



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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Looking for Jesus
Galatians 3:23-28, 4:4-7; Luke 2:41-52

A few years ago, my sister-in-law and brother-in-law took their three young boys to Disneyworld, with Mark's parents along on the trip. The group was at Magic Kingdom and after lunch, our brother-in-law took their youngest son Elliot, who was still in a stroller, to visit the restroom. Granddaddy got in line for a ride with the older boys, while Aunt Denise and Grandma found a nearby place to sit so they could take pictures of the ride. All of a sudden, Denise looked around, didn't see the stroller, and got this panicked feeling that Elliot was lost. She started to look around frantically and, within a few seconds, Grandma was also panicked, thinking maybe they had left him in the stroller by the table where they ate lunch. Denise then yelled to Granddaddy, "Where's Elliot? We don't have Elliot!" so Granddaddy grabbed the two older boys and started to climb the railings to get out of line to join them. And just as everyone was reaching full-panic mode, Eric reappeared with Elliot safely in the stroller, right where he should be, and where Eric had told everyone he would be.

Perhaps you've had one of those feelings of panic when you and your child became separated in a crowd or in an unfamiliar place. Maybe you've been lost yourself, or thought you were.

My nephew was safe all along and was misplaced for only a few minutes, and yet everyone was worried sick. I can't even imagine how frantic Mary and Joseph must have been! The family had traveled from Nazareth to Jerusalem, along with a large group of family and friends, for the festival of the Passover. It was a familiar journey, one the group of pilgrims made every year. It was a fairly long journey, though, 120 miles or about a five-day walk, but since they were among their tight-knit community, there was no need to worry when they set out for home and Jesus wasn't with them. He was probably with his friends or with other relatives in the caravan. After all, they all looked out for each other.

But after they didn't see him for an entire day, Mary and Joseph started to look for Jesus. I'm sure at first they just asked around to see if anyone had seen their precocious twelve-year-old boy. But when they didn't find him, they

traveled back to Jerusalem and after three days—THREE DAYS—they found him still in the Temple, listening and learning from the elders.

I assume that the conversation that followed, as we have it, has been sanitized in Luke's retelling. Mary is reported to have said, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." Now, come on, Luke, do you really expect any of us who have ever been parents of twelve-year-olds to believe that's ALL Mary said? Really?!

I have a twelve-year-old boy in my house, and he knows I love him dearly, but I can promise you that if he had gone missing for three days, and after we found him he had the audacity to ask why we had been searching for him . . . Well, what followed would not have been calm or pretty! We know virtually nothing about Jesus as a child. He was born, and at eight days old his parents had him dedicated in the synagogue. When he was about two, wise men from the East came to visit and Herod's threats drove the family to Egypt until it was safe to return home. And with the exception of this story of Jesus at the age of twelve, the Gospels tell us nothing else except that Jesus grew and matured until we meet him again at the age of 30 when he is about to begin his public ministry. Even though we know almost nothing, we can imagine that Jesus was probably not the typical pre-pubescent boy and that even if he did not yet fully realize his identity—There is quite a bit of disagreement among scholars about when Jesus came to understand who he was—Mary certainly knew. But even with that knowledge, Mary was a good Jewish mother, and I have no doubt that her words to him when they finally found him that day in the Temple were not so tender and mild.

Even though the young Jesus claimed that his parents should have known exactly where to find him, this would certainly not be the only time people would look for Jesus. At his birth, shepherds would follow the angel's instruction and set out to locate the stable where he lay. Herod had already gone to great trouble trying to find Jesus when he was a toddler. At the age of twelve, he had already been widely sought, and this was only one of many times throughout his life that others would seek him, often with urgency. And as his life and ministry unfold, it becomes apparent that this child born to common folks in a small town in a rather obscure part of the world is the One for whom the Hebrew people had been searching for generations. Being sought out would become a common occurrence for Jesus.

After one of his early healing miracles when he cured Peter's mother-in-law, Jesus went off by himself to pray, but Peter and his companions came hunting for him and said, "Everyone is looking for you!"

(Mark 1:35-37). When Jesus' disciples found themselves out on the lake in the middle of a storm, they immediately went looking for Jesus (Luke 8:24). When their brother Lazarus was gravely ill, Mary and Martha sent someone to look for their friend Jesus (John 11:3). A group of men searched for Jesus and eventually lowered their paralyzed friend through a roof in order to get to him because they had faith that he could heal. And many times throughout his ministry, the Gospel writers tell us that great crowds searched for Jesus to be healed and to hear his teachings (Matthew 9, Luke 4, John 6 . . .)

Jesus sometimes seems to be troubled or perplexed that he is being sought, not because he wants to hide but often because his whereabouts should not have been a surprise to begin with, because those who are searching should have had more faith that he would be right where he said he would be. Even after his crucifixion, the women who came to the tomb to prepare Jesus' body for burial were greeted by angels who asked them why they were looking for the living among the dead (Luke 24:5).

For his first followers and for us, a life of faith is a life of seeking, but these stories, and especially Jesus' reactions, cause me to wonder if our searching has been misguided. Perhaps some of us are so perplexed or distracted by all the voices and choices around us that we spend our time and energy seeking that which is already right in front of us. Society, celebrities, politicians, scholars, even religious leaders may convince us that God or truth or meaning or peace can be found in a particular philosophy or social issue, in a certain theory or political movement, by acquiring a coveted portfolio or social standing or degree, even through a particular worship style or denomination or church.

