

Jesus: Lost and Found
Christmas One: December 27, 2009
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The relatives had come from Montana down to California to visit the cousins, and to have their first trip to Disneyland. Mickey and Minnie and the Matterhorn made for an enchanting experience, and now, at midnight, the Magic Kingdom was closing for the day. Swarms of tired, happy people headed toward the exit. The California cousin heard her mom say "It's time to go". And so she started, obediently, toward the gate. Having grown up near the ocean, this young one had been warned about undertows and rip tides. Now she felt herself caught up in a human rip tide, dragging her little seven year old frame away from her parents and cousins and aunts and uncles, but toward the exit and then through the exit into the vast sea of asphalt that was the Disneyland parking lot. The lights shone on some parts of the lot, but there were plenty of dark scary spots too. And then the crowds fanned out, and she found herself alone.

Now, it would be futile to try to go back through those gates. Guards were there - they wouldn't let you back in without a ticket, would they? (she thought) - and besides she could see at a distance all the people who were still pouring out. There was a tram that would take you through the whole parking lot, from section B (for Bambi) to section T (for Tinker Bell), but they probably don't let seven year olds ride this tram alone, (she thought). She thought quite a few thoughts, but she never thought to ask for help. What she did think, though, is that she had better find the car since there was no way she was going to find her parents. And so she headed off, toward the right hand side of the parking lot, trying to stay away from the dark scary spots, and after a while she found her

uncle's big car with the Montana license plates, parked up against the perimeter fence, under a light, just where she thought it might be. She knew she was in the right place, so she sat down on the bumper and waited for the rest to comeand wondered what was taking them so long.

This story has a happy ending. After all the security guards had been set on alert and begun their grid search of the park, paying special attention to all the places a child might hide or be lost, the family decided to head for the unlikeliest of all places - that's right, out to the parking lot to the car with the Montana plates. And there they found the girl, certainly not where they expected her, but in a sense, exactly where she belonged.

Terror melted into relief, the mother melted into a puddle of tears, and the child wondered what all the fuss was about. She had been given an instruction from her parent, and she had done what she was told. As far as she was concerned, she was exactly where she was supposed to be. And why did the rest of them take so long to figure this out, anyway?

For many years, I identified with the child in this story, because, well, I WAS the child. This is a true story. It happened to me. It also happened to my poor mother. It wasn't until I became the mother of toddlers that I had any insight into the panic that a mother can feel when her child goes missing. Whether it's a boy in Colorado who floats away in a home-made balloon, a missing child whose picture is in a milk carton, or our own precocious little one who scampers off to explore the toy department at Target, we all feel it. Parents, have you ever lost your child? What did you feel? I wracked my brain, and

then a thesaurus, for a word strong enough to describe that emotion. Panic isn't a strong enough word. Terror falls short. There is simply no word that fully describes the feeling you have.....

And so we turn to Jesus.

Merry Christmas!

Advent is over, and Epiphany is yet to come. Advent concludes with the birth of the baby Jesus on Christmas Day; and Epiphany marks the beginning of Jesus' public ministry as an adult. The twelve-day Christmas season between Advent and Epiphany is an in-between time. You might even call it an adolescent time.

During this adolescent season, today we are given the only story in the Bible that tells us about the adolescent Jesus.

It's pretty easy to deal with a Baby Jesus. Little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes, you know! He is perfect, He is pure, and He is innocent. He is the hope of the world. All He does is lie there in the manger and glow, while his proud parents look on, shepherds worship Him and angels sing His praises. He doesn't scare his parents by crawling away into the night and getting lost. In fact, he doesn't give them any trouble at all. And he makes very few demands on us. All we have to do is throw a birthday party once a year in his name, called the Christmas feast, and admire his cuteness.

The Adult Jesus is another story altogether. Once he is baptized and begins his ministry, there is plenty of triumph, but there are also plenty of troubles. Jesus has troubles; his

disciples have troubles; and anyone who takes seriously a call to follow Jesus is sure to have a full measure of both triumphs and troubles. Tragedies, even. And he makes all sorts of demands on us! We can talk about the Adult Jesus for the rest of the year. The Adult Jesus can have all the spotlight from Epiphany through Lent, Holy Week, Easter and Pentecost.

But just for today, for this one Sunday during the adolescent season of Christmas, let's pay attention to the twelve year old Jesus. Not the God-Man, or the God-Baby, but the God-Boy.

It may not be so hard for us to see the God part of the **man** Jesus. He walked on water, after all, and he raised the dead. It may not even be so hard for us to see the God part of the **baby** Jesus when we think about the mystery of God taking on human flesh. But what do you do with a **pre-teen Deity**? Especially one who gets into trouble once in a while; but for whom you have high hopes? One who tries to be a good boy, and seems to have a bright future, but who doesn't always meet your expectations? One for whom you've been told that there is a secret promise that He is God-With-Us -- but where the heck is He now?

How can we encounter the Boy Jesus? What do we do with Him? One way might be to take a hint from Mary. Love Him the best way you know how, and see what happens.

Mary and Jesus had come up from Nazareth with Joseph and some other relatives to visit

Jerusalem at the time of the Passover. For them, this was even a bigger deal than it was for the Montana cousins to visit Disneyland. Yes, there was solemn worship and lots of animal sacrifice, but it was also PARTY TIME! There was feasting and celebration and happy crowds and the excitement of the big city. This was better than Disneyland, and they got to come here EVERY YEAR!

