

Sunday, December 27, 2015 – Christmas 1
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
Luke 2:41-52

Where is Jesus?

One story, one singular story, in all of the canonical gospels, there is only one story about Jesus' childhood. We have the story of Jesus as an infant that we hear on Christmas Eve, and many stories of Jesus as an adult, but only this one of Jesus' childhood, recorded only in the gospel of Luke. Of all the possible stories, it's this one: the one where his parents can't find him. What a story to record for posterity. The holy family travels to Jerusalem, and Jesus' parents lose track of him, they have no idea where he is—for three days. These are the legal guardians of the son of God?

But then again, what about Jesus' part in this? At the time of this story he was twelve years old, after all—old enough for some independence. Surely his parents gave him some instructions along with that independence: “You can go off on your own, but don't be gone for too long, and don't go too far.” I don't think Jesus kept up his part of the deal. Yes, he's God, but that seems a little too handy an explanation any time he does something like this. And if you're going to go down that road, shouldn't God be a bit more considerate? Jesus' mother is with me on this. Mary asks: “Child, why have you treated us like this?” Is that not the eternal maternal question: “Child, why have you treated us like this?”

Of all the possible stories of Jesus' childhood, this strange story is the one that's enshrined in scripture? Biblical scholars say that the only possible reason for including such a strange story is that it's true. What's true about it? Where we find Jesus. At least two aspects to where we find Jesus are true.

First: We find Jesus in the Temple, in the special, ritual festivals. Jesus is with us, right here, right now, this special festival, this first Sunday of Christmas, Jesus is with us in the special rite, the sacrament of baptism of little Sonja, happening today. With these special festivals, there's an extra level of excitement. I'm sure there was an extra level of excitement also in Jerusalem, around the holy days. Then, and now, there were out of town guests. Parents of Sonja, Todd & Leslie, count the number in your party before you depart today.

Yet I also note that in the gospel story, though Jesus' family embarks on this special, spiritual sojourn, it's described in a rather perfunctory way. They do this “every year,” and “as usual.” You actually hear less about the festival than that they observed it. You hear less about the mountain top experience than the regularity of the trek. Yes, it was a special occasion, but there's also a sense in which it was just something they did. You might say they were both spiritual, and religious.

There's a word of truth for us here. The spiritual comes with, not apart from, the religious. Jesus is there in the “as usual” of faithful living, in the way that being spiritual is something you do, year in and year out. There was a sacredness to the day of Sonja's birth, the miracle that was, and there is a sacredness to every single day of her life, what a miracle it is to be her parent. So also, the Spirit is poured out on us in the singular sacrament of baptism, and we grow in the Spirit in the promises and practices that accompany it: worshipping, praying, serving, giving—there's a holy presence to these regular practices, even if they sometimes feel perfunctory. Week in and week out, they might not have the same high as a holiday, but how important they are. You may not be able to tell me what you had to eat every day last week, but I

can tell you it was important that you eat something, every week, every day. In the regularity of religious practice, in the as usual observations, in today's gospel story, in the ultimate inevitability of where Jesus is found, there's a rather droll commentary being made: You want to find God? There's a rather obvious place to look.

Second, a second aspect of where we find Jesus: We find Jesus in the listening, and the questioning. When Jesus is finally located, in the Temple, the gospel says that he is found seated with the teachers, and he's listening to them and asking them questions. Jesus takes time for them; he wants to hear from them. God in Jesus inquires, investigates, invests in people. As God does, as God takes time, we can, too. We'll need to take time, to live out the practices and promises of faith. And as we do, we can add these practices and promises: patience, curiosity, engagement. These are Godly qualities, God-like things to do. Where is Jesus? Jesus is there in inquisitive, patient attention. Jesus was so very patient, even while his parents were probably frantic, Jesus takes his time—three days! (Later on in the gospel, there's another story about a desperate three days without Jesus) Jesus takes time to engage with those around him.

All who hear this are amazed at Jesus' understanding. Notice, though, that we never hear exactly what Jesus says to them. We don't hear what he says that makes them amazed. In fact, not a word is recorded from the lips of Jesus until later in the story, until its very end... I find it fascinating that the gospel records the story in this way. I think that even more surprising, or strange, than a story of Jesus being misplaced, is a story of Jesus' restraint. I mean, he is God, after all. He could make didactic announcements. But according to this gospel story, that's not how God operates. Like the Temple leaders in today's story, I find that amazing—I am amazed that God is like that.

Although, I must also admit, sometimes, like Jesus' parents, it makes me frantic. Where are you, God? Why have you treated me this way?! Why can't you write out all the answers? I think that Christian faith is sometimes portrayed as if once you find God you have all the answers. But today's story, and so many others in the Bible, makes me suspicious of that. According to this story, finding God, is less about getting all the answers, than sitting with God, and having God question you.

That's what Jesus does. The first thing he says in this story, the only story we have from Jesus childhood, and so the first thing that is recorded from the lips of Jesus in the entire gospel of Luke, is, after all, a question. In the story, the question is posed to his parents, but really it is posed to all of us: "Why were you searching for me?" The story says that his parents don't really understand what he's saying. To answer—for them, and for us—it'll take years of living with Jesus. We know, like Mary, what treasure in our hearts that we'll find there.