

Text: Luke 2:41-51

Don't Lose the Christ of Christmas

In a mall during Christmas Jingle Bells was playing loudly over the speakers. It was interrupted by the announcer, "May I have your attention please!" the friendly voice said. "There are two lost parents in the store. Would the parents of Jamie and Susie, please come to the office so your children may find you." This is a courteous and humorous way to look for lost kids. It puts the kids and the parents at ease and aids in the fast resolution of a scary situation. A situation Mary and Joseph had in our gospel reading. But with one big difference. At the mall I'll bet the children were just as scared as the lost parents. But in Jesus' case he doesn't seem very concerned at all. Perhaps that is an important detail of the reading. Perhaps Jesus wasn't lost at all, but Mary and Joseph were.

Luke begins his gospel by telling us that what he has written comes from what "those who were eyewitnesses from the beginning have told us." (Luke 1:2). It's very probable that Luke interviewed Mary and Mary told Luke how it all happened. That's probably why Luke has such details about the birth of both John the Baptist and Jesus, and also about Jesus' early life. In fact this is the only story in the Bible about Jesus' youth.

Mary and Joseph had gone to the Passover Festival in Jerusalem just as they had done every year with Jesus. From Nazareth where they lived, it was 65 miles to Jerusalem, about a four or five day journey. They traveled with lots of other families. There's safety in numbers and the fellowship and conversation along the way made the long trip easier. The children would play together and entertain each other as children do.

Looking back on the whole thing, Mary recalled that it was the year that Jesus turned 12. They just assumed he was with them, that is, with the caravan they were traveling with. They just assumed he was with his friends, doing stuff that boys like to do. But at the end of a day's journey, He never checked in with them as He had always done. Mary asked Joseph, "Have you seen Yeshua?" Joseph responded, "Me? I thought he was with you. You're his mother." Mary might have responded, "I thought he was with you. You're his father." To which Joseph would have responded, "No, not really."

For the bulk of the world the Christmas season has been festooned with all kinds of worldly trappings. For one thing everyone is supposed to be joyful and triumphant. On every hand one encounters signs that speak of it; smiling faces, happy greetings, family reunions, friendly gatherings, eager children, beautiful music, special church services. For a moment everyone seems to share something of the spirit of joy that surrounds this time of year. Or if you listen to the economic news about Christmas it's all about consuming and getting good sales figures. Our retailers rely upon Christmas to make their whole year's profits.

Then for the world all too often, once Christmas day is over, the joyful appearances fade as well. The smiles are gone, people move back into their routine without even a hint that Christmas has made any difference at all except for the big bills, the trees chucked out the back door, the decorations taken down and packed away again, and the church goes back to its own routine as well.

Why? More than likely for the world the spirit of joy is just so much emotional enthusiasm, it is just so much ha ha and ho ho. The world's Christmas is not rooted in Christ at all. If Christmas joy is not rooted in the good news that God has acted decisively on our behalf by sending his son to be our Savior from sin and death, then it's little wonder that Christmas joy doesn't last. It is not truly joy at all but an emotional high or a diversion in the midst of the humdrum and plodding lives we find ourselves in.

But those of us who recognize that in the birth of Christ we are the ransomed, we are the recipients of God's goodness, we are forgiven of all our black and evil sins, we have the spirit and the word of Christ dwelling in our hearts and that is not emotional high or temporary happiness, but everlasting and true joy in the midst of all our troubles and pains. We have something that does not fade with the passing of holiday. For us everyday is a holyday because in everyday we discover afresh the gift of the Savior come from God to save us. Christmas is not just a time of giving and receiving but a time for giving and receiving as a reminder of what God first gave and what each of us constantly receives from God through Jesus Christ. But there is always the possibility that we could lose the joy of Christmas in fact almost all of us have done that sometime or the other.

