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Colossians 3:12-17

Luke 2:40-52

WHEN JESUS IS MISSING

We have gone through the season of Advent, a time of preparation for the coming of our Lord Jesus. On Christmas Eve, we celebrated his birth and welcomed anew his entrance into our world and into our lives. But now, just days later, we are presented with a story about losing him. The New Testament contains only one account describing anything about Jesus between his infancy and when he reached the age of thirty. Yet this single account we have is a profound one describing something that happened when Jesus was twelve, telling about a situation where Jesus was not where his parents expected him to be. This story is an occasion for us to explore what we need to lose so we don't lose track of Jesus.

It was Passover - a time when Jews from all over Israel made their pilgrimage to Jerusalem to remember how God had delivered them from slavery in Egypt. The Gospel of Luke tells us that Joseph, Mary, and Jesus went every year to this religious celebration. By the time Jesus was twelve, he certainly would have learned the great story of the Exodus. He must have been taught that it was God's business to deliver people from anyone or anything that enslaves. Like other Jewish parents, Mary and Joseph told Jesus that the people were waiting for God to send someone to deliver them again - a Messiah, who would lead them into the great blessings God intended for them.

After the Passover celebration was over, all of the people who had traveled from Nazareth started their return trip. But after starting their trip, Mary and Joseph discover to their horror that their eldest child was missing. We are told that they had assumed he was in the group of travelers with family or friends. We know that life was very communal in those days. We know it was common for groups of people to travel together as a community. Mary and Joseph certainly knew that twelve-year-olds prefer to be with other young people their age, especially on trips. Jesus was old enough to know it was his responsibility to be on the caravan home.

Maybe his parents had even been working on the ‘responsibility’ thing with him. But in spite of all of this, Jesus wasn’t with the group that left for home.

Before Nancy and I had children, I had a difficult time understanding this passage because it didn’t make sense to me that you could lose a twelve-year-old. But as a parent who has had children go through their teenage years, I certainly understand how such a mishap could have occurred. And frankly, I take some comfort in knowing that even the holy family had at least one communication snafu and a bad holiday experience.

After Mary and Joseph discover that they have lost Jesus, they are understandably anxious. Few things frighten a parent more than losing track of a child. After checking with their fellow travelers, they discovered that Jesus never began the trip home, which meant he most likely was still in Jerusalem. There were a lot of places in the city where a young person could get into trouble. For three days they searched for him. Finally, they discover him alive and well - in the temple. Who would expect to find a twelve-year-old kid hanging around the gathering place for the faith community? Talking to the clergy? Talking theology? Joseph and Mary are described as being astonished. But Mary also sounds like she is pretty upset with Jesus when she says, “Child! why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.” It was as if to say, “Jesus, why aren’t you where you are supposed to be?”

Perhaps some of us have felt frustrated, even angry, that Jesus was not where we expected him to be. Having just passed through Christmas, and having just told ourselves the great news once again that the Savior is now with us, we then set out on the road back to normal. We expect Jesus to be with us now. Even if we cannot see him, like Mary and Joseph, we assume he is near. It would be frightening to discover he is not as near as we thought. Those who assumed they were taking Jesus with them on the road to a prosperous New Year may have already found that he is hard to find when they call on him to save their dreams. It was just a few days ago that we were singing “Joy to the world, the Lord is come.” How could we have lost Jesus already? Some of us lose him as we return to work. Others lose him in relating to family and neighbors. Again, it is so bewildering when we cannot find Jesus in the place where we expect him to be.

When we realize that we don't know what we thought we knew about Jesus, like his parents, we begin our search for him. We move pretty quickly from Plan A to Plan B - looking to regain the joy of the season. Some of us may even be all the way to Plan X or Y by now, and we don't even have the Christmas tree out of the house yet. Some try a new tact in addressing a challenge. Some of us eventually make our way into the house of worship. When we do finally stumble into the place where we find an active Jesus, it is always astonishing. Those who have long nurtured a cynicism about the established church are astonished to find him in a traditional church like this one. And those who expect him only to be here are astonished to find that Jesus does other things than hang out in a religious institution. Parents are astonished to find Jesus blessing their children who have chosen a different path, and children are astonished to find a reflection of Christ's wisdom from their aging parents. Liberals cannot believe that Jesus could be with conservatives, and conservatives are out of their minds astonished to find him in parts of liberal agendas. Those who have always been successful will be amazed to find him somewhere in their failures. Those who have grown accustomed to their hurt will be astonished to find Jesus as a healer. For some bizarre reason, we continue to be amazed to find him among the poor and marginalized.

According to the text, Jesus is often not in the place we expect him to be and maybe not even in the place where we think he should be. We come to realize that his agenda is not always the same as ours in terms of placement and timing. To tell the truth, that's enough to make most of us somewhat angry. So we echo Mary's lament: "Jesus, why have you treated us like this? We have looked all over for you!" His response, the very first words he utters in Luke's Gospel are so striking. With these questions, perhaps he indicates his explorational faith. "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" Or in a variant reading: "Did you not know that I must be about my Father's interests?"

What are those interests? If we know those, I dare say we won't have such a hard time locating Jesus, at work within us or in our midst. In our passage from Colossians, Paul instructs the readers of his epistle to let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts, to let the word of Christ dwell in us richly, and in word or deed, we are told to do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus. Jesus is not an ambulance driver who just comes when we beckon. He is not a magician or a fix-it man. He

doesn't even protect us from all accidents or tragedy. Jesus Christ is the mission of God on earth, and he conducts it in his own way.

When we suffer a loss or a great disappointment and it seems that the Savior is not near, we need to realize that we actually have not lost Jesus. We may have lost our expectations of him, however, there is now no place that is void of his saving presence. He is not far away. We simply get blinded to his presence by our expectations. God has more Christmas gifts of unfolding revelation than we have yet received. We have only to lay down our limited expectations to see that.

There is one final response by Mary to all of this. She did not stay angry. We are told that she "treasured all of these things in her heart." It was the same response she made to the story of the shepherds when Jesus was born. There would be a lot of that for Mary in the years ahead. It would all culminate at Passover, again, twenty something years later when she found her son on a cross, another place she did not expect him to be. But amazingly, that was where Jesus needed to be in order to be about God's interests. Not as we would have expected is the work and way of our Lord. We don't have to understand everything about Jesus' ongoing ministry. We don't even have to see it all the time. If we could control Jesus, he wouldn't be God. We do well in joining Mary, in treasuring even our challenging encounters with him and taking it to heart. May you recognize the blessed and blessing presence of Jesus throughout the coming year.