

## **Staying Found**

Luke 2:41-52

January 2, 2011

### **I.**

Last week we remembered Jesus as a baby, and next week we hear about his baptism as a man. In between is today's reading, which is the only mention of Jesus' childhood in the entire Bible. So, what is the significance of this story about Jesus getting lost as a twelve year old boy?

I'm going to point the way to an answer right at the beginning. Today's reading offers an opportunity to consider what we do when we, like Mary and Joseph, look around and think that Jesus is not there. What do we do when Jesus gets lost?

But that question doesn't sound right, does it? Can Jesus actually get lost? Let's see if we can approach it another way. Look at these beautiful Christmas decorations around the altar. And look especially at the manger scene with Jesus resting in Mary's lap.

This is the last Sunday you will see all that. We celebrate the Epiphany of our Lord next Thursday. In preparation for that day the Flower Guild will carefully disassemble these parts of the visual story of Jesus' birth, and put them in a safe and secure place so we can enjoy the story again next Christmas. They will put Jesus back in a box for another year.

But that doesn't sound right either, does it? How can we put Jesus in a box? Perhaps once again I am looking at Jesus in the wrong way. Earlier I asked what we do when Jesus gets lost. Well, Jesus does not get lost. We are the more likely suspects.

And in the same way, we cannot manage Jesus to suit our own purposes. There is no box, real or theological, able to contain him. Through the Holy Spirit he is everywhere in the world. Today's reading makes clear that the Jesus we worship, and describe in the Nicene Creed, and in whom we share during the Eucharist, is the Lord of our lives now, and his divinity was apparent then.

### **II.**

But this story about Jesus as a young boy is somewhat conspicuous in the unfolding stream of stories in the Gospels. It stands out. It's not in any other Gospel, and it's the only account of the younger days of any New Testament figure. Why did Luke include it in his writings?

There are differences of opinion. Some experts emphasize that it showed Jesus' awareness of his relationship with God the Father at an early age. Others suggest that it demonstrated his knowledge and understanding of Scripture. Still others believe it was evidence that he had special powers even in his youth. Perhaps he was Superboy before he was Superman.

And at this point I feel compelled to briefly digress into a related area. You might have heard fanciful stories about Jesus' so-called special powers as a boy. Some 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 things normal boys could not do.

Scholars know 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. But unlike today, they often wrote in the name of a famous person in order to give their works more authority and wider circulation. There were no laws against that back then.

In addition, ancient fiction, like modern fiction, was intended to be entertaining or to make a point. And long after Paul wrote the epistles that now are part of the New Testament, and many

years after the biblical gospels were completed, a new genre of pseudo-biblical literature began to appear, frequently authored by those who promoted their own novel ideas about Jesus.

And these pseudo-gospels, which conflicted in many ways with teachings and first hand accounts of the apostles, also developed a cultic following of sorts. As a result, over the next few centuries the church had to convene several ecumenical councils to officially separate fact from fiction.

### **III.**

But, end of digression. Back to our reading. We are told Jesus' parents went to Jerusalem every year to celebrate the Passover. Jesus had been there before. It was a regular part of Jewish life. And, of course, the temple was the central focal point for the Passover

But this time, 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 rabbis. And Mary and Joseph were well on their way before they realized he was not with them.

This raises several questions, doesn't it? First, why did it take Joseph and Mary an entire day to realize that Jesus was not there? Wouldn't you suppose they would have checked before they left Jerusalem, or at least made sure he was with someone else?

And then, as Jesus stayed behind, how did he explain his presence to people in the temple? Wouldn't you think they would have asked about Jesus' family and where they were? How would Jesus have answered? A twelve year old boy who suddenly showed up at the temple by himself, and then stayed for three days on his own, probably would have caused concern.

Also, why were Mary and Joseph so surprised to find Jesus in the temple anyway? 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?

And the last question might illuminate the others. How did Jesus think he was going to get back to Nazareth? There were no buses or taxis. He didn't have a horse or donkey. This suggests that Jesus probably knew his parents would come back and find him, and he really felt drawn back to the temple, so he just went.

We probably can identify with Mary and Joseph. Most of us have experienced 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.

But it's also clear that Jesus believed he had a purpose in taking his little road trip. He asked why Mary and Joseph did not understand that he must be in his Father's house? And note from the reading in your bulletins 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 events the Bible describes without further background explanations, and some of the details of this story of Jesus' youth are among them. We take it on faith that it occurred, and that God through the Holy Spirit was at work for reasons not revealed to us.

### **IV.**

And perhaps the real purpose of the story is to lead us to think about what happens today if it seems that Jesus has gotten lost in our lives. What do we do if we sense that he is not with us?

Well, the first thing we might do in those situations is acknowledge that perhaps 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.

Many, many years ago, when I was about ten years old, I got lost while shopping with my mother in a big department store. Naturally I was a little frightened as I ran around the aisles looking for her, and then I heard an announcement over the PA system that Billy White should go to the customer service desk in the right rear of the store.

I did so, and Mom was there waiting for me. That became our understanding. If ever lost again I was to go to the right rear of the store and wait. And it worked several times. I did get lost again, but I knew where to go, and I had faith someone would be there.

The same idea can apply to us. If we think that Jesus is not in our lives, we can know where to go. Where is the spiritual right rear of the store for us, so to speak? And the answer might be different depending on our circumstances, but it is important to remember what it is and to practice it regularly.

And some of those places are obvious, aren't they? We can find Jesus in the church and its Sacraments. Jesus comes to us through prayer and reading the Bible. And we can find him when we share fellowship with others at St. Thomas or help people in the community. We each probably could name other examples that work for us.

But I also have to caution against some of the ways today's church might cause us to get lost even if we were not before. I know that Jesus is not anywhere near some of the ideas that a few church leaders proclaim in his name. Those details are in another sermon, and many of you have heard me speak of them in our Adult Education classes.

But there is a guaranteed way to avoid losing our spiritual bearings. At the center of knowing Jesus is the presence of the Holy Spirit. And I have preached about the Holy Spirit so many times that it might start sounding routine. But the Spirit is anything but routine.

The Spirit is God in the world after Jesus ascended into heaven. The Spirit reveals Jesus to us, and enables us to know his love as the apostles knew it. 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 opens it to us. And we can know the truth 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 separate mysterious invisible power or force. The Spirit will be close to us when we seek God. The Spirit will never be lost and we need not be either if we listen for God's word that the Spirit gives to us.

## V.

So we see that giving ourselves to the Spirit is the way to keep us connected with Jesus. The Spirit will lead us to the right rear of the store, where Jesus awaits. The Spirit is our compass and draws us closer to Christ wherever we might be. And in this way we can be strengthened to do God's will in a fallen world that tempts us to do otherwise.

And even then, for all the efforts we might make, the Spirit is in control. Our assurance is that if we surrender to the Holy 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. He will be in the Father's house, and, we will know he is there for us. *Amen.*