

## **AFTER THE TINSEL**

Have you seen the movie "Home Alone"? It came out nearly 20 years ago now and is shown again each Christmas season. I'm sure if you have watched it you can see some connection between that story and the gospel account that Dennis read for us this morning from the end of Luke, chapter 2. Of course, both scenarios seem a little unlikely on one level. How could parents actually forget about a child? How could they not notice that their kid was not with them as they set out on a big trip? At least in the "Home Alone" scenario those parents had the excuse of having to keep track of nearly a dozen children, one of whom was accidentally left behind when the family had to scramble to catch a morning flight to Paris after they had all inadvertently overslept. In the chaos, little Kevin got left behind, and no one noticed until the airplane was halfway across the Atlantic.

By the time of the events narrated in these verses of Luke, Mary and Joseph may have more than one child, but they don't have a dozen! And you'd think that both Mary and Joseph knew full well that their first child was special, was worthy of taking very good care of. After all, when you become the earthly parents of Emmanuel – God with us – your commitment level tends to rise! Yet the story tells us that Mary and Joseph just assumed their son was hanging out with the other kids somewhere in the pack of folks making the return trip from Jerusalem to Nazareth and they kept on assuming it across an entire day's worth of walking. Didn't see him at breakfast, but he must be around. Lunch? Well, no, they didn't see him, but he must be grabbing a tuna sandwich with the other boys. Finally after dinner (still don't see him but...) it got dark and all the children returned to the safety of their mothers and fathers to settle down for the night. At long last it dawns on Mary and Joseph: he's not there! And after a little checking with some cousins and the other kids, no one had, as a matter of fact, seen him all day.

Their panic was doubtless real – any parent who loses a child in a mall or at an amusement park knows that the old metaphor about having your heart come up into your throat is pretty accurate as descriptions go.

But honestly, what had they been thinking? It's one thing to be fairly laid-back as parents – I would encourage it – however this seems more than a little careless. True, maybe they figured God wouldn't let anything happen to Jesus, but God uses real people to attend to such things and when a child just 12 years old, it is parents who rise to the top of God's list.

It takes Mary and Joseph three whole days to locate him – it took one day just to get back to Jerusalem (they probably had to wait until first light the next day to head back) but that still meant there were two whole days of panic, 48 hours of further anxiety. It must have felt like a year – a lifetime. Fifteen minutes of this kind of stress is enough to make the average parent dizzy and lightheaded – on the verge of mental and physical collapse.

When people lose things, they often say, "I finally found it and, of course, it was in the last place I looked!" But that's silly: of course it was in the "last" place you looked because once you found it, you stopped looking! But behind that phrase there is a certain truth: the longer you look for something, the more unlikely are the locations you check. If you lose your car keys, you check coat pockets first, then countertops, then drawers, then the car itself, and then you look under the sofa cushions. If by some chance you ultimately locate the keys in the freezer, you might remember how in the world it was you accidentally stuck them in there but the freezer surely was not among the most likely of spots to check.

So it is in Luke's account: Mary and Joseph spend 48 hours before finally tumbling onto the idea that maybe, just maybe, they should check the Temple. "I can't imagine he'd be there" they must have said to each other, "but we we're running out of likely places so let's check." For his part Jesus is merely confused. The Temple was the first place they should have looked as it turns out. Jesus was not exactly "home alone" but he was "home" at the Temple. His parents don't understand. They are too flush with a combination of intense relief and a little abiding post-traumatic stress to be able to make sense of it all just then. We are told that Mary *treasured all these things in her heart* and that *Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor*.

Almost the same thing is said in our Old Testament reading of another youngster: *the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the LORD and with the people*. There is also a description of John the Baptist in Luke, chapter 1: *the child grew and became strong in spirit...* Children marked by God, for some special – some divine purpose. All three set apart even at a young age. Imagine being the parent of one those boys – imagine trying to let go of the child, knowing that God has a plan for something greater than you could possibly envision. Imagine...

Actually it is part of what we agree to and what we celebrate in the sacrament of baptism – especially when we baptize an infant as we will do today. We let go as we accept God's greater purpose at work in our lives, in the lives of those we love and throughout all creation. Each one who is a parent longs for their child to grow – to increase in years, in spirit, in wisdom, and in divine and human favor. As we present a child for baptism we accept our part in that process acknowledging that the child is a gift from God whom we hold in trust. We hang onto our children for dear life – knowing that God has a plan – remembering that they are children of God – a gift from God that we hold lightly by God's grace.

And this is not something that parents do alone – the community of faith is a partner is the promise of a child. Just as it is often said that it takes a village to raise a child – just as Hannah gave Samuel to the shelter of Eli in the temple – just as Mary and Joseph trusted that their tightly woven faith family would keep Jesus safe – we too covenant today with Danny and Bo Min and God to nurture and support Dahim in his journey of faith. God entrusts this baby – this boy – to his parents care – to our care – so that he might become strong in spirit, increase in wisdom and years, growing always in relationship with others and with God.

Who knows what Mary and Joseph were thinking or how they actually managed to lose Jesus for a time – God made flesh who comes among us. In its own quirky way, however, this conclusion to Luke's second chapter provides us with a nice window onto the very human, very earthy, very mundane nature of the gospel. The same chapter in Luke that began with angels singing concludes with an utterly homely little story about parental error, deep panic, great relief and a hopeful future – all played out on an ordinary stage.

After the tinsel and the glitter – after all the hyperventilating of the season – we come down to earth and watch God's drama of salvation unfold quietly and steadily. We pour water and make promises – using the ordinary to point to that which is divine: God's presence – God's love – in our lives. We come back down to earth because that is what God did – God came in the flesh to redeem all of creation – each one of us. Thanks be to God!