

Jeremiah 31:7-14
Psalm 84
Ephesians 1:3-6, 15-19a
Luke 2:41-52

Christmas 2C
St Barnabas, Bainbridge Island
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About My Father's Business

Merry Christmas! We get 12 days to celebrate the season of Christmas and today is the 9th day. It was just over a week ago that the baby Jesus was born and already he's 12 years old.

Have you ever thought about how little of Jesus' life we really know? Yes, we have a lot of detail of the last three years of his life, but precious little of the first 30. For whatever reason, those first 30 years – other than Jesus' birth and these few verses - don't seem to rate any coverage. There are writings about Jesus as a boy-child... the Infancy Gospel of Thomas tells stories of Jesus startling other children with his divine powers and bewildering his teachers with his adult-like wisdom, but we never hear those stories in church, and we won't find them in the bible. In fact there seems to be no interest in how Jesus grew up, how he was influenced by his family and community, or even what he did or said. The Nicene creed which we say every Sunday bears this out too. The creed speaks of the three persons of the trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God the Father gets one sentence. The Holy Spirit gets two. The church, baptism and resurrection get one each. But even though Jesus gets a whopping ten sentences in the creed, there is precious little said about his life. Pay attention when you say it today – you'll see what I mean. Jesus was made incarnate from the virgin Mary and became human. Then he was crucified. There's nothing at all about the miracles or the healings or the teachings, nothing about Jesus being the pattern for our lives. The Bible is the same way. The second chapter of Luke's gospel begins with Jesus' birth – it's the story we hear on Christmas Eve each year, with the angels and shepherds and the baby lying in the manger wrapped in swaddling clothes. Next, Jesus is 8 days old when, according to Jewish law, his parents took him to the temple to be circumcised and presented as holy to the Lord.

So that's good – we've got a lot of coverage for the first week of Jesus' life. But the very next thing in Luke's gospel – a gospel that says more about Jesus' early life than any other – is what we heard today. We've skipped 12 years, and it will be another 18 before we hear anything else. This incident in Jerusalem is all we get of Jesus' life until he begins his earthly ministry, around the age of 30.

One passage. And a strange one at that. What is your reaction to hearing that a child has gone missing for a whole day before his parents even notice he is gone? What parent or grandparent these days could ever imagine not noticing that a child had gone missing? When we think of this in our context, it sounds like taking a road trip to Disneyland, packing up and heading home, only to notice when we stopped at Taco Bell in Ashland that one of our children is missing, then

frantically returning to LA and searching three days before finding him waiting in line for the Matterhorn.¹

But it wasn't like that at all. Life in first century Palestine was nothing like 21st century life in the Pacific Northwest. The pilgrimage Jesus' family made to Jerusalem each year was something every faithful Jew – which meant everyone in the entire village, joined in. And as the crowd journeyed on, others joined in as well. You see, people back then lived fully into the reality that it takes a village to raise a child, and all children were cared for by all the grown-ups in their midst. It wouldn't have been unusual for Jesus, or any other child from Nazareth to be traveling with someone other than their own nuclear family, because the notion of a nuclear family didn't exist back then. So while our first inclination might be to be horrified by Mary and Joseph losing track of their child, their behavior was perfectly normal in a world where every adult looked after every child.

As it turns out, Jesus was the one with the unusual behavior.

It seems he didn't understand how in the world his parents could possibly have wondered where he was. He offered no apology, no remorse, not even a hint of regret for doing something that had his parents in a full tilt panic for three days. He only had questions for them... WHY were you searching? How could you not have known where I was?

How could you not have known where I was? Can you imagine Jesus asking you that question?

Searching for Jesus and not being able to find him has as much to do with us today as it had to do with his parents 2,000 years ago. Sometimes it feels like we search and we search and we search for Jesus and cannot, for the life of us, find him. And then we tell ourselves there is something wrong with us. After all, Jesus promised "I am with you always, even to the end of the age." so why, we wonder, can't we find him, can't we feel him? He's right here, or so he says, but sometimes we can't tell.

If we think of Jesus as the light of the world, he should be easy to spot.

If we think of Jesus as the good shepherd, we should feel his protective presence.

If we think of Jesus as the gate, we only need to walk through.

If we think of Jesus as the bread of life, maybe we just need to come to communion.

But for some of us, or maybe most of us some of the time, Jesus is hard to find these days. We are constantly bombarded with bad news, we're emotionally exhausted by a pandemic that won't go away, and we're worried about our families and friends. For the first time, several members of our congregation aren't in church because they are in isolation, having been exposed to COVID this Christmastide. It seems like things are getting worse instead of better, and they are. So "Where is God in all this?" is a perfectly reasonable question. But Jesus asks a

¹ Inspired by the Rev. David Lose in "Christmas Devotions," 1/5/13

question in return... why are you searching? Did you not know that I would be in my Father's house? My favorite translation puts it differently – "Did you not know that I would be about my Father's business?" That feels like an entirely different question. It wasn't where Jesus was physically located that mattered. It was what he was doing that mattered. And what he was doing, was the work of the Father. That is important information for this community, especially now. We long to be in the beautiful, holy, sacred space of our church, a place where we're steeped in decades of prayer, where we can hear sacred music played on our glorious organ, a place where we imagine God lives. We long to sink into the comfort and familiarity of that place, to close our eyes and let the liturgy wash over us, especially now, when comfort and familiarity are in short supply. And while I am so grateful we have a safer place to worship, here in the parish hall, I too, long to be in the church. And still, it isn't about the place.

We come to church for so many reasons. We need strength for the journey throughout the days and weeks to come, and we'd like just to be able to sink into what we have always known. And we can't. Not just because we're in the parish hall instead of the church, but because the world we have always known, or the world we thought we knew, is no longer. Yes, we are still held in the ritual of our liturgy, our history and our tradition, and at the same time, we're being invited into something new. That's not particularly good news for all of us. It would be so nice just to go to church in the church without a mask on, to close our eyes and to take in all the words and smells and the sacrament too... but we can't. We can curl up in our chair and be sorry about that, or we can wonder about what amazing new thing God is calling us into. God didn't cease to exist because we can't have cozy, comfy church in our extraordinary cozy, comfy, holy, beautiful sacred space. God willing, we'll go back there. But the world cannot wait for us to bring the presence of the living, loving God until we can worship in the church.

This little story is something I think we really need to pay attention to. We get one story in 29 years, and from it we learn that being about the Father's business is where we will find God. It's easy to glance over, and perhaps that's what we'd prefer to do. We are tired, we are weary, we are spent. It's all true. But who will bring the good news, if not us? This isn't about muscling through. This is about seeking God, resting in God, doing a mediocre or even bad job of connecting with God when God feels so far off... and still trusting that God is right here and that you are the face of God for every single person you encounter.

I know the struggle of searching for God. And that struggle is holy. I know that God can feel absent... And I've learned that "feeling" God is only a bonus, that recognizing God's faithfulness is what is lifegiving. Maybe that doesn't sound like good news to you, but it is, because it means God is right here, right now, whether or not we "feel" God. When we do God's work in the world, we will, Jesus tells us, find God. We need to create quiet so we can listen, pray honestly and tell God how we feel, we need to worship together and receive communion in order to be nourished so that we can be about the Father's business in the world, because doing God's work in the world, Jesus says, is where we will find him. Nothing can separate us from God – not a pandemic or nasty politics or living in a culture that feels devoid of kindness and caring. When

we are doing God's good work in the world, we WILL encounter God. And that, my dears, is nothing short of lifegiving. Amen.