

# SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Christmas  
Year A

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December 27, 2015

Text: Luke 2:41-52

Title: "Finding Bethlehem in the Midst of Bedlam: Losing Jesus"

Some of you may remember this story as I've told it before. Lynn and I were in the mall with our young son. Just shopping. Josh was a toddler—2 or 3 years old. We were in a women's clothing store. She was looking. I was roaming around as husbands do in these stores with the same "I-really-don't-want-to-be-here-but-I-owe-my-wife-and-this-is-a-love-gift"-look that I saw in other husbands' eyes.

I thought Josh was with Lynn. She thought he was with me. But when we met back up with each other in the back of the store, we discovered the truth: he wasn't with either of us.

We started calling his name, calmly at first, but no Josh. Not a peep. Then a slight panic set in as we raced around the store with more urgency every second that passed without hearing or seeing him. It's amazing--isn't it?--how quickly the mind rushes to the horrible possibilities in these situations, the stories we've all heard about abducted children and the usual grim results.

Lynn went out to the store entrance to see if he'd wandered out in the mall traffic. I started searching the racks from the front of the store to the back. I came to a round rack of dresses that hung from the bar nearly all the way to the floor. It was in the middle of the store. Spreading the dresses apart, I heard a giggle, then saw our cute little toddler sitting cross-legged, big smile on his face, then laughing at his father and the panicked expression on my face. It's amazing, too—isn't it?--how a person can feel the power of two opposing feelings at the same time: first, the urgency to sweep him up in my arms and thank God he's safe and yet at the same time the urge to swat him for putting us through those few uncomfortable moments. Losing a child isn't fun and games.

That personal incident reminds me of a story I read of a pastor who phoned the home of some recent church visitors. A voice answered with a whispered

"Hello."

Pastor: "Who is this?"

Whisper: "Jimmy."

Pastor: "How old are you, Jimmy?"

Whisper: "Four."

"Jimmy, may I please speak to your mom?"

"She's busy."

"Then may I speak to your dad?"

"He's busy."

"Are there any other adults at your home?"

"The police."  
"Then let me speak to one of the police officers."  
"They're busy."  
"Who else is there?"  
"Firemen."  
"Well, put one of the firemen on the phone."  
"They're busy."  
"Jimmy, what are they all busy doing?"  
"They're looking for me."

(--Leith Anderson, *Winning the Values War in a Changing Culture*, Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1994) 101-102)

I don't know if Mary and Joseph had people helping them in their search for their missing son, but ever since that experience with our son, when I read this account in Luke's Gospel—and only Luke's Gospel has this story, I more deeply empathize with Mary and Joseph. Missing a child—or anyone we love—affects the human heart in ways that can bring pain, if only for an instant.

So after three days of not knowing where he is, when they do find him, Mary is justifiably upset: "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." What's the cheer of encouragement I so often hear these days, "You go, girl!" Mary, you're absolutely right to ask that question of your son. We understand how you feel. We know what it means to search for someone important to us.

I wonder if this story of losing Jesus raises questions for us: "When was the last time you searched for God with that kind of urgency? When was the last time you felt any anxiety about finding God? When was the last time you've gone looking for Jesus and expected to find him?"

This isn't so much about the losing part, though, as it is the finding. The boy isn't lost in the Jerusalem market. No abductor has him imprisoned against his will somewhere. He hasn't run away. He was a good Jew as were his parents. They were faithful to the observances of their faith which took them to Jerusalem in the first place, to celebrate Passover. On the eighth day after his birth he had been circumcised. When it came time for Mary to be purified after having given birth, they went to the Temple and offered their sacrifice. Jesus was raised in a family that went to church. This family was rooted in the historic faith into which all of them were born. The Bible tells us that Jesus was a faithful Jew from the beginning, and so when after three days of searching his parents finally find him, he's in the Temple, the place for religious learning and worship, not out on the street somewhere seeking entertainment and thrills.

Nevertheless, Mary asks her justified question and Jesus answers her with a response they don't quite understand, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" Other translations prefer "...I must be about my Father's business." Either way the need—it wasn't just a want!--the need Jesus expressed was to be with God, to be near God.

Bishop Krister Stendahl was the Bishop of Stockholm in the Church of Sweden. He was also a Swedish theologian, a New Testament scholar, and professor emeritus at Harvard Divinity School. He told the story of the little boy who kept following his mother around the house, from one room to another, until she said: "What is it that you want?" The lad replied, "Nothing, I just want to be where you are." The Bishop said further that's what prayer is. We simply want to be where God is.

Jesus needed to be with God, so he went to the Temple, the place in which God could be found. It was the place in which people gathered to give to God, to pray, to open themselves to God.

Unfortunately, according to George Barna, a pollster for religious issues in the U.S., seven out of 10 adults (71 percent) said they have never experienced God's presence at a church service. (George Barna, *The Index Of Leading Spiritual Indicators*, (1996), 50.)

But then again as one writer on spiritual matters puts it, "'God is no more present in a church than in a drinking bar, but generally we are more present to God in a church than in a bar."

(Ronald Rolheiser, *The Shattered Lantern: Rediscovering The Felt Presence of God* (New York: Crossroad, 1995), 19.)

Even in church, it takes openness to God, a search for God, a desire to be with God, and a trust that God is present in order to find God. Jesus had to be—it wasn't a choice—he needed to be with God, so he went to the place in which his tradition and his family trusted God was present.

I read the story of a mother who has a different way of asking her children how their day went. As she tucks her children into bed each night, she asks them a question: 'Where did you meet God today?' And they tell her, one by one: A teacher helped me; there was a homeless person in the park; I saw a tree with lots of flowers on it. She tells them where she met God, too. Before the children drop off to sleep, the stuff of the day has become the substance of their prayer." (Dorothy Bass, in *Receiving the Day* (Jossey-Bass): "How was your day?", Quoted in Context, September 2006)

What a great way to end the day!  
What a great way to end a service!  
What a great way to end a year!

I invite you to ponder where did you meet God today?  
Where did you meet God this year?

Consider sharing it with someone because it's in the conversations that we have--the dialogues that take place--that we often find Jesus.