

Second Sunday after Christmas

January 3, 2010

Jeremiah 31:7-14; Psalm 84; Ephesians 1:3-6, 15-19a; Luke 2:41-52

The Church of the Redeemer, Bethesda, MD

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When our children are very young, we keep them very close. Calming for baby and mother, or father, for baby to be carried, “worn,” kangaroo-style in front; when older, on the back. Wheel around in carriage or stroller. Out walking with a toddler, “Hold my hand.” The contact, warmth, steadying and guiding hand are reassuring, and wise. Our very young children cannot take care of themselves. Cannot survive without warmth, closeness, attentive care.

As they get older, they can go, gradually, safely farther afield. But we know where they are supposed to be, and who is responsible for watching over them. In school. At practice. At a friend’s house, having checked that a parent is home. . . . Among the group of travelers returning to Nazareth from the festival of Passover in Jerusalem, walking with relatives or friends.

But, no! He is *not* there, nowhere to be found. Who among us does not understand, intuitively or from experience, the panic of these parents whose 12-year-old boy is not where he is supposed to be! They’ve gone a day’s journey now. It’s a whole day back again. And then another day, and another, searching for him. This is terrifying. (Will they sleep? Will they even try?) Even after they’ve found him, the memory will knock them off center at the most unexpected moments, for a long time.

They do find him. But when they do . . . Well, it’s all still very disconcerting. His composure, his surprise that his parents didn’t know where he was the whole time. He is altogether sure of himself and what he is about. It might be tempting to see this as all too typical of early adolescence! Aren’t all teens and even pre-teens this confident? Don’t they just know everything? Aren’t they all convinced that adults, especially their parents, are over-protective, anxious, alarmist, out of touch with reality?

There is something comical underlying this scene. The usual joke, in “Zits” or even “Baby Blues,” would be how little the child-becoming-adult really understands, his or her overblown confidence and skewed perspective. But here it’s the opposite. The 12-year-old really *does* know what he is about, and they really *don’t* understand. The joke is on us, the adult listeners, or readers!

Things are on a tilt here, and we are thrown subtly off balance. Luke’s “orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us” (1:1, 3) already is shaking up some of our basic assumptions about the order of things in our world, giving us a foretaste of what is to come. (Though you do kind of have to wonder, when was this 12-year-old thinking he might head back home to his family in Nazareth?)

The one assumed to be under authority because of his age actually exercises authority here. The boy is teaching the teachers, sitting among them as one of them, asking them questions. He amazes them with his understanding and his answers to them.

The child does know more than his parents about where he should be and what he is meant to be doing. “Did you not know that I must be *in my Father’s house?*” our translation reads. The Greek is difficult. Another, better translation is: “Did you not know that I must be *about my Father’s affairs/business?*” It is not so much about *place* as about *activity, engagement*.

What he is doing is what he was born to do, what he will do. He has come to be about his Father’s affairs: to teach, to heal, to proclaim the good news of God’s kingdom throughout Galilee and Judea. People will come from all over to hear him, crowds will follow him, everyone will be amazed. And people will not really understand.

At the time of another Passover, Jesus will be in the temple again, questioned by religious authorities. Again, he will teach the teachers, as well as the listening crowds. The authorities’ incomprehension will be tinged with hostility then. His answers will make their world seem to tilt and wobble, maybe even turn upside down. They will be watching for an opportunity to have him put to death, then.

Even the most faithful people will not really understand, as his parents do not understand now. As his disciples will not understand about his death, even though he will have told them. As two disciples on the road to Emmaus will not understand, on the very day of the Resurrection, the third day. They will have lost their hope, even after hearing from some of the women that his body is gone from the tomb. As we often do not really understand in the midst of our own lives, when it seems to us that he is lost and gone from us.

It takes time. What is disconcerting, puzzling, incomprehensible always takes time. It takes questioning, listening, sifting through all the possible, and impossible, answers. Contemplating. Just being still and silent. Holding what we do not understand, in quiet confidence and trust. As Mary held the words of the angels about the child, and pondered them in her heart. As she ponders her son’s words now, here in the temple. (“Ponder” being another, better translation of the Greek rendered here as “treasure.”) As Jesus himself grew in wisdom, so we may hope to do, in time; in this world, and on into the next.

Jesus’ parents assumed that he was still with them somewhere with the other travelers; and then, when they did not find him, assumed that he was lost. After he was crucified, dead, and buried, the authorities, religious and political, assumed they had closed the book on him. The disciples assumed that he was gone from them, that they had lost him. But he was not lost, he was not gone.

He was never lost, not even in the darkness of death and the grave. He was always where he was meant to be, about his Father’s work, in the Father’s will.

Wherever he was, whatever he was about, all was so that we could be where we are meant to be, in the Father's will. Even when we do not fully understand, even when we feel lost, dislocated, at a loss.

Too many things in life can throw us off balance so that we do feel dis-located, lost. Sickness. Concerns about our family, our friends, maybe especially our adolescent children or grandchildren. The economy, our own jobs or retirement. Just the news of the day. Sometimes it feels as if things have just gone haywire.

What is amazing is the steadfastness, steadiness of God's purpose. It is right here in the clarity, composure, confidence of Jesus in the temple, already as a boy. It is here in Jeremiah's words to a people in exile, who really are lost, who have lost everything—family members, lands, houses, cities, fields, orchards, temple. Who are afraid they also have lost their connection with God.

But Jeremiah calls them to sing and rejoice even while they are in exile, because even now the Lord is getting ready to gather the people again and bring them home. "See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north, and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth . . . a great company they shall return here. With weeping they shall come, and with consolations I will lead them back . . ." Even when things really are flying apart, as they weep for all they have lost, the Lord is holding them, and holds them together, so they are never really lost.

To gather the people, to hold us close, so that we never, ever will be lost, this is the activity, energy, direction of God. Even if we should wander off or ever deliberately walk away, to hold us always in heart and will, ready at our first turning to gather us in and welcome us home.

As the shepherd will leave the 99 sheep to find the one that is lost and bring it home, gathering friends and neighbors to rejoice with him.

As a woman will sweep and search her house til she finds the one silver coin is lost, and then gather friends and neighbors to rejoice with her.

As a father will watch for his long lost son, run out to meet him while he is still a long way off, kill the fatted calf and throw a party, to celebrate that this son who was dead is alive again, the one who was lost is found.

Wherever we are in life, whatever we do and do not understand, the Holy Spirit is closer to us than our own breath. Even in death, when all our days in the world are past, the Lord gathers us in and holds us close—as we hold our children close when they are young; as Mary held her son as close and as long as she could as he grew, until she had to let him go. Nothing and no one is ever lost; all is gathered and held by God.

Note: An image underlying this sermon, though not stated, comes from a painting in the Church of the Dormition in Jerusalem. Mary's body lies on her bed. She has "fallen asleep," surrounded by the apostles. Above this scene we see Jesus in heaven, holding her soul, which is swaddled in white cloths, just as Mary has so often been depicted holding her newborn son.