

Sermons at St. Luke's

A sermon preached by the Rev. Joseph H. Hensley, Jr. on Sunday, January 3, 2010.

2 Christmas Year C

Jeremiah 31:7-14; Ephesians 1:3-6, 15-19a; Luke 2:41-52

Where is Jesus? Have you seen him? We spent all of Advent waiting for Jesus to arrive, and it seems like we spend all Christmas trying to find him. Maybe he got lost amongst all the discarded wrapping paper on Christmas morning? In the scriptures, the shepherds, the wise men, even Jesus' own earthy parents are searching with great anxiety. It brings to mind the title of the old hymn, "Where is this stupendous stranger?" In today's reading from the Gospel according to Luke, the twelve year-old Jesus is found by Mary and Joseph in the temple. Jesus says he must be, "in my Father's house," or as the King James Version puts it, "about my Father's business." Jesus, it turns out, is exactly where he needs to be. The question then becomes not "where is Jesus," but "where are WE?" Jesus is not the one who needs to be found, we are.

The secular New Year is often a time of making resolutions, a time of asking ourselves these very questions, "where am I" and "where do I need or want to be?" We may feel a bit like Mary and Joseph, the earthly parents of Jesus, looking for someone or something with great anxiety. Mary and Joseph in the story are frantic. They have just taken Jesus on a trip to Jerusalem, to the big city, for the Passover festival. They are on their way home when they realize that their twelve year old son is not with them or any of their family or friends. It is a parent's worst nightmare. Then put on top of that who Jesus' real father is, and we can imagine Mary and Joseph's concern. "How are we going to explain that we lost the son of God?" We can almost hear Mary and Joseph's thinking to themselves, "Sure, we had a multitude of the heavenly host when the boy was a baby, but where is an angel of the Lord when you really need one?" Many of us may wish we had an angel. Christmas is nearly over and we are trying to get our feet under us as we look ahead to a new year. Where are we? And it would be convenient if an angel of the Lord appeared to help us find ourselves.

The scripture says that after three days, Mary and Joseph finally find Jesus. He is in the temple (surprise, surprise) with the teachers asking questions and giving answers and being all impressive. We can understand that Mary and Joseph were astonished, even agitated. Mary says "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety?" These are words that sound familiar to many parents of pre-teen and teenage children. "How could you do this? We raised you better than that!" And almost as familiar is Jesus' response, "Why were you searching for me? Didn't you know that I must be about my Father's business?" We can almost hear Jesus saying, "Duh, mom. Don't make me call my real Dad and tell him how you lost me for three days." It may seem initially that Jesus is a typical twelve year old, trying to assert his independence and distance himself from his parents. But I do not think Jesus' question, "why were you searching for me" is just some rebellious pre-teen jab. Jesus truly knows who he is. "Why were you searching for me" is his way of saying "there is no need to search with great anxiety. I am right where I need to be." I wonder if it might even be an invitation to join him there, in his Father's house, about his Father's business. If we go back and translate that phrase word for word, Jesus says, "Did you not know that it is necessary for me to be in my Father's things?" In my Father's things.

For most parents, children meddling in their things, in their business and stuff, is a major boundary violation. "Why are you children getting all up in my business? Stay out of my stuff!" the parents say. We might expect a typical twelve year-old to go looking through his parent's things. But Jesus is no typical twelve year-old, and he means something much deeper when he says, "I must be in the things of my Father." For the Heavenly Father, as Jesus calls God, does not mind our getting into his things. Whether we view God as Father, Mother, Creator, or just God, we are not forbidden to touch God's stuff. God seems to invite our curiosity. "Sure," God seems to say, "go through my jewelry box. It contains the riches of the glorious inheritance of the saints. Go ahead and rummage through my closets. You may find yourselves clothed with power from on high. Go ahead, listen to my music, and rejoice in the dance. You want food? Have mine. In

fact, take and eat my body and my blood. Then go and share it with the world.”

Do we dare to meddle in the things of God? Do we dare to poke around in God's dresser drawers? I know the image might seem funny at first. For many of us, our parent's dresser drawer was or is a place that inspires a lot of curiosity, even a little fear. What might we find there? Some old family heirloom? A grandfather's watch or a jeweled necklace? Perhaps the drawer contains something dangerous, forbidden, or embarrassing. Some of us have wanted to go looking around in those drawers when our parents are not around. Some of us have actually gone ahead and invaded their privacy, listening carefully for the sound of the footsteps coming toward the bedroom. Some of us have had to go through our parents things after they are gone from this earth. When the boy Jesus says, “It is necessary for me to be in my Father's things,” I wonder if we can imagine that same sense of curiosity, wonder, and fear that we have about the parent's dresser drawer. I wonder if we can imagine ourselves approaching God with the same careful, watchful manner, listening for God coming down the hallway. Only this time we actually want to be discovered. This time we actually want God to know that we are looking around in God's things. We want to hear God saying, “aha, I see that you found something. Now let me show you something even better.”

Perhaps, though, we more easily imagine God's anger. We may worry that God will speak like an earthly parent. God will find us meddling in God's affairs and say, “what are you doing here?” “You do not have my permission. You do not deserve to be in my house, messing with my things.” This voice is not of God but of our own insecurity and fear. This voice keeps us searching in great anxiety. When we hear this voice, perhaps we can also recall the voice of the boy Jesus. “Why were you searching for me. Did you not know that I must be about my Father's business, in my Father's things?” When we hear the voice of anxiety, we can hear God calling to us, “Stop worrying and let yourself be found about my business.” Look through my things and let ME find YOU. When you are in my house, you are exactly where you need to be.”

In this new year, how will we get all up in God's business? How will we dare to peek into God's things? How will we let God find us? For some, it may mean a renewed discipline of prayer or devotion. It may mean more regular participation in this house and community of prayer. For others, it may mean a strengthened practice of loving service and generous giving. For some it will mean a re-dedication to the work of justice for the poor and marginalized. For some of our youth, it will mean a pilgrimage to Belize in June. They will hope to be found by God as they get into God's business of serving school children and praying in holy places. How ever we end up being about God's business in 2010, I invite us not to make new year's resolutions which can be easily begun and just as easily neglected. We often just disappoint ourselves when we lack resolve. How many times have we said, “This year, I resolve to pray more, exercise more, and eat less,” only to abandon the project after a short time. Instead of resolutions, I invite us, with God's help, to ask for DIS-solutions. Instead of RE-solving to do more for God, instead we might ask God to DIS-solve our fear and anxiety. God, please dissolve our stubbornness and hard-heartedness. Dissolve all our busy-ness so that we might be about your business. God please dissolve our attachment to the things which do not feed us so that we might be nourished by the things that are of you. dissolve the bonds of meanness and arrogance that separate us from one another so that we might know the bonds of affection and love our neighbor as you love us. Dissolve our dependence upon our own cleverness and make us curious about you and your things. As we are FOUND by you exactly where we need to be, O God, our Father, our Mother, our Creator, give us, in the words we heard from Ephesians, a spirit of wisdom and revelation as we come to know you, so that with the eyes of our heart enlightened, we may know the hope to you which you have called us, what are the riches of the glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of your power, O God, for us who believe.