Jesus had always been a good boy. He was growing up now and becoming a little more independent. Mary had let him roam around the city a little this year with his friends, as long as he met her at the agreed-upon time and place. If they had lived today, she might have said, "Make sure to answer me IMMEDIATELY if I text you." but as is was they had to make do with plans like "meet me at the ninth hour at the Damascus Gate." And he always had.

So when the party was over, and Mary said, "Let's go", she had no reason to doubt that her little Jesus would come right along with the rest of the relatives. But he didn't. And it took her a whole day to figure this out.

Jesus was lost. What could have happened, she wondered? He couldn't have run away. Did he take a wrong turn at the gate? Maybe he's headed west to the big sea instead of back north, to home? Did he fall into a ditch? Was he snatched by some deviant Roman soldier for his own wicked purposes? Or did something even worse happen? Is he hungry? Is he cold? Is he even still alive? Will I ever see him again? What have I done? Why did I ever let him out of my sight? The angels told me he would be a special boy:

Immanuel, God-with-us. Well, little Mr. God-With-Us, where are you now? How could you do this to me? You had better hope that God is with YOU if I ever find you! Oh Jesus, my little child, where are you?

Jesus was lost, and Mary was devastated.

Fear turned into anger and anger turned back into fear.

Jesus, my little child, where are you?

Who do you know that has never lost anything precious to them? That person would be very rare indeed and very blessed. If you haven't lost something precious, the sad truth is that you will. That's hard to talk about at any time, but even harder during the Christmas season. We're supposed to be full of joy.

We are a world at war. We have been ever since war was invented. Some of us even now, even in this congregation, have loved ones serving overseas in the military. Those of us who don't still feel the fear of loss, and pray for peace.

Many Christmases ago, the United States was at war against itself. Citizen fought against citizen, and sometimes brother fought against brother. Everyone felt the fear of loss and prayed for peace. But it was Christmas, and they were supposed to be joyful.

A man named Henry Wadsworth Longfellow had a son fighting in the war. He was afraid, but it was Christmas, and he was supposed to be rejoicing. He wanted to be

joyful. So he sat down and began to write a poem that echoed what the angels had said :

Peace on Earth, good-will to men.

*I heard the bells on Christmas Day
Their old, familiar carols play
And wild and sweet
The words repeat
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!*

He found it hard to keep focused on peace, though. Thoughts of the war kept creeping in.

He was scared. He couldn't get rid of that image of the black cannons firing, and he worried about his boy:

*Then from each black, accursed mouth
The cannon thundered in the South
And with the sound
The carols drowned
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!*

*It was as if an earthquake rent
The hearth-stones of a continent
And made forlorn
The households born
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!*

Then came the news he had dreaded all along. His precious son, his little one, had been killed in the war. His son was lost, and Henry was devastated. My little son, where are you? And Jesus, where were YOU?

*And in despair, I bowed my head,
"There is no peace on earth", I said;
"For hate is strong
And mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!"*

As for what happened next, the details will remain forever between Henry and Jesus.

Henry had hit bottom. The unthinkable had happened. It couldn't get any worse than

this. All was lost. Even Jesus was lost to him, it seemed. But those two - Henry and Jesus - met each other in a secret, holy way. This is what was revealed to Henry: You'll never know that Jesus is all you need, until Jesus is all you have. We don't know the details of this holy and joyful secret meeting, but we know the outcome. Henry found hope again. He found faith again. He found peace again - not just the world's peace, but the divine peace that passes understanding. He mourned, and he was comforted. He had thought Jesus was nowhere to be found. But he found out that Jesus was right where Jesus belonged, all the time. And where Jesus belonged, and where he was, was right there beside Henry, crying with him, and wiping away his tears. Jesus was not lost. Jesus was right there where he belonged.

And so Henry concluded his poem, triumphantly and joyfully:

*Then pealed the bells more loud and deep
"God is not dead; nor doth He sleep!
The Wrong shall fail
The Right prevail
With peace on earth, good-will to men!"*

God is not dead, nor doth He sleep.

Jesus is not dead and Jesus is not lost.

Jesus is not always where you expect Him to be, but He is always where you need Him to be!

Mary learned a lesson that Passover. Jesus was gone from her for three days, but He was not lost. He was doing what He was born to do, his Father's business. Several decades

later, He would be gone from her again for three days, this time in the grave. But He was not lost. He was doing what he was born to do, his Father's business.

Perhaps you have experienced an unimaginable tragedy, or you know someone who is going through one right now. Maybe you ask yourself: When is this all going to stop? How much more of this can one person take? Or maybe you've actually had a pretty good life, a charmed life. Maybe your life has been troubled so far only by fender-benders, mosquito bites, and occasionally getting short-changed at the check-out line - but you read the newspapers and your heart breaks for the tragedies of your fellow-man. Either way, it is easy to question -- just where is Jesus and what is He up to?

This is my prayer for us during the adolescent season of Christmas and always: That we learn the lesson that Mary learned and that Henry learned. That the Baby Jesus, the Boy Jesus, the Man Jesus, and the Lord Jesus may live in our hearts, and that we may always know his presence; and that knowing his presence we may be as Christ, and be Christ, to those who are lost, and to those who think Jesus is lost. Jesus is not lost. He lives in you.