WHERE IS HE?

Scripture: Luke 2:42-52 and Colossians 3:12-17

FOCUS: As Mary and Joseph lost track of Jesus we likewise lose touch with his presence in our lives.

Most parents have been there. You are at the mall, in the park or perhaps at church and all of the sudden you don’t know where one or more of your children are. Now I will not call any names, but I have been part of the search committee for more than one of our church kids. It is an uncomfortable feeling at best and a source of panic at worst when we cannot locate a child. I tis easy to assume the worst, after all we have become a nation which excels at doing just that. The instant we realize that we don’t know where a child is we begin the search. That is the way it should be, that just makes good sense.

So what was up with Mary and Joseph? Why on earth did it take them a whole day to turn around and three days to locate their son? Sounds to me like they needed some parenting classes? What were they thinking? Were they just not paying attention? Were they so wrapped up in themselves, perhaps trying to impress friends or drum up business for Joseph’s carpentry business that they forgot about their son? Actually, all indications are that Mary and Joseph were good parents, loving, nurturing and attentive.

To fully understand the delay we need to consider the setting and remember the times. The festival of the Passover was the most important of the three great Jewish religious celebrations, think Christmas or Easter in our tradition, except think having to travel to Montgomery on foot for the observances. For faithful first century Jews, when it came to feast days, place was as important as occasion. You didn’t celebrate Passover at home unless absolutely necessary, you went to Jerusalem. Everybody went to Jerusalem. Faithful children of God, marginally committed families, the first century equivalent of our Easter and Christmas folk, vendors of all kinds, entrepreneurs with wild ideas and novelty items, thieves intent on duping the teaming crowds.

Jerusalem during Passover was a hectic and invigorating city. There was much to do and many things to see, plenty of temptations for a youngster. The sights, sounds, colors, smells and tastes would have filled those present with an excitement rarely, if ever, experienced back in small towns like Nazareth. There would have been scores of young folks there, all looking for adventure and new friends. Jesus, like all the others, would have been wide eyed, a bit amazed, and ready to explore and experience the wonder of the occasion. As was customary in that day, he was most likely allowed to venture off as long as he periodically checked with Mary and Joseph.

Twelve year olds, that was Jesus age when he made this pilgrimage to the temple, were considered to be on the cusp of adulthood. Mary was most likely only in her early teens when Jesus had been born, so at this juncture she is most likely still in her twenties. Adult responsibilities and the accompanying freedom associated with them came at an early age in first century Israel. As those preparing to be officially confirmed as full Jewish men in less than a year, Jesus and his peers would have been given significant freedom while in Jerusalem.

The annual journeys to and from Jerusalem for the feast days were significant social occasions. It was customary for the women and children to travel in the front of the caravan while the men would bring up the rear, thereby being in position to protect the women and children were there to be a threat from the petty thieves who often sought to ambush unwary travelers along the dusty roads of ancient Israel. The travel arrangements also fostered the renewal of old relationships and offered a time to catch up with friends and acquaintances. How often during the holidays do we find the men gathering in one room or on the back porch while the women congregate somewhere else? The travel days offered that kind of opportunity for families and friends.

Given his age and in between status it would have been acceptable for Jesus to be at either end of the procession. He was still young enough to be considered a child yet old enough to be seen as almost a man. It is therefore quite understandable that each of his parents would have assumed Jesus was traveling with the other. Some of us have experienced similar situations, haven’t we? ***“What do you mean where is our son, I thought he was with you?”***

Scripture is unclear concerning the time between when the panicked parents realize that Jesus is missing and when he is located in the temple. We read that they found Jesus “after the third day.” That could mean after a total of three days; a day’s travel before he was found missing, a day’s travel back and a day in Jerusalem. But it could also mean that after returning to Jerusalem it took them three days to find Jesus. I find that possibility intriguing. Put yourself in the sandals of Mary and Joseph. Jesus is a typical twelve year old kid, struggling to adapt as he makes that uncomfortable transition to adulthood. He is at that awkward age where part of him has matured and part is still very much a child. The temptations and allures of the big city were almost limitless and the two worried parents knew of them all.

Perhaps they searched in the marketplace. It would have been a frustrating search, for the crowds were still there. As they described their beloved son to vendors and bargain hunters the description could have been of scores of kids in the market that day. Mary and Joseph probably had friends in town, maybe he was with one of them they thought, so they went from home to home. They probably searched in the neighborhood surrounding the inn where they had stayed for the celebration. Maybe he had left something there and returned to retrieve it. They looked all day, or for three days depending on which interpretation you choose, but he was nowhere to be found.

Finally in desperation they went to the last place they ever expected to find him, they went to the temple. We need not be too hard on Mary and Joseph. While it is true that they had received God’s word that their child was unique, they were a long way away from Bethlehem and twelve years removed from the events of that first Christmas morning. It is fair to assume, given the silence of scripture concerning Jesus’ childhood, that he had been a rather normal kid, doing kid things, making kid mistakes, causing his parents frustration as do all kids, bringing the special joy only a child can bring. Now, as much as I would like to think it could be otherwise, I am pretty certain that if an precocious child were to escape his or her parents for a bit of adventure here in Daleville, the church is not the first place the parents would look, nor is it the place where the child would most likely be found.

