

Lost and Found

Luke 2:41-52

January 3, 2010

I.

This is the last Sunday before we celebrate the Epiphany of our Lord this Wednesday. That means the Christmas decorations you see here today will be gone when you come back next Sunday. The lovely manger scene also will be removed. We will put Jesus back in a box for another year.

That doesn't sound right, does it? How can we put Jesus in a box? Obviously I am speaking of two different things. In one case the Flower Guild will carefully and lovingly disassemble the iconic components of this visual story of Jesus' birth, and put them in a safe and secure place so we can enjoy the story again next Christmas.

But the other case involves the Jesus we worship, and the Jesus we describe in the Nicene Creed and in whom we share during the Eucharist. And as much as people might try, they cannot manage or shape the real Jesus to suit their own purposes. There is no box, real or theological, able to contain him. He is everywhere in the world.

Even so, what if we sought Jesus and could not find him? What if he seemed to get lost and we didn't know where he was? In a few moments I will talk about becoming separated from our heavenly Lord and Savior, and what really might be at work if we think that has happened.

But in today's Gospel Joseph and Mary actually thought that the earthly Jesus had gotten lost when he was twelve years old. Instead of accompanying his family back home after the Passover celebration, Jesus stayed in Jerusalem and started hanging around the temple with the teachers.

And we might wonder why this story is even here. It's the only account of Jesus' childhood in the entire Bible, except for stories related to his birth. The rest of the New Testament focuses on his adult life. What is the significance of this story, and how are we supposed to understand it?

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

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

Obviously, those stories were not written by our patron saint, Thomas the Apostle, who died decades before these fables in his name appeared. People wrote fiction in those days just as they do now. And ancient fiction, like modern fiction, was intended to be entertaining literature. In fact, several books from that early period are titled as gospels of various saints, even though not written by those saints, and consist entirely of stories 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 suppose they would have checked before they left Jerusalem, or at least made sure he was in the care of someone else? What were they thinking?

And the reading says Joseph and Mary searched for three more days in Jerusalem before finding Jesus. So, where did he sleep and eat during this time? And how did he explain his presence to

the people in the temple with him? Wouldn't you think they 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). They knew that Jesus had a special destiny as the Son of God. Why didn't they think about the temple sooner? Where else did they think he possibly might be?

We probably can identify with Mary and Joseph. Most of us have experienced scary situations when we thought our children had gotten 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!" It's clear she was frustrated.

Or was she? Maybe it just appeared that way. Perhaps this is part of the answer. Perhaps she was trying to protect Jesus. As I just mentioned, Mary and Joseph both had special knowledge that Jesus was both human and divine, and maybe they didn't want to raise any suspicions by treating him in any way other than those watching would have expected.

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." Jesus was not referring to Joseph. At age twelve he was claiming his own divinity as God's Son.

So we see that the reading raises some questions without offering answers. However, there are several things the Bible describes but does not explain, and this little road trip by Jesus in his youth is one of them. We take it on faith that it happened, and that God through the Holy Spirit was at work for reasons unknown to us.

III.

And perhaps the real purpose of the story is to make us think about what happens today if it seems that Jesus has gotten lost. What do we do if we're dealing with life and sense 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 probably are. He didn't go anywhere, but we most likely did. He was not really lost in the Gospel story, and he doesn't get lost now.

This causes me to think about the Hertz car rental company. 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 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 as 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 getting lost. The Spirit reveals Jesus to us, and enables us to know him as the apostles knew him. 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 it is important to remember that the Holy Spirit is a divine person as part of the Holy Trinity, not some mysterious invisible power or force. The Spirit invites us to love God as the first Great Commandment calls us to do. But we cannot create that love just through our own efforts.

This means that we cannot acquire the Holy Spirit on our own 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 know God's 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 a matter of substance. 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 know him. The Spirit is God. And it's important to understand how the Spirit relates to us.

If we think we can strengthen our faith by reaching out to grab some of the Spirit, by transferring some of the Spirit from the world to ourselves, it won't work. The Spirit doesn't increase in us. We increase in the Spirit. We cannot dial up the Spirit on demand. That call won't go through. But through faith we can keep the line open to receive the Spirit's call to us.

Here is the key. 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 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 us connected with Jesus. That is a contemporary lesson that can be based on 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 in the community. 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.*