Mary and Joseph had a time when they almost lost not only the joy but even the Christ of Christmas. It was a normal, yearly occurrence for them. The yearly trip to Jerusalem for the Passover celebration. Of course they took Jesus along with them. And more than likely as usual they went to all the sites of Jerusalem: Herod's palace, the frescoes, watched the throngs of people, saw the marching of the Roman garrison, and especially visited the temple where they would join the throng to buy the Passover lamb for their celebration. This was no doubt a source of great amazement and interest for the 12 year old Jesus.

After the seven days of unleavened bread, Mary and Joseph prepared to return to Nazareth as usual, nothing stupendous about this trip. It was going just as planned. But unknown to Mary and Joseph this trip would be very different from previous years. Jesus had other plans. He remained behind in Jerusalem.

A day's journey back to Nazareth went by until Mary noticed that Jesus wasn't with the rest of the family. She looked for him among the relatives but no one had seen him. She thought Jesus was with Joseph and Joseph thought he was with Mary. Frantically they returned to Jerusalem to look for the boy. None of their relatives had seen him. Perhaps they try the authorities but like today they are almost no help, children run away all the time. They begin a house to house search. Three days pass and then Mary perhaps remembers how fascinated Jesus was with the temple. Perhaps they should look there. And sure enough there they find Jesus. Now perhaps they could finish their pilgrimage without further mishap.

But again this is not to be because Jesus is no ordinary boy. When Jesus is in someone's presence, even this 12 year old Jesus, there is no ignoring his special character and work. He sits among the teachers asking penetrating questions and answering with such understanding of the Scriptures that all are amazed.

Mary is astounded that Jesus was unconcerned about his being separated from her. But Jesus knew that he was not lost. In fact it was Mary and Joseph who were lost without Jesus. Jesus reminds them that he is in his Father's house. Mary and Joseph did not understand. The temple was not Joseph's house. Had they so soon forgotten the miracle of Jesus' conception and birth as God's son? Had they like us not let the

Christmas event remain in their lives and hearts? They needed a reminder after these twelve years just who Jesus was and what he was to do.

He had to be about his Father's work. Someday he would leave the carpenter's shop in Nazareth to take on the work as the sacrificial lamb of God. He would leave his mother, Mary, 18 later and live a life ministering to the lost and afflicted. And she would find him again in agony as he suffered and died on the cross where he became the Passover lamb and the very temple where the sacrifice was made once for all for the forgiveness of sin. Mary would sit at the foot of his execution cross and I wonder if she remembered that day in Jerusalem when Jesus said he was to be in his Father's house.

And then on this trip after three days in the tomb he would return to his mother and to all his followers in the resurrection. He would show her his nail pierced hands and feet. He would breath on them the Holy Spirit and open their eyes to the truth that his work of redemption was finished. He had won the forgiveness of sins, life and salvation for Mary for us and for all mankind.

Aren't we sometimes like Mary and Joseph? Unsure where Jesus may be? Or sometimes too confident that Jesus is confined to our comfortable church sanctuary? How frantically we search for the comfort he can bring when we encounter loss or pain or illness or rejection, but so often just so we can continue our life's journey without further mishap in our Christless ways. Today Luke is telling us that that our lives are too filled with false joy, bitterness, selfishness, greed and violence. What we need is to really open our ears to the word so the Holy Spirit will open our hearts each day to the Christmas message—that God in Christ entered our world to make a permanent change: a change in our standing before God, sinners forgiven by Christ's blood and a change in our attitude so that true joy that endures in the times of sorrow will come to us as we seek the real Christ of Christmas. Let us be ever watchful that as the joy of Christmas seems to fade, we not lose our focus on the Word made flesh and the Christ of Christmas given to us in His word and in His body and blood. That's the work Christ was doing for his Father. Jesus didn't need to be found for he was right where he promised to be in the temple with his Father's Word and in the Sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper he established to keep us right with him. That's where we need to go to find him. May we never lose the Christ of Christmas.