

**First Sunday After Christmas Day
December 27, 2015
Marley United Methodist Church**

1 Samuel 2.18-20, 26

Psalm 148

Colossians 3.12-17

Luke 2.41-52

When You Lose Jesus

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The first time I had the honor of standing here before you was six years ago this week; December 27, 2009. And I was faced with this story of a 12 year old boy who had gone missing. On December 30, 2012, I again found myself standing here with the same gospel lesson before me. That is because the Lectionary runs in a 3 year cycle – every 3rd year on the First Sunday after Christmas we have the same gospel lesson. And so here we are again.

I don't know that I have ever taken the opportunity to preach a sermon series on the connections that the gospel writers make between the infancy stories and the crucifixion stories. For example, in Matthew the story about Herod's attempt to kill the infant Jesus points forward to the later plot to have him crucified. Luke doesn't tell that story but he does tell us one about the 12 year old Jesus. And he tells us this one because it serves a larger purpose in the way he organizes the whole gospel.

Luke tells us that each year, Jesus's family went up to Jerusalem for the Passover, and this story of Jesus, on the verge of his transition from childhood to young manhood, going missing in Jerusalem takes place on one of these annual trips up to Jerusalem for the Passover.

Now already we have our first hint, because Jesus going up to Jerusalem for the Passover becomes a major theme in Luke's narrative; a theme which

Luke emphasizes more strongly and deliberately than do the other gospel writers. Much of Luke's gospel is structured around that last big trip up to Jerusalem for the Passover, the trip which culminates in his arrest and execution.

In today's story, the young Jesus is mistakenly left behind when the big extended family group heads for home at the end of the festival, and when he is discovered missing, his frantic mom and dad leave the group and rush back to Jerusalem to look for him. It is three days before they find him. That will probably give you another clue. This is not the last time in the story people will think they have lost Jesus in Jerusalem, only to have him show up three days later.

It is also not the last time that Luke will introduce us to a couple on the road who are distraught at having lost Jesus but who find him again in a discussion of the scriptures. Do you recognize the story I'm pointing to here? Right near the close of his gospel, Luke tells us the story of the couple on the road to Emmaus. He tells us that they had put their hopes on Jesus, but now he had been lost and they were devastated. It's been three days now. And then Jesus appears with them, unrecognized at first, and discusses scripture with them, pointing out to them exactly the sorts of connections between stories that I'm pointing out now, and finally they recognize him in the breaking of the bread.

Both of these stories — the twelve year old Jesus lost in Jerusalem, and the road to Emmaus account — appear only in Luke's gospel, and with one being close to the start and the other close to the end, they serve as something of a frame for the rest of the story. And to add further color and light to the message suggested by this framing, Luke is the gospel that puts the most emphasis on images of being lost and found. He is the only gospel writer to include the stories of the lost coin, the lost sheep, and the lost prodigal son.

Losing Jesus or being lost ourselves and being found by Jesus, is a significant theme for Luke, and you will notice, of course, that in neither of the stories does Jesus himself think that he is lost. It is other people who

think he is lost, not him, so Luke is begging us to ask the question, “Who is really lost when we think we’ve lost Jesus: him or us?”

Luke makes it abundantly clear that Jesus is not lost, he knows exactly where he is and what he is doing. And he knows where he needs to go to fully engage in his Father’s business, and it is often to places we would neither be expecting, nor perhaps be willing, to go ourselves.

Sure, a theological discussion in the temple might not be so frightening, although it would be pretty daunting to the average twelve year old, but the image of Jesus being in his Father’s house doing his Father’s business is leading up to a later story. You see, the temple is not only the place of theological discussions (in fact, if that had been the point of the story it would probably have been placed in a synagogue rather than the temple).

The temple is primarily the place of sacrifice, so it is not the place you want to be when a hostile mob has joined forces with the religious and military powers-that-be and turned their anger on you and decided that you are the one who is going to be sacrificed. “It is better than one man die than that the whole nation face the wrath of Rome,” says Caiaphas, the High Priest in a classic expression of sacrificial logic from the most powerful man in the sacrificial system.

And so this story of a twelve-year-old anticipates the later story where, for Jesus to go about his Father’s business meant walking into the fires of hatred and hostility and offering himself to appease the wrath of an angry violent humanity. Incidentally, that act also exposed the ultimate religious lie that it is God who demands that blood must be shed, not so – this is also a theme that runs through all of Paul’s writings – it is the bloodthirsty demands of a violent humanity that requires the shedding of blood, and God is willing to submit to that on the cross so that humanity may be reconciled to him.

Mary and Joseph, the couple on the Jerusalem-Nazareth road, thought that Jesus was lost because they didn’t know that he would be about his Father’s business. They expected him to simply be fitting in with the

family business, which at this point was all about going home and getting back to their ordinary day to day life.

And the disciples later, including the couple on the Jerusalem-Emmaus road, thought that Jesus had been lost because they couldn't comprehend that going about his Father's business could mean surrendering himself to the cross. They expected him to fight fire with fire if he was going to walk in and confront the powers that be.

They expected him to overthrow the Roman occupation forces and reestablish the throne of David, a throne whose history, interestingly, tells us that when it was first established the crowds in the streets cried out "Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands." (I Sam 18.7) That throne was built on military conquest and so Jesus was expected leave a body count maybe in the hundreds of thousands as he re-establishes that throne.

And everyone thinks 'that's the kind of king we want' and that's what they were hoping for and expecting of Jesus. So when the powers strike first and Jesus is killed, well, that's it then. Jesus has lost, and his friends have lost Jesus. Goin' to give up and go home.

But three days later, there he is, discussing scripture again, and still trying to get them to understand that his Father's business does not involve matching the world's violence, but rather absorbing its full force and giving it back transformed into love and forgiveness and extravagant grace.

But even in the far less earth-shattering losing of Jesus in the twelve-year-old story, there is an important warning for us about our expectations of Jesus and where we will find him. If even Mary and Joseph could take Jesus for granted, and just expect him to be going along with whatever they were doing and wherever they were going, then you can be pretty sure that we are very much in danger of making the same mistake.

How often do we just head off on our own business, unquestioningly doing whatever we have always been doing or whatever we have decided

we should be doing, and just assumed that Jesus would be with us? You've heard the expression "Jesus is my co-pilot"? That is the mindset—we decide where we're going and expect him to come along and help out.

Jesus may well have said, "I will be with you, even to the end of the age", but he wasn't saying "Whatever you choose to do is fine with me, I'll just come along and baptize it." Jesus has not offered to follow us around and bless whatever we want to do. The saying should be "Jesus is the pilot, I'm traveling coach wherever he wants to take me."

He has called us to follow him, and to do as he does, as our reading from Colossians puts it, this means to clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, and above all love, and to forgive each other; as he has forgiven us. (Col 3:12-14) The promise of blessing is that blessing is found in following Jesus and in being where he is and doing as he does, even if it means following him into the fires of hostility, clothed only in love, compassion and forgiveness.

If even Mary and Joseph could get Jesus wrong and think he was lost, no doubt we will often make the same mistake. We, too, will be just going about our business and inadvertently leave Jesus behind, and then panic because we think he's lost. And whenever that happens, then it is absolutely right that you will have to stop what you're doing and get busy searching -- retrace your steps and hunt high and low and pray hard and do whatever it takes to find out where he is. And when you find him, stick with him, whatever the cost.

But take it from the twelve-year-old, and take it for a fact: when you find him, remember he is not the one who was lost.

Amen