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Finding the Jesus You Thought You Lost

Luke 2:41-52

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I'm constantly looking for misplaced things. My things, my kids' things, my dog's things. Usually these things are shoes, or in this winter season everything one needs to be comfortable outside on a cold day. And if I'm really honest, Erica will tell you that I almost never know where my wallet or my sunglasses are at exactly the same time I need to run out the door. The trouble is that the harder I look, the more elusive those things often are. It isn't until I don't need them anymore or we've stopped looking that these things simply show up. Why is that?!

When Jesus went missing after the Passover festival, I'm sure that Mary and Joseph were looking for him in a manner they had never looked for anything before. Those familiar places where they had just been celebrating days earlier felt foreign and maybe even threatening. Especially after looking for Jesus for three solid days. This was their beloved son. Of course, Mary and Joseph had hope that their son would be what others said he would be, that he would bring the fulfillment of Mary's Magnificat. They hoped he would bring honor to God and honor to their people, but none of these hopes stood a chance of being realized if they could not find him.

For now, they just knew Jesus was their boy. He was probably curious and witty, maybe a bit mischievous with his younger siblings. Helpful, and mostly obedient to his parents. Like any parent, they must have been

worried sick. Yet, I wonder if it took them three long days to find him in the Temple because they couldn't see that this Son of theirs was already becoming what angels and prophets had said he would become. On that third long day, that must have felt like a week, maybe they were dashing through the courtyard of the Temple one more time, on the way to somewhere else they were sure he'd be, when they slowed down just enough to see him in plain sight.

They couldn't see the bigger picture at that moment, that Jesus was already taking part in God's divine plan of salvation. They had expectations of their children, but wandering off for three days was not on their list, regardless of what young Jesus was up to.

Though, you can't really blame them for losing sight of *that* Jesus, can you? After some unusual events when he was eight days old during his presentation in the Temple, they returned to Nazareth where life became uncommonly average. Jesus wasn't turning water into wine yet. There was no healing of Peter's mother. No Sermon on the Mount to give them any confidence that what the angels announced, or what old man Simeon prophesied the first time Jesus was in the Temple, would ever come to pass. But there Jesus was in the Temple among the great teachers and rabbis of the Jewish faith – a child among giants, and yet right at home in God's house. And though he was still their boy he must have seemed so different to Mary and Joseph, as though many more than three days had passed. As though they found the Jesus they thought they lost long ago.

Bible scholar NT Wright points to this passage as one of two book ends in Luke. The other is the story of two disciples on the road to Emmaus. They felt they had lost Jesus as well. For three days they wandered around Jerusalem in a grief-induced haze after Jesus' death. Then they heard the women tell them of the resurrection. They couldn't seem to believe it. In his commentary on Luke, scholar Justo Gonzalez writes that "even the possibility of resurrection was not enough to wipe away their sadness". It was not enough to change their expectations of what they had experienced. They had hoped that Jesus was the one to redeem Israel. They had hoped he would change their lives. They had hoped he would bring justice and peace that didn't involve submission to Rome. They had hoped that the end of their time with Jesus would have looked a lot more like celebration and victory and a lot less depressing. But their expectations got in the way of seeing all the ways God was fulfilling their deep longings. It just didn't look like they expected.

In both cases, Jesus was exactly where God called him to be. He needed to be among the teachers and the rabbis to learn of his people's long journey with Yahweh, to know the Law he had come to fulfill in his very existence. And he needed to suffer with humanity and for our sake on the cross in order to bring salvation and redemption to the whole world. For both Mary and Joseph, and the two disciples on the road, they were disappointed because Jesus didn't meet their expectations, he didn't fit their view of how God should act.

Here's the thing though, when faith becomes a dynamic relationship between God and the world, and not just a set of ideals or principles about

a divine being, disappointment and misunderstanding is going to happen. Sometimes we have a clear sense of what we're looking for, we remember the promises that Jesus embodies and the hope that his life, death, and resurrection give to the world and faith seems to come without effort. And sometimes we are confused and disappointed. We are disappointed when our brothers and sisters in faith do the opposite of what Jesus taught. We are brokenhearted when justice and mercy seem to be such a constant battle. We are discouraged when God seems distant.

Often our memories of youthful mountaintop experiences color our expectations – where God seemed to burst from every fiber of our being - whether it was at camp or a mission trip or with a youth group of close friends and a beloved youth pastor. Faith is less about mountaintops and more about the journey and learning to walk with God along the way, even when the path is uncertain.

I have had conversations with several people over the last year who have wondered where God is in all the challenges the world is facing these days. We could offer our own litanies of “we had hoped...” along with Mary and Joseph and the disciples on the road. We had hoped people would come together during such a global crisis. We had hoped that people with power would act in the best interest of everyone. We had hoped that we would care more for God's creation and the future of our planet. We had hoped that Christians would be a beacon of love and grace and unity in a time of division. We had hoped that the cries for justice for people of color would not have to come so frequently. But here's the thing, those litanies are acts of faith in themselves. They are the very things that God longs for as well.

Those longings are God's call to action, and God's call to find the Jesus you thought you lost in the midst of the things that are broken or misaligned in the world.

When you hear those longings, that come like whispers rather than bullhorns, slow down because Jesus is likely standing there in plain sight. When you stop looking so hard, God comes to you in the uncommonly ordinary places of life. God seeks us where we are, more than we seek God. God makes a way in subtle grace, in the words of a verse from Scripture or a silent prayer, or the words of a song or the needs of your neighbor. In these subtle ways Jesus shows up with compassion and empathy, with gentleness and strength that calls us into the ways of God.

Embody some of the hopes that grab your attention in the litanies of your heart and commit to one of the ways you wish the world would better reflect the ways of Jesus. It's in these places where God surprises us with presence and power.

And if you are feeling like your faith has hit a rough patch or is worn thin, remember that faith is not certainty or magic that makes everything instantly right in the world. "Faith has at its heart longing and hope – longing for fulfillment and hope in what has been promised."<sup>1</sup> Faith, at its core, is trusting that despite the challenges we see in the world, that God is working and has always been working in people like you and me, through our searching and longings for our world to be more just, more compassionate, and more loving. In this new year, may God lead you to

ways to be part of this work, and in the process, may you find that Jesus has been with you all along. Amen.