

“Searching in Great Anxiety” / Luke 2:41-52 / 30 December 2012

You or I would have strangled the kid for pulling a stunt like that! Disappearing for five full days, then flippantly asking his parents, “How could you not have known where I was?” Oh, if that had been my kid, there would have been no miracles in his future, no healings, no wise words uttered from the mountainside, no disciples, no fame, no Upper Room, no crucifixion, no Easter morning. No, if Jesus had been my child, and if he had disappeared for five days, then he would have lived to a ripe, old age...in his room...grounded for life. I can’t imagine a worse thing to do to a parent.

It’s no wonder they’re still making statues of Mary. She was surely the most patient parent who ever lived. I’m touched by her angry-but-relieved words upon finding Jesus. “Child, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety!” I find those words poignant and moving because I think I’ve uttered them to Jesus myself from time to time. I’m pretty certain that you have, too. “Why have you treated me like this? I’ve been searching for you with great anxiety!” And his answer is still the same, “How could you not know where I was?”

Mary and Joseph just assumed that Jesus was marching along behind them. We assume so much about God, about other people. Do you remember when Billy Crystal used to do a comedy routine in which he made fun of New Jersey? “I’m from Jersey! You’re from Jersey? Which exit?” It’s similar out in South Fayette. Whenever Michelle and I meet other parents’ at the elementary school, they always ask the ubiquitous question, “Oh, which development do you live in?” It’s just the way of the world out in South Fayette, where there are exactly three kinds of people: young professionals who live in housing developments with picturesque-sounding names, like Meetinghouse Manor or Hickory Hills. Then there are the old longtime South Fayette families, who occupy the few remaining farms and the old coal villages. Finally there are the immigrants, mostly from India, who live in apartment complexes. Our house lies at the intersection of these three worlds, with a housing development across the road, an apartment complex to the rear, and our own private acre of farmland in between. When people meet us at the school, they assume we’re housing development folks; when they see our house from the road, they assume we’re old-time farmers. When they see that we’re surrounded on three sides by an apartment complex, they make vaguely worried noises, implying that surely if we haven’t been carjacked yet, then we’ve got that to look forward to. We assume so much about people, just by where they live, how they talk, walk, dress. We assume even more about Jesus, whom we’ve never seen. “Jesus? Oh, yeah, he’s back there somewhere. He’s traveling with us.”

As a parent, I side with Mary and Joseph. I truly would have been hard pressed to find a suitable punishment for the young Jesus, short of things that would get me placed in prison and him in foster care. But as one who seeks the living Jesus in my life, and out in the world, and in the face of the stranger—as a seeker of Jesus, I have to admit: They really should have known where to find him. They never should have just assumed that Jesus was marching along in the holy parade of pilgrims on their way back to Galilee. They never should have assumed that Jesus had fallen into line with everyone else, that he was somewhere in the ranks. No, for surely even by the time he was twelve years old, they should have known the thing that you and I know now that he’s over 2,000 years old: Jesus doesn’t march in our parades. Jesus doesn’t tow the line. Jesus isn’t a member of our club, or party, or team. He goes about his father’s business, which may or may not

be ours. When we look around for Jesus, we won't necessarily find him playing nicely for our side, the way we supposed he would. He's got his own agenda.

But people have been using Jesus as a mascot in their parades for centuries. The popes of old thought that Jesus wanted them to kill Muslims in the early Middle Ages and Protestants in the late Middle Ages. And then various kinds of Protestants thought that Jesus was on board with their persecution of other Protestants. Swiss Presbyterians used to have Mennonites put to death for the crime of rebaptizing adults who'd been baptized in infancy. I truly wonder how they could have believed that Jesus was looking on with satisfaction! The Ku Klux Klan always said their prayers to Jesus before going out to bully, or intimidate, or lynch African Americans in the Old South. Even today, I sometimes find that the people who are quickest to claim Jesus as their ally in politics or the so-called "culture wars" are very often people whose Jesus doesn't look much like the one whom I—admittedly—claim as an ally for my agenda. The people at Westboro Baptist Church—the ones who picket military funerals with signs that read "God hates fags"—they too believe that Jesus is standing right there with them, sanctifying their hatred, speaking a benediction over all their anger and gracelessness. Jesus often ends up looking a lot like the person who's painting his portrait. But that's because the real Jesus never sits still long enough to get a painting done of him. He's out in the world doing the things that Jesus does. Consider all the brutal conquests, all the holy parades, all the boisterous agendas, the marching, the strutting, the pomp and ceremony all in the name of a Jesus who's barely paying attention, and whose interests lay far, far away. It's only the ones with the humblest, most teachable spirits who ever bother to look around and realize that Jesus isn't even marching in their band. And then they've got to look around to find him on his own terms, in his own haunts, doing his own things, and not theirs.

It's a time of growth and beauty when we do, in fact, finally realize that God is far bigger than our conception of God, that there is goodness, and truth, and beauty outside the bounds of our own culture, and camp, and church...that Jesus is out there among some most unexpected people. It can be frightening-but-freeing to travel out into the Big World and meet people of other faiths, or of no faith, and find that they, too, are kind, and gentle, and wise in a way that speaks of God's presence and activity in their lives. It's an exciting realization when we come upon the difficult truth that Jesus doesn't march with our parade; he's out there in the temples, asking and answering hard questions with those who are honestly searching for truth.

What is NOT a fun realization is when—in our private lives—we believe that Jesus is marching right along with us, and one day we look around in the place where we thought he was, but we just can't seem to find him. It's at these times of God's glaring absence that we might search, in great anxiety, the spots where we thought we'd left him and even ask, with Mary and Joseph, "Why are you doing this to me? Don't you know that I've been searching for you in great anxiety?" When the old platitudes of faith ring hollow or fall flat, when we really are loaded down with more than we can bear, when no good thing seems to be coming from our trials, when Good Friday comes and goes, and Easter morning shows no signs of breaking on the dark horizon. There are times in the life of faith when Jesus doesn't seem to show up at the appointed time and place, and what do we do then? There are times when our prayers seem to bounce off the ceiling, and fall back to us unheard. There are times when our acts of devotion do nothing to nourish our souls. There are times when we search in great anxiety for traces of God in

our lives, and we find nothing. What then? Well, here's a hint: Jesus doesn't always show up for our parades, but he does promise to be present when we come together. And he can always be found in places where people are united in their longing, in their misery, in their worship, in their need. We find Jesus in each other.

The carol asks, "What child is this?" Mary and Joseph ask, "How could he treat us like this, disappearing from where we expected him to be?" And he asks, "How could you not know where I would be?" He's a child who isn't interested in our costly investment in the status quo of this world. He's a child who won't march in our parades, so don't assume that he will. He's out there in the world among those who are searching for meaning and purpose. He's out there in the world among those who are working for a better tomorrow. He's out there in the world pursuing his own agenda of goodness, truth, and beauty. His preoccupation is not with our trivial processions, with all their pomp and drama, but with a whole new kingdom of justice and well-being for all people. God's presence will always be found more in the doing than in the simple believing. God's presence will always be available to those who do the hard work of retracing their steps, perhaps journeying back to where they started, rethinking their cherished assumptions. Those who rediscover God in their lives are those who are willing to seek God anew, again and again. Sadly, the living Christ will often slip away from those who try to capture him and keep him preserved in amber like a bug. His promise has always been, "Seek, and you will find." And so, seek him again and again. Then you will know—how could you not know?—where he is. Amen.