week.

But for today, the distinction is both a matter of perspective and substance. Some of us probably have been in church settings where people hoped that unending incantations or repetitious singing of a single verse or stanza would induce the Spirit to make itself known in the congregation. The Spirit, however, does not appear on demand.

On the other hand, we also probably have been in church settings where cycles of prayer or music could effectively help people empty themselves of worldly concerns so that they could give themselves to the Spirit without expectations or reservations.

And the Spirit is among us now. God's Spirit is in the world, everywhere, all the time, always revealing Jesus to those who want to find and know him. The Spirit is God. But our own misconceptions can get in the way.

If we think we can find Jesus by reaching out to grab some of the Spirit, by transferring some of the Spirit from the world to ourselves, it won't work. I have been in spiritual workshops and small group meetings where people hoped they could strengthen themselves in Christ by increasing the amount of the Spirit within them. They were not successful with that approach.

Here is the point of the analysis. The Spirit doesn't increase in us. We increase in the Spirit. We don't open the door, and reach in to take possession of the Spirit. Instead we open the door and walk through it to let the Spirit take possession of us. When we do that we are surrendering, not acquiring. And when we surrender to the Holy Spirit we will know Jesus and be filled. We will be led in the way of wisdom and truth, and will know the love our Lord has for us.

#### **IV.**

So we see that giving ourselves to the Spirit is the way to keep Jesus from getting lost in our lives. That might be the lesson in today's Gospel. Through the Spirit we are drawn closer to Christ. In this way we can be strengthened to do God's will in a fallen world that tempts us to do otherwise.

And we live in the Spirit through our own piety, and through the church. The Spirit calls us to prayer, meditation, interaction with others here at St. Thomas, and living a holy life. And do not underestimate the power of prayer, especially when you can devote time to it on a regular and peaceful basis.

And even then, for all our efforts, the Spirit is in control. Our assurance is that if we surrender to the Spirit we will know Jesus and we cannot get lost no matter where we go. Unlike Mary and Joseph, we won't have to search for him. Instead, we will know he is there for us. *Amen.*