

First Sunday of Christmas (c)
1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26 Colossians 3:12-17 Luke 2:41-52
St. John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH
December 26, 2021 [Traditional]

One summer, Karen and I took the kids (when they were young and still cute), to Disney World with another family, close friends of ours. We had a wonderful time. But there was one scary incident. We were at Epcot, coming out of Norway, walking along the big central pool. I suddenly stopped dead in my tracks: Victor, our seven year old son, was gone. We all started looking around frantically in the milling crowd of strangers. I told everyone to stay there and wait, and I ran back into Norway. I was just about to lose my mind with anxiety.

I had watched “Forensic Files” enough to be absolutely sure that the wolf had pounced. That's the kind of situation—you know—where all your fears about the world come right to the surface. But thankfully, I found Victor in Norway. It struck me as symbolic that he was standing under a huge troll statue. Some nice Epcot workers were comforting him. What a horrible couple of minutes that was, though.

Joseph and Mary were frantic when they lost their 12-year-old in Jerusalem. And they were right to be scared. As far as safety went, back then Jerusalem was probably on par with Chicago. And even though he was the 2nd person of the Holy Trinity in the flesh, make no mistake: Jesus was as vulnerable to evil and harm as you or me. Remember, Jesus always lived in the shadow of death. King Herod had already tried to murder him. And now he's lost in a big city with its typical share of robbers, thieves and sickos. It never ceases to amaze me, that God exposed himself and his plan of salvation to such very real risks when he became one of us.

God becoming vulnerable in Jesus definitely tells us something surprising about the God who created this universe. Typically you think of God as being above you. He's like a King or a president or a boss. He's someone you'd better listen to or there will be trouble. And that's true—God is the Almighty power. But for Christians, there's the other side to God that, if you miss it, you've missed everything. When Christians look to find God in our lives, we look first towards all those people who don't have any apparent power over us in this life. We look at children, we look at helpless people, people who are lost, helpless, frightened. And we say...that's where the Almighty God lives in the flesh today.

Remember, he says "I was hungry and you fed me (or you didn't feed me), I was alone and you kept me company (or you didn't keep me company)" and so forth. So on the level of daily existence, God is not a king lording it over us. He's not the boss whom we're always trying to impress in order to get a raise. Instead, God identifies himself more with the helpless child for whom you are caring. God lives in the person who can *not* tell you what to do. He lives in the person who can not give you anything in return, when you do something for them. That's why we believers know that we show who we truly are, not by how well we suck up to the boss or by how many raises or promotions we got or how well we're thought of by our social peers. Instead, we know that we show

who we truly are by what we do to those who cannot do anything for us. It's no surprise that in the bible, parenting is the highest profession :)

But then the kind of humorous part of the gospel: when his parents finally find Jesus, he informs them that *he has not been lost*. He's been home the whole time in his father's house. Suddenly the whole perspective changes. It shifts from Joseph and Mary's terror, their fear of all the evil stuff that could happen to their boy, from their frantic search, from their sense of shame at having lost their son, from their sense of failure as parents, to Jesus himself, who cannot be lost, who is exactly where he's supposed to be the whole time, who even as a child of twelve is showing his divine authority. He's in charge of the situation.

So while God is showing us where he is, while he's showing us how we're responsible for the little ones in our lives, he's also telling us: don't be afraid. We know we fail in our responsibilities. Especially as parents for example, where we're given the highest responsibility of all, we face our limitations on a daily basis. And yet the God who meets us as the child we're caring for is the same God who tells us in Christ that we cannot lose him.

It all comes together in the last part of the gospel. The 12-year-old Jesus has shown that he is in control of the situation. But then, amazingly, even though he clearly has all this authority, he goes home with his parents, and he is obedient to them through the rest of his childhood. Think of that: God in the flesh is obedient to his human parents.

Joseph and Mary are biblical models for decent parenting. They raise their boy making sure to follow the law, and to teach him God's law, every step of the way. They're loving and caring. And yet here in this story, we face the reality that despite all our best efforts, we can lose what we love. Well, let's face the truth: we do lose everything we love. We lose everything we have. We face all these terrible things, evil things, that can happen to people in this world, including to those who are in our care. And yet God is telling us in Christ—do not fear. We cannot lose him, we cannot lose the life that he has given us, the promise he's given us about our future with him. God's power is for us. No matter what dark place you find yourself in, you are not lost; you are in your father's house. Or to put it more accurately, Jesus has made you his house.

Did Jesus need to go home and be obedient to his human parents? No—he did not. He was God. He was the Word through whom his parents were created. But look how he uses that power, that authority. He submits himself to others. He serves. That's the kind of confidence God wants you and me to have. He wants us to be so sure of him and his promises to us, that we can submit ourselves to each other. Love each other truly. Serve each other. Without fear for what it might cost. Believers will never be slaves to the people around them. We're people who live freely for the people who need us. It's not even really this big choice we have to make. It's who we are.

You can't read today's gospel without thinking about what happened twenty or so years later. Mary was going through hell again, because she'd lost her son. This time the death

was real. No doubt she felt that everything—everything had been a complete loss. You notice how in today's gospel, the boy Jesus is lost for three days? Well, twenty years later, after three days of darkness, Jesus came back to them again. In a big way. The picture came together. Mary found out that her son would never be lost...never. The despair gave way to a victory.

No power on this earth can reverse that victory. He lives now for you and me. No matter how lost we feel, no matter how much we stumble, no matter how often the people and things we put our hope in fail us, no matter how many ties are broken with people whom we love...and yes, even if we die...even *when* we die: we are safe in our Father's house.