If we can filter out these other messages and distractions, our faith teaches us that all of these gifts and more are given to us by God, who has come to us in Christ, and who is right where he told us he would be: As Jesus told his mother, he can indeed be found in holy places of worship. We discover him in the pages of Scripture and in moments of prayer and quiet contemplation. But the totality of Jesus' life and ministry demonstrate that we can also find him out in the world wherever we find healing and generosity and acts of mercy. We find him wherever love is shared, joy is experienced, and peace and understanding are shown. We find him wherever there is hope instead of despair, light instead of darkness, life instead of death.

What may be even more troubling for me than those times when we seek Jesus with clouded vision or divided attention are those times when we approach faith with such certainty that we search for Jesus as if we have forgotten that we are the ones who are lost. One of the most disturbing

tendencies among people of faith is the belief that we possess God—all of God—all for ourselves. To hear many talk about faith, one would think that there are those in the Church today who have finally found the "true" Jesus, and that they are the only ones. They have everything figured out and have all of the answers. They no longer see through a glass darkly. And so they are the first to judge others, the first to point out the sins of others. They believe they have somehow earned the claim that they are good enough, wise enough, clean enough, straight enough, or saved enough to find and understand Jesus, rather than being the ones who once were lost but now, by the grace of God, and not by their own achievement or doctrine or worthiness, are found.

Perhaps we believe the fallacy that if our faith is genuine and strong then it can't include any doubts or questions. Perhaps we've convinced ourselves that for our convictions to be real and meaningful, they must exclude all other thoughts or beliefs that disagree with our own and insist that ours is the only true path to Christ. Or maybe it is easier to convince ourselves that we have found Jesus rather than undertaking the hard work of surrendering ourselves—our pride, our greed, our complacency, our self-centeredness—to the One who has come to search for us. Being lost can be difficult and frightening, but when it requires that we give up our assumptions and desires and even to give of ourselves, being found might prove to be even harder for us.

In the passage we heard earlier from Galatians, Paul was writing to a church that was having a hard time giving up their old ways of thinking, insisting that in order for Gentiles to become a part of the church they must first become full converts to Judaism, insisting that their interpretation of the law and understanding of faith was the only way to be a part of God's family. They believed they had found Jesus and that theirs was the only right path to him. But Paul reminds them here that, while there was a time when faith had been revealed under the law, when God's law had served as a guardian or disciplinarian over them, they had now been redeemed through grace in the coming of Christ. They no longer had to go searching for God through adherence to a set of rules because, in the fullness of time, God had come to them; had chosen to be revealed to them through the birth of Jesus; seeking us all, Jew and Greek, male and female, slave and free; and claiming all who would receive this gift as his beloved children and heirs.

Yes, the life of faith is a life of seeking, but because Christ has come to us in the fullness of time, in our very flesh, we need not seek Christ as if he is lost or unknown to us. We need only to trust in God's grace and receive the gifts offered to us through his coming. Instead, what we need to seek is to

give up anything which hinders us from receiving this gracious gift. What we need to seek is a truer, more authentic, more complete version of ourselves as children of God. We need to seek understanding, to seek obedience, to seek forgiveness, to seek an openness to the leading of the Holy Spirit. I have become convinced that we do not need to seek Jesus, as if he is somehow hidden from us and we must look fervently for him, for he has told that he will always be with us, that he will not leave us or forsake us, that we can find him wherever there is life and love and joy and peace.

The message of Christmas is that we no longer have to search high and low for signs of God's grace. Christ has come! He is here among us and He is out in the world! The Good News of Christmas is that in the coming of Christ, God has come to us. His persistent love searches for us, never gives up on us, is always trying to grab hold of us. Christ's coming is God's way of saying to us that He is right here among us, mysterious but no longer hidden, unlimited but no longer unattainable, beyond our seeing or knowing but no longer out of reach.

We once were lost, but at Christmas we celebrate and share the Good News that in the coming of Christ, God's grace comes looking for us, searches tirelessly for us, and if we are willing to be found, claims us as his own. Indeed this is Good News for us and for all the world. Thanks be to God! Amen.

Our hearts abound with gratitude, Generous God, for gifts that flow from you with such extravagance that we cannot keep track: for the birth of the One who comes to save us; for the splendor of angel songs that heralded the birth and transformed unsuspecting shepherds into evangelists of the wondrous news; for unfailing love that refuses to abandon your people to a frightening world; for the promise of life that challenges the finality of death; for joy in community and kindred that we share; for your stubborn grace that pursues us and calls us to be agents of your mercy; for blessings not counted because we lose sight of them in the midst of our plenty. For all these gifts that come forth from your gracious hand, we offer our thanks and praise.

But we confess, Gracious God, that too often the flurry of activities has prevented us from hearing the angel songs of peace on earth. The excesses of food and gifts have caused us to miss the good news of justice for the poor and oppressed among us. The obligations and expectations of the season have felt like fetters which bind us rather than a proclamation of freedom and joy. Help us, O God, as we open our hearts to receive our Savior, to refocus our attention on the beautiful simplicity of his call to love God with our whole selves and to love one another. Help us to remember, in all our celebrations, that we rejoice today and every day because we have received the gift of your grace Incarnate, the gift of your Son who by his life, death and resurrection has redeemed us and set us free.

Even as we give thanks for your generosity to us, Merciful God, we pray that you would help us not to become too comfortable or too preoccupied with our own circumstances that we fail to see the need all around us. We ask for your mercy on those who are not able to celebrate during this season. We pray for healing for those who are sick. We pray for comfort and peace for those whose burdens seem too much for them to bear. Holy God, reveal yourself to us again in the birth of your Son, that we may show mercy and love to your world and to one another. In the name of the One who comes, offering light in our darkness, even Jesus the Christ. Amen.