

“Searching for Jesus the Christ”

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December 29, 2024

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1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26

Luke 2:41-52

When we pray to Jesus, we may often think of a cosmic Christ, who sits above all creation, surrounded with swirls of clouds and accompanied by angels, a holy being who stands outside of time, whose power and glory have no end.

But since we are in the season of Christmas, perhaps you think about praying to the little baby Jesus, the Messiah of the manger, a tiny child. When you pray to him, you have the wonder of the wise men, or maybe the *shalom* of the shepherds.

How about this: how many of you have thought of praying to the twelve-year old Jesus— the one whose voice is cracking, whose body is changing, who tests his parents every chance he gets, and also tests himself: his knowledge, his independence, his relationships, his invincibility? I know a certain tween— not mine, let me be clear— who came to see his parent after taking a shower, and was sent right back to the shower, because according to his smell, he stood under the water, but without scrubbing or using soap. Maybe this kid would have *liked* one certain aspect of living in Jesus’ time— that showers weren’t a thing.

We may not think of looking for this adolescent Jesus as one to whom we pray. But maybe we should.

The gospels leave out all stories from Jesus’ childhood except this one. From his nativity in Bethlehem, and his flight to Egypt as a very young child, till Jesus’ public ministry in his early 30’s, there is radio silence in our canonical gospels about Jesus’ youth— except for this story. There are other gospels that did not make it into the bible, which tell stories about a young, mischievous Jesus who did things like push his friend off a roof, and then bring him back to life so that he doesn’t get in trouble. But those who looked for the Spirit’s discernment of holy

truth didn't choose *these* books to go into our bible, so all we are left, if we are looking to know Jesus in his youth, is this one story.

Apparently, Mary and Joseph didn't think of looking for their 12 year old when they left Jerusalem. They had traveled the full day toward Nazareth already, along with the caravan of family and friends who also had gone to Jerusalem as pilgrims to honor the Passover, when they realized Jesus was missing. You may wonder, "How this could happen- how could two parents forget their own child for the day?" *Especiallly* if he was proclaimed at conception to be *God's* son, the Messiah, the Savior of the nations?

Before you get too judgy about Mary's and Joseph's parenting skills, let's try to give them the benefit of the doubt. As good Jews who who presumably made pilgrimage every year to mark the Passover, they probably trusted the people on the journey with them, with their children. You know the saying, "It takes a village to raise a child?" Well, I imagine with each year going on the same journey, the parents grew in trust of those around them and also their child, granting him each year a little more independence within their chosen group of believers. It's not like he was still a toddler. At the exit to the social hall, where Take My Hand holds its toddlers, there are signs, "Count your children before you leave this room and when you return!" I have been told- and I think I vaguely remember- that when I was a very young girl, my mom used to bring my sister and me to listen to summer symphony in Atlanta's Piedmont Park. People would fill the lawn with their blankets and picnics while music sung the day to rest, and called out the stars. My sister Alice would always read a book, even in the dark, while listening to the music, but as for me? I was a traveler! And I would wander from blanket to blanket, and people would feed me, and I gladly ate their food. I guess my mom trusted the strangers around us- at least, they had good taste in music- but because I had some food sensitivities, she needed to do *something* for my protection. So my mom had a t-shirt airbrushed for me, with a clown on it, and it said, "Please do not feed me." That was my summer symphony uniform, from 3-4 years old.

Mary and Joseph weren't parents of the late 1970's, but maybe they had the same kind of trust in their community. And, Jesus was old enough that some independent exploration was appropriate. I worked in youth ministry many years and witnessed this dance of closeness and distance that teenagers want with

their parents, and now I have a resident expert in adolescent developmental psychological need who is teaching me that sometimes, a parent needs to back off— such as when she goes trick-or-treating with her friends— but sometimes she still desperately needs me close. It's not always easy to tell which is which. So, I have some compassion for Mary and Joseph.

Once Mary and Joseph realize they have lost their son, and not only that, they have lost *God's* son, they are in a panic. Although, I am not sure why it takes them three days to find him at the Temple, when they had only traveled one day away. Maybe the three days will remind us of another loss of Jesus— the loss of his life, the time from when he was crucified, till the Sunday he rose from the dead. Or maybe it was less symbolic, like maybe Mary and Joseph were looking for the little kid Jesus, who would have gone to a stable to play with some donkeys. Maybe they looked for him at the last oasis, thinking they'd find him mixing water and sand to make sandcastles, as young kids do. Maybe they thought he befriended a young shepherd along the way, and together they were making up songs and playing games. For some reason, it did not occur to them that he would be acting *grown*, talking Torah with the rabbis at the Temple. But to the adolescent Jesus, he can't consider that his parents would have imagined him anywhere but the Temple, his Father's house. The fact that he was the one asking questions— in the Socratic method of ancient Greece, the one who asked the questions *was* the teacher— showed that his identity and purpose had emerged. Here is one who would teach us about who God is.

In this story, Jesus shares his first words of the gospel of Luke- "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?"

For those of us who have searched for Jesus, but have had trouble finding him, we could be asked the same question. "Why are you searching for me? Didn't you know exactly where I would be?" You may have looked for Jesus in the places we expect him: You may come to church thinking you will experience a jolt of holy excitement from Jesus, but walk away thinking, "Wow, the people here sure are nice, and the music was amazing, but where was Jesus?" You may expect Jesus to swoop in and help us when we are in trouble, like a superhero who saves the day, but then wonder when *your* world keeps crashing in around you, "Where *is* Jesus?"

Mary and Joseph assumed Jesus was lost. And you may have felt at times— maybe even now— that you have lost Jesus, lost your way to him, even lost your faith.

But keep in mind, Mary and Joseph never felt lost *to* Jesus. He was not anxious about their distance, even though Mary expressed agony at his disappearance. I believe that, even when Jesus feels lost to us, we are not lost to him.

Some words from Jesus himself will help to show us where to find Jesus. We do not have to go all the way to the Jerusalem Temple— which doesn't even exist anymore— to find him. Here these words from Luke 17:

Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed, **21** nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you."

One thing that we hope will happen, as children transition into adulthood, is that all the love, instruction, and care that parents have invested in them will travel with them, wherever they go. In the same way, that child remains part of us, even when they choose to hang out with friends instead of Friday family night, even when their room stays tidy because they are no longer home. Jesus in his ministry tried to show his followers, and it seems his family too, that they could still access him when he was not with them.

Jesus has set within each one of us a home where he will still abide. And so within our bodies, we are not home alone. Christ is with us, and in us. And if we have a hard time finding that truth, the best thing to do is to find another follower of Jesus to help show the way to that truth. You may find Jesus in them, but they may also reveal to you how Jesus is present in you, too.

May this Christmas season reveal to you the closeness of Jesus Christ, and his love.