

Losing Jesus
(and Sacred Imagination)
Luke 2.41-52
12.30.18
Christmas 1C
Rev. Elizabeth Mangham Lott
St. Charles Ave. Baptist Church

Since moving to the Lakefront, we've begun the New Orleans morning zig-zag driving challenge of navigating partially closed roads to make the northeast to southwest journey over about nine miles of the city. The trick, no matter how you cut it, is Tulane Avenue. Broad Street is a nightmare. Jeff Davis is only slightly less so. Carrollton is unpredictable. And there's no way we're messing with I-10 to the Claiborne overpass at that hour. Everyone in the city is on the road at 7:30 a.m. making the morning drive, and it's easy to get lost in competition with this sea of travelers. We think we've found our best route for now, but it almost always takes us 40 minutes to get from point A to point B. This is the closest we come to journeying in a sea of people in a distracted and mindless way; heading to our destination with a sea of others.

In an attempt to make the most of our time and **not** give in to the aggressive competition of the morning commute, Turner and I have begun listening to a podcast called *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text*. Created by two Harvard Divinity School graduates, the co-hosts, Casper and Vanessa, treat J.K. Rowling's book with curiosity and tenderness, expecting to hear wisdom and life-lessons in her words. They apply practices of sacred reading from Jewish and Christian traditions to the reading of each chapter, and these experiences of active listening make our daily journey so much more thoughtful and purposeful.

Lately, my favorite technique for reading is Sacred Imagination, and I'd like for us to practice that together this morning. Inspired by the teaching of Ignatius of Loyola, Sacred Imagination invites the reader to enter the text as a character and fully engage the narrative through creative listening. Father David L. Fleming, SJ, writes, "[Ignatius'] imagination played a central role in his conversion. Through his many years of directing others he discovered how useful the imagination could be in fostering a deeper relationship with God...[One way he taught this] method of imagining is to place ourselves fully within a story from the Gospels. We become onlooker-participants and give full rein to our imagination. Jesus is speaking to a blind man at the side of the road. We feel the hot Mediterranean sun beating down. We smell the dust kicked up by the passersby. We feel the itchy clothing we're wearing, the sweat rolling down our brow, a rumble of hunger. We see the desperation in the blind man's

face and hear the wail of hope in his words. We note the irritation of the disciples. Above all we watch Jesus—the way he walks, his gestures, the look in his eyes, the expression on his face. We hear him speak the words that are recorded in the Gospel. We go on to imagine other words he might have spoken and other deeds he might have done.”¹

Today’s gospel reading invites (almost begs for) this practice of Sacred Imagination, and this slow Sunday between the rush of Christmas and the demands of a new year gives us space to pause, wake up, give ourselves to creativity and holy playfulness. Close your eyes. Find a comfortable posture. Rest your hands in your lap. Imagine yourself into this story as a parent—as Mary or as Joseph. The rush and demands of Passover are done. It’s time to join the caravan home. How many are with you on the road? Dozens? Hundreds? What is the temperature and humidity around you? How does the road feel beneath your feet? What clothes and shoes are you wearing for this journey home? Hold these thoughts and senses as you continue to imagine and listen to today’s Gospel reading.

Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover.
⁴²And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival.
⁴³When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. ⁴⁴Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day’s journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. ⁴⁵When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. ⁴⁶After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. ⁴⁷And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. ⁴⁸When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, “Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.” ⁴⁹He said to them, “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?”
⁵⁰But they did not understand what he said to them. ⁵¹Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart. ⁵²And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.

{May God bless the reading and the hearing of this word. You may open your eyes.}

¹ For more on Ignatian imagination and spirituality: <https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/the-spiritual-exercises/pray-with-your-imagination>

I find it nearly impossible to imagine this story from anything other than a 21st-century, American, helicopter parenting perspective. I do not think of myself as the hovering helicopter parent, but I certainly cannot imagine a day's journey and simply assuming my children are nearby and safe in a sea of people without periodically laying eyes on them. The carnival season kicks off in one week, and most of us know the feeling of scanning the crowd during parades to make sure kids are still nearby. Some of us likely also know the feeling of realizing one is *not* nearby and then rallying other parents (sometimes nearby enclaves of people, even police) to find a young one who has wandered off amidst the noise and the throngs only to be found beneath a table with another slice of king cake. It's difficult for me to get beyond this first point of "assuming he was in the group of travelers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends," without bringing my modern parenting anxiety into the reading. Are Mary and Joseph as frightened as I imagine them to be? Does the panic build when another day passes? And then another? And then another before they scan the temple and find him fully alive and engaged and practically dancing in wordplay with the rabbis?

They don't get to speak to him right away. Mary doesn't interrupt what is happening with her scolding and urgent questions. They scan the room, lay eyes on him, and then they begin to take in the scene of Jesus listening to the rabbis, asking them questions about the sacred text they are engaging together. They see the delight on the rabbis' faces and notice the crowd that has gathered around to witness the scene. Before they approach, before they speak, they realize all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers.

I have a 12-year-old son, and I pray I never know Mary's panic of realizing she is a day's journey away from Jesus and then another day back and then another day of searching and yet another before locking eyes with him. I simply must lay my own parenting on top of this exercise of Sacred Imagination as I consider how she felt in first spotting him across the room. Relief coming in waves. He's alive. He's safe. He's here. We found him. The heart finally settling down for the first time in three days. The breath fully dropping into the belly for the first time in three days. The fear and dread giving way to anger for the first time in three days as she finally realizes he's been having a fine time in Jerusalem and never followed his parents out of the temple to head home in the first place.

Is she impressed at all with the way he engages the rabbis? Does she notice the way the crowd is watching him and listening to him? What exactly is she taking into her heart to treasure as she and Joseph and Jesus return to Nazareth together? When she finally gets to Jesus and speaks to him, what happens? Does she rush to him first,

grabbing him, pulling him close, scanning his body for signs of bumps and bruises, kissing his head before she swats it and says, “Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.” Is that Mary-speak for, “You nearly gave me a heart attack, kid. What were you thinking?!” So much to imagine in this brief narrative.

Now let’s take our questions back one step and consider what the author of this text is hoping we hear and ask. Just as it is difficult to read ourselves into the story without bringing 21st-century anxiety and parenting perspectives, it is nearly impossible to consider Luke’s narrative goals without some 1st-century context. If you have been with us through the Advent season, then you’ll recall we dove into the political and historical context clues Luke lays out for us to remind us all that this Jesus is being born into a particular moment.

In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah. In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria...In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas.

Is something happening in this story of a 12-year-old Jesus in the temple, flashing his oratory skills, exhibiting his brilliant mind, recognizing his place within the life and work of the temple, that Luke wants his listening audience to imagine? Wisconsin Pastor Niveen Sarras helps nudge us toward this part of our exercise as she offers a note on “Roman heroic leaders like Augustus. Emperor Julius adopted his nephew Augustus, who received an exceptional education at early age. At the age of 12, [legend tells that] Augustus gave the funeral oration for his grandmother Julia Caesaris.”² If this legend was in the awareness of his audience, what might Luke be asking readers to imagine in this parallel?

Sarras suggests, “Luke demonstrates that Jesus carries the qualities that will make him an extraordinary leader, just as Augustus became an exceptional leader.” Luke is clearly interested in setting the Jesus story in a distinct, particular historical and political moment, and he is just as “interested in introducing Jesus as superior to Augustus. Jesus is the new promised Caesar appointed, not by the Roman Senate,

² http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3930

but by God. Luke wants his Gentile audience to believe that Jesus is the true Son of God and successor to [even supplanter of?] Augustus.”

Something is happening here in the life of this boy. He is extraordinary and exceptional, just like the angels predicted. He will topple leaders from their thrones and fill the hungry with good food, just like his mother sang of him while he was in the womb. He will disrupt our journeys and engage our imaginations. He will surprise us by leading the crowd on winding paths and not disappearing among them on ordinary roads home. If a 12-year-old Jesus behaves in these ways, what will a grown-up Jesus do? What will he demand and command? How will we respond? And if Mary and Joseph can lose Jesus, what happens if we do?

Continue to explore questions of your own as you consider what the text is asking you to imagine. Continue to imagine yourself into the crowd, into the temple, into the story of Jesus the wise teacher. And hear now the possibility in losing and finding Jesus in this closing poem by Andrew King.³

IF WE MISS YOU by Andrew King

If we miss you leaving the festival
leaving the celebrations and memories
leaving the feasting and traditions
leaving the prayers and the songs;

if we miss you leaving the festival
returning to the stresses and pressures
returning to demands and deadlines
returning to the everyday routines -

we can find you in places of peacefulness
we can find you where wisdom is spoken
we can find you where holiness is nurtured
we can find you where God’s love is shared

and we will find you back with us in our travels
we will find you still with us at home
we will find you growing stronger within us
your grace embracing us, our hearts your own.

³ <https://earth2earth.wordpress.com/2015/12/21/poem-for-the-sunday-lectionary-christmas-1-yr-c/>