

## **Sermon on Luke 2:41-52**

**March 19, the Feast of St. Joseph, 2020 – Preached by Sister Monica Clare**

The story we hear in today's Gospel is the only account in scripture about Jesus' childhood. There are other accounts of his childhood in some apocryphal writings but they didn't make into the canon. This is the only one that did. Some of the other tales of Jesus as a child may have been too outlandish, such as the ones in the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, but I think they may also have not been as spiritually significant as this one.

The story, at first glance, seems to be very simple. It's a down-to-earth, mundane story of parents losing track of their child in a crowd. It's very human, and it's something we can very easily relate to. Whether you've babysat other people's children or had your own children, this is something that happens to most of us – even to Sister Pamela when she's out walking Jennie and she starts wondering where Jennie has run off to. And usually Jennie, with her sense of humor, walks right up behind Sister Pamela and listens to Pam calling her and sort of sits there and waits for Pam to turn around and realize – she's right there.

And so it's that simple kind of thing that happens in the story of Jesus, at age 12. He's gone with his parents and a large group of family and neighbors, to Jerusalem for Passover. His parents start to walk home with their group of travelers, and it's not until after they've walked an entire day's journey that they realize Jesus is not with them. They walk all the way back to Jerusalem, another day's journey, and after 3 days they find him in the temple. Can you imagine how panicked they had started to become after three days? Can you imagine the fear and the sense of shame and guilt they felt at the idea that they had lost Jesus - especially since they knew, from angels and wise men and their own dreams, who he actually was?

Their words here in the Gospel of Luke when they find him are entirely relatable to us across two millennia. We can feel his mother and his father's emotional intensity when Mary says "Why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." The Greek word for "anxiety" that's used here is *ὀδύναω* which means to cause intense pain, to be tormented, or in anguish. So, Mary tells Jesus here that she and Joseph weren't just anxious about not knowing where Jesus was, they were tormented, in anguish.

I think that one of the many dimensions, or levels, that this story presents to us is a deeply spiritual and symbolic one. You can look at it not as just a story about Mary and Joseph's dialogue with Jesus, but also, as in many cases in the Gospels where Jesus speaks, as humankind's dialogue with God.

How many times in our own lives have we felt that situations were so hopeless, or so fraught with doom and fear, that we looked around and we could not sense, or we failed to remember,

that God was with us? How many people in the midst of the incomprehensible crisis and catastrophe that we find ourselves in right now, are feeling that God has abandoned them? How many times, in those historic moments when humankind as a whole endures senseless tragedy or unfathomable evil, are we drawn so deeply into anguish and torment that we might forget, or some might even deny, the presence of a loving God?

But at some point, if we turn back and retrace our steps, and go back to where God is, whether in a holy temple, or in our prayers, in scripture, or in our faith community, we might ask with frustration “Where were you, God? When I was in the midst of that tragedy I was looking for you in so much anguish, and torment, and I didn’t see you or feel you. Where were you?” God’s reply to us, and to humankind, is always as it is in this symbolic scene. He is right where he is supposed to be, doing what he is supposed to do, and he is asking, just as Jesus asks here “Why were you searching for me?”

The fact that, in this story, Joseph and Mary searched for Jesus for three days before they found him is of course not an accident. The entire narrative is fraught with symbolism that foretells the crucifixion of Jesus and his resurrection on the third day. It points to a time in the future, twenty-one years from this scene, in which Jesus’ disciples will in anguish and torment believe that their teacher is gone forever, and then they will find him again after three days, right where he is supposed to be, doing what he is supposed to do.

And so let this simple, human story serve as a reminder to us, just as the resurrection stories are a reminder, that God is always with us if only we can turn around, go back to where he is, and find him.