



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

Rev. Scott E. Schul

1st Sunday of Christmas: December 30, 2018

Sermon Title: "Lost"

Gospel Text: Luke 2:41-52

As a parent, this is a difficult Gospel reading for me to engage, because I can't help but remember times when I've been in a similar situation, looking frantically for a child who isn't where you thought that child would be. One can easily imagine the heartbreaking and tense discussion between two terrified parents. "Joseph, where is Jesus? He's not in the caravan! I thought he was travelling with *your* cousins!" "I have no idea, Mary. I thought he was with *your* cousins. Where could he be? Did he wander off? Did thieves take him? We have to double back!"

This passage offers rare insight into what scholars call the "hidden years" of Jesus, which include most of his first 30 years of life, before his public ministry began. Those years, spent mostly in Nazareth, provoke *many* questions. What was his personality? What did he like to do and eat? Where did he work? How did those years influence the way he thought about his faith, his family, and the circumstances of his nation, which was occupied by a foreign military power?

Perhaps the most intriguing question of all pertains to his identity. At what point did Jesus begin to understand his identity as the Son of God, and his mission, which would involve self-sacrifice on the cross as the means of defeating sin, death, and the devil? This last series of questions, concerning Jesus's identity, is at the heart of what today's Gospel intended to address. As this reading draws back the curtain ever so slightly on the hidden years of Jesus, we see a 12 year old who has a highly developed faith and who appears to understand that he has an utterly unique relationship with God as God's Son.

Just as interesting to me though is what this text tells us about Mary and Joseph. First, it establishes that they were pious, faithful parents who passed their faith and religious practices along to Jesus. Incidentally, study after study shows that the most important factor in determining whether *children* become regular church goers is whether or not their *parents* were regular churchgoers. What great examples Mary and Joseph are for us.

Today's Gospel also establishes how seriously Mary and Joseph took their parenting responsibility. It may seem silly to say that about a couple who lost their 12 year old. But on that annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the Passover, it was common for extended family groups and even entire villages to travel in a big caravan, both for fellowship and mutual protection. So I don't think Mary and Joseph were neglectful parents. In fact, they put themselves at serious risk by doubling back to search for him.

Finally, note how they reacted when they finally found Jesus. They were understandably upset after he had been missing for so long. You can easily sense the frustration and even anger in Mary's voice when they confronted him in the temple. "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." But that anger and frustration and even fear seems to have melted away when Jesus explained his absence. It is as if Mary was transported back to that Bethlehem manger, when highflying angels and lowly shepherds alike proclaimed that Jesus, her newborn son, was no ordinary baby. He was the Messiah – the Son of God. There's a line in Luke's account of the birth that he repeats in today's lesson – a line that ties those two events together: Mary "treasured all these things in her heart." In summary, Mary and Joseph knew – as Jesus knew – that Jesus was no ordinary young man. He was – and is – the Son of God – fully human and fully divine.

But now let's move from the literal meaning of this text to a more symbolic meaning. That's one of the reasons the study of theology in general and the Bible in particular is endlessly fascinating to me. There are always stories wrapped within stories. As a result, this ancient text, which carried such a vitally important meaning for its original audience, also has something fresh and important to say to us in *our* day and age – something that pushes us to engage Jesus not from a distance but from a very *close* and *personal* point of view.

You see, Mary and Joseph aren't the only ones who lose Jesus. All of us have times in our lives when we feel as if we cannot find him. Your prayer life becomes dry. Your enthusiasm for your faith life dims. Your church participation dwindles. Jesus feels distant, and we wonder if he is hiding or playing some sort of cruel game with us. Like Mary and Joseph, we grow frustrated and perhaps even angry as our sense of isolation and vulnerability grow. What do we do when we feel as if we've lost Jesus?

Well, let's begin with a parent's perspective. When my son Emilio was young, he could be a bit of a wanderer. We'd be in a mall or a store and just when I thought I had a firm handle on where he was, he'd be gone. Before long, I'd hear this mournful plea: "Daddy? Daddy? Where'd you go?" In fact, I hadn't gone anywhere. *He* was the one who had drifted away, got distracted by something else, wandered off, and lost his way. It's the same with us. When you feel like you've lost track of Jesus, chances are that it's not *Jesus* who moved away, but it was *you*. And so when you find yourself in that situation, what do you do?

First, take your cue from today's Gospel. Where did Jesus's parents find him? At worship. The same is true for us. Lutheran worship is *saturated* with Jesus. He is in our rich treasury of hymnody. His Word comprises our liturgy and we invoke his name in our prayers. We have four separate readings from the Bible every service. Hopefully you hear his name plenty of times in the sermon. And we have the promise that he comes to us in a very literal way in Holy Communion. Worship is the *most* reliable place on the planet to *find* Jesus and be found *by* him. And so if you feel like you've drifted from Jesus, your first move is a simple one: get back to worship on a regular basis. Do this and after a while your spiritual senses come alive. You get the *scent* of Jesus in your nose. You develop a *taste* for Jesus. You begin to *hear* and *see* him all around you. And before long, even *outside* of worship, you begin to notice him in places that will surprise and delight you. Of course he was *always* there, but *now* you're equipped to sense his presence like never before.

The second thing I recommend when Jesus feels lost in your life is to tackle that identity question I explored earlier. It's the question Jesus continually asked his disciples: "Who do you say that I am?" If your answer to that question is that Jesus was merely a wise teacher or some sort of ancient spiritual guru, then you will inevitably lose him. After all, if that's *all* he is to you, what's the real benefit in keeping him around? You see, that's the point – Jesus is *so much more* than that. He is our Savior, our Messiah, our Christ, the Son of God who takes away the sin of the world. *That's* someone worthy of your time, attention, and worship. *That's* someone you'll *want* to keep close to you every day, don't you agree?

One final suggestion. Despite all the divisions and disagreements that have plagued Christianity, there's one thing everyone has *always* agreed upon: a consistent habit of prayer will keep you close to Jesus. He loves you and wants to hear from you. So pray extemporaneously, or pray using a rote prayer like the Lord's Prayer. Just pray. These three simple things: *worship*, focus on Jesus's *identity*, and regular *prayer* will help ensure that Jesus doesn't feel lost to you. In fact, he'll be *so* present in your life that, like Mary, you'll find you have more things to treasure in your heart than you can imagine. Thanks be to God! Amen.