So we can identify with the holy couple. When they finally did go, out of desperation, to the only placed they had not already looked, the temple, they were amazed, relieved and more than a little perturbed to find Jesus calmly sitting with the religious scholars. I suspect they were also a bit put out with the teachers. Didn’t they know the boy’s parents would be looking for him? Imagine the troubled and agitated parents surprise when they discovered that not only has Jesus been asking deep, thoughtful questions of the rabbis, he had actually been taking questions from them and astounding them with his wisdom. It must have been confusing for them. Perhaps Mary and Joseph remembered what the angel Gabriel had said to them. Maybe they had an inkling that this was all somehow a part of what God had in mind. Still, they were parents, a bit angry no doubt, most likely irritated by the time spent and the schedules upset, but relieved.

***“Son, how could you do this to us? We were worried sick, you ought to know better.”*** Now I can’t help but get a bit amused thinking of what comes next. Imagine yourself in this scene. What would your parental response be to the preteen lad’s reply? ***“I ought to know better? You ought to know better. Doesn’t it make sense that you should have looked for me first in my father’s house.”***  We are not told how Mary and Joseph reacted to that response. Perhaps that is just as well. But we are told that Jesus then went back to his home and was obedient to his parents. And we are told that Mary treasured all these things in her heart. We have previously been told of Mary pondering things in her heart. I think that is descriptive here as well.

We have journeyed through Advent, hung the greens, sung the carols, and lit the candles. Now in a few short days all the decorations that are not already removed will be gone and it will be time leave Christmas behind and to get back to work and to school, time to return to normal routines in ordinary places on ordinary days. And that is as it should be. After a detour to Egypt in order to escape a ruthless despot, the strange and magnificent events of Bethlehem behind them, it seems the holy family returned to an ordinary life in not so remarkable Nazareth. For several years we hear nothing about their lives.

Then after this brief interlude it seems there were fifteen more unremarkable years, years of which we have no record. There is an important message for us here. Mary and Joseph left Bethlehem and the awesome events there behind and returned to the routines of life at home. Joseph and Mary witnessed something special in the temple that day after Passover then went back to their quiet lives in a quiet town. Likewise, we are called to be filled with wonder during these special days and then to move on past Advent and Christmas as we return to routines.

There are surely high holy moments in sanctuaries on special occasions. The special spirit of generosity does seem to be particularly prevalent for a few weeks the end of each year. The bright lights and fresh smelling symbols of the season do seem to remind us of our calling. But real ministry, real spiritual formation, real holiness come only as we ponder the mysteries we have experienced and go back home, to work, to school, committed to living out the faith in regular, even mundane ways in ordinary places on average days. That is what all three members of the holy family did. How can we do less?

But I want to go back to that pondering thing. To ponder is, according to the dictionary, ***“to consider something deeply and thoroughly, to meditate”***. When Mary encountered God in amazing and confusing ways she pondered. Or as our scripture from Luke says, she treasured the moments. No doubt as she pondered and treasured, her life was enriched and changed. When Mary returned to Nazareth from Bethlehem, everything was the same and everything was different. The setting was familiar, but as any of us who have brought a child home from the hospital know, life was dramatically altered, because Jesus was in the house. And when that young couple returned to Nazareth from Jerusalem having been reminded of the unique nature of the young man, the son who returned with them, life was the same and life was different. Joseph still went about his carpentry work. Mary continued to be a faithful wife and mother, but everything was seen in a different light as they pondered the nature of the child who had caused them such anguish those three days. There would still be times when Mary and the rest of her family were not sure about Jesus, but somehow there was always that treasured memory deep within.

We recognize Advent as a time to prepare ourselves for the coming of Christ. Since we are all here this morning it is pretty clear that the end of time was not on December 25th. The final coming of Jesus was not on Christmas this year. But that does not mean Christ didn’t come on Christmas morning or on any other day for that matter. I pray that he came anew to us all during these days and I pray that we will continue to welcome him as we travel through the coming year. We will certainly return to routines and jobs and schools and home responsibilities. But if we have really had a Christmas, everything will be the same and everything will be different. We will live and work and study and play in the same places. But we will live as those who not only marveled at a child in a manager, but who are committed to bringing his Spirit with us into a new year.

What do those who bring that Spirit with them look like? Well our epistle lesson makes it quite clear. They are those who reflect the life of the one whose birth we have celebrated. That is what we are to do if we truly desire to bring the baby home with us, if we are willing to allow him and his Spirit to grow with and in us. My prayer as we begin to move through Christmas and toward a new year is that we may all live as those who know where Jesus is, in our hearts, and who seek to lead others to know where to find him. My charge to you is that you seek to so live this year that you reflect the Spirit of the one for whom the angels sang, for whom the star shone. So I close with Paul’s words to the church in Colossae as a reminder of what such a life looks like.

***“As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord*** ***has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ*** ***dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.*** ***And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. “*** For your sake, for the sake of the one who came and who still comes, and for the sake of all God’s children, let it be so. In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN.