

The Search for Jesus
Luke 2:41-52
Christmas 1C
December 27, 2015
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I heard the first signs of chatter around 5:30 a.m. There was giggling and some kind of muffled debate about whether or not it was too early to come in to wake the parents. Amazingly, my children made it an entire hour before sending in the youngest to scout out whether or not it was still too early to go downstairs in search of Christmas presents. We held them off for just a little bit longer. Still, every single gift was open and examined, wrapping paper cleaned up, brioche casserole in the oven and second pot of coffee brewing by 8:15 a.m.

I trust you know familiar scenes. So much planning and hiding and wrapping and waiting, shopping and preparing and decorating. Then our Christmas celebrations are over in a blink. In some ways Christmas Day is a let down. When the celebration is largely about giving and receiving gifts and every single present is unwrapped by 8:30 a.m., then the only tasks left are overindulging in sweets and making room for new stuff amidst old stuff.

It happens every year. Sometimes we tweak our experiences, focus on Advent more and shopping less, sitting in the presence of people we love rather than scurrying around till the last minute. But it seems to me that the anticipation never quite leads us to the experience we are seeking, and it rarely leads us to the Jesus we are seeking. Yet, here we are.

Our Christmas Eve service is a highlight of my Advent and Christmas experience as we gather at dusk with the darkness growing around us and the glow of candlelight slowly taking over. I said to those gathered here Thursday night:

There are parties, celebrations, and traditions waiting for us in the evening and day ahead, but we have chosen to stop everything and hold this sacred space together for a little while. We need to be near one another. We need to sing.

We need to hear, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.” That word is worth carving out an hour of a special day in a busy season in our crowded lives to sit and be still for just a little while.

And now we’re back, together again to carve out a little more time because we’re seeking something together that we haven’t quite grabbed hold of yet. But we catch enough glimpses from time to time that we keep showing up, keep holding space, and keep searching together.

Today we turn to Mary again who has been our guide for a little while now. We’ve listened to her claiming her place as a chosen one of God, taking comfort in the presence of her cousin, Elizabeth, and singing her confidence in all that God will do in our world. Then we quietly eavesdropped as she heard the shepherds proclaim the angel’s words. We pondered with her as she held these things in her heart and stared at the face of her newborn son.

Luke skips a rock across the pond of Jesus’ childhood. We get humble birth and visitation by shepherds, ritual presentation of the newborn in the temple, then the family goes home to Nazareth to raise this son of God. Then Luke skips over a dozen years with a simple, “As always, the family went for their annual trip to Jerusalem for the festival at the temple.” Luke wants us to know that this family is rooted in tradition.

Traveling with a large group of pilgrims, the time comes to journey home, and the parents realize (a bit too late for our present-day standards) that Jesus isn’t in the caravan. Mary’s immediate response is fear. Time passes...three days, in fact. Mary is afraid; filled with anxiety. It’s easy to project my experience of motherhood onto the text. Of course, I would be frantic. One hour would be nerve-wracking, and three-days would be a nightmare. But that’s not what Luke is telling us.

Remember, the shepherds went *with haste* to find Mary, Joseph, and the newborn Jesus. They ran to tell them that an angel appeared to them saying, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.” Mary

knew from the beginning that this life her son would lead was God-breathed in the fullest sense. Twelve years later, her anxiety reflects her hopes and her expectations.

Perhaps she is worried God won't be true to what God once said. She pondered these things in her heart, then the moment passed. She didn't understand that God was transforming things over time. God was beginning a process. And the one word to hold onto for the whole journey is: Do not be afraid—good news is coming. Yet when they find Jesus, they are not impressed that the 12-year-old has an audience around him hanging on his every word and they do find great joy in the scene before them.

Instead, Mary goes to Jesus (Does she grab him in relief? Hug him and then push him away to fuss at him?); she says, "why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety."

And Jesus replies, "Well why did you do that? Surely you knew I would be seeking the interests of my Father! Surely you knew I would be in the heart of religious thought and theological debate. Didn't you know this would be the starting point?"

Why would you do that? Surely you knew.

"[H]ere is the problem," Pastor Russell Rathbun writes, "This is the first Sunday after Christmas. God has come into the world. Jesus the Christ has been born into our midst. God is among us, but maybe there is a little bit of a feeling that when we started to look for him, we could not find him. We have been anticipating his coming for four weeks and we celebrated his arrival and now we just want to see him and hold him or be held by him, but we don't see him among our party of travelers."¹

Jesus disappointed his parents. He didn't act the way they expected him to act. He didn't say what they expected him to say. He let them down. Even with the knowledge they were given in advance, they still can't anticipate God's moves or God's ways. They are still surprised by what comes next, and they are learning to

¹ <http://thq.wearesparkhouse.org/featured/christmas1cgospel/>

release their control on what life with Jesus will be. Why do we expect our experience to be any different than theirs?

Lutheran Bishop Craig Satterlee adds, “[W]e aren’t ready to let go of our expectations and give our Jesus to God. We are not ready to accept that Jesus did not come to fulfill our expectations. He is not to be found in sentiment for the way things used to be or the way we wish things could be. Jesus is about the future. Jesus was born and lived and died and rose to be about God’s business of putting an end to our searching by making plain the way to God, even if that means shattering our expectations.”²

Luke gives us some good questions to ask ourselves: Where are we searching for Jesus? Why do we choose to make the search harder and more anxiety-filled than it needs to be? Are we following the caravan of pilgrims without realizing that Jesus isn’t part of that crowd? We search for Jesus and find him exactly where he belongs—in the presence of God, rooted to the kingdom, offering new insights into God’s ways.

Luke introduces the story of Jesus with all kinds of details to signal Jesus is not born outside of time, Jesus is born into a story. There is politics and empire, oppression and struggle. There are humans doing what humans do—vying for control, wondering who is best, protecting others or using people to get ahead. There are powers-that-be who don’t care that Jesus is born. There are disregarded shepherds who can hardly believe that God is seeking them out, waiting for them to notice and hear that God is alive and doing a new thing.

There is a family with names, Mary and Joseph, who are doing their best to honor God and each other. Their faith, their rituals, their temple are central to their life together. Jesus is born into this story and into this tradition, and the scene in Luke 2 today invites us to understand that Jesus really “has not come...to demolish the tradition,” writes William Loader, “but to uphold it and expand it.”³

² http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1524

³ <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/LkChristmas1.htm>

We think we understand what the Jesus story is all about. We think we know why we float in and out of church. We think we have figured out the stuff of life. But more often than not, we stand alongside Mary with her moments of transcendence and pondering beauty in her heart and then going about her life in ways that allow her to forget her guiding story. So quickly she is searching in great anxiety for the one she already knows and the plan she's already been told.

We need to ponder our individual searches, but I'm also asking these questions of our faith community as a whole. In what ways do we get into a pilgrim crowd mentality—doing the right things, going through the right rituals, heading back home to live out what we've experienced—all the while not encountering the Christ?

Jesus sits in heart of his community and moves from that center. If we want more of the Jesus Way, then we need to move close to the Way we are seeking. When we are aware, mindful, connected, and searching for Jesus together, then we will find him in the center of God's movement. There are two crowds in this story today. In one scene we have faithful, wandering pilgrims, not bad folk but also not fully aware of the others around them. In another, we glimpse a vibrant, engaged community with the Divine presence in their midst offering insight and understanding they'd never heard before. Which are we seeking? Which pulls us closer into the life God dreams for us?

It's easy to criticize and offer commentary from sidelines about how a church should work or what a particular congregation should be doing. That's where the anxiety is. That's where the fear is. If you want your life to be more intimately connected to Christ and to the Jesus Way, you must be rooted in a faith community. I'd love for it to be this one, but it needs to be somewhere. And it won't happen in one hour every 4-6 weeks. Like any other endeavor in life, that is not enough.

Want to eat healthier in the next year? If one meal a week is a kale salad with grilled chicken but the other 20 meals are cheese pizza and pop tarts, you can't blame the kale salad for not making you healthier. Same is true of exercise or learning to play the cello or picking up a second language. A true practice takes time and effort. True community demands roots to see growth. If it is the Christ we are after, we need to increase our time together in worship, study, conversation, play, prayer,

laughter, and service to the world. What do we seek this Christmas? What is God's business all about? What does it mean to be about God's work? Hold onto these questions and commit yourselves to exploring the possibilities together. That's our starting point for our journey.