

We begin with two stories about two youngsters who went missing. There was a young and carefree girl who lived at the edge of a forest. She loved to take walks in the forest, but one day she became lost. As it grew dark and the little girl did not return home, her parents became worried. They began calling for her, and with the help of their neighbours they searched the forest, but it grew darker. Meanwhile, the girl wandered the forest, disoriented and afraid as nighttime fell, unable to find her way home. She followed many different paths through the trees, but none of them took her home. Exhausted, she arrived at a clearing in the forest; she lay down by a big rock, and fell asleep. Her frantic parents and neighbors continued to scour the forest, repeatedly calling the little girl's name, but to no avail. While many of the searchers became exhausted and gave up, the little girl's parents continued searching throughout the night. Early in the morning, the father came to the clearing where the little girl had lain down to sleep. When he saw her, he ran towards her, yelling and making a great noise, which woke her up. When the little girl saw her father, with a great shout of joy she exclaimed, "Daddy, I found you!"

The second story about a youngster who went missing is told in today's gospel lesson. Joseph and Mary brought Jesus, then twelve-years old, on their Passover pilgrimage to Jerusalem. In their time and culture, neighborhoods functioned almost as extended families. Therefore, Jesus' initial absence on the return trip home from Jerusalem would not have caused alarm. It was assumed he would be safe somewhere amid the large group of travelers. Only when everyone had halted for the night and Jesus was not with them, did Mary and Joseph begin a search. They turned back to Jerusalem, undoubtedly in a frantic attempt to find him. They must have felt what the parents looking for their little girl lost in forest felt, fearing the worst.

Finally, after three days Mary and Joseph found Jesus in the temple. You must admit, only an unusual twelve-year-old would gravitate towards the temple and become involved in a question-and-answer session with the rabbis. Luke tells us that Jesus was listening attentively to the learned men, and even giving some answers himself.

Upon witnessing this strange scene, Mary and Joseph – despite all that had been revealed to them at the time of Jesus' birth – were amazed. Nevertheless, just as any concerned parent might do, Mary rebuked Jesus for going missing and causing so much worry. When she asked Jesus, "How could you do this to us? Can you imagine how upset and anxious we were?" Jesus responds almost disdainfully, telling his mother that she should not be surprised at finding him in the house of God, his Father. At that, Mary and Joseph pack up the boy and head for home.

Anyone who has been attending worship services the past couple of days might feel that we have covered a lot of ground in a short time. Because of this year's unusually tight liturgical calendar, only yesterday we were observing the birth of Jesus. Now, we are encountering him today as a twelve-year old. Time does fly.

Everything that is known about Jesus as a child – and it is not much – is what we read today. From this point we jump ahead to when Jesus was an adult around the age of thirty. The Bible is otherwise silent about Jesus for all those years between the ages of twelve and thirty. Do you ever wonder what went on in his life during all that time? The only hint we are given is included in a single sentence: "Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor." That is not exactly a detailed biography.

Is it not incredible to think of God living among us in human form while Jesus was developing from a baby to an adolescent to a young adult to a grown adult aged thirty?

One writer asked: "Can you imagine God as one of us, playing tag in the streets of Nazareth? Can you imagine Jesus complaining to Mary about the evening meal, or picture him falling and skinning his knee, or tearing up when his girlfriend broke up with him? Can you imagine God as one of us, needing everything that we needed as youngsters: a mother to dress him and bathe him and put him to bed? A mother who urged him to eat more fruit and drink more milk. Who reminded him to stay out of the heat at midday and wear an extra cloak when winter came? Can you see God as one of us, living with a human father? A father who scolded him when for missing curfew? A father who taught him the skills of a craftsman, cutting rock and

sawing wood. Can you imagine him grieving at his father's death and then being exhausted by running the carpentry business and supporting the family by himself?"

It is an interesting challenge, isn't it? Trying to imagine a young, human Jesus living in our midst.

You will have noticed that Luke tells us when everyone else, including Jesus' own parents, departed for home, "Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem." Some commentators have suggested that this looks like a case of deliberate disobedience on the part of Jesus, as he begins to assert himself while on the threshold of adulthood. That controversial decision to remain behind in Jerusalem after his family and their fellow travelers had departed might represent a defining moment in Jesus' development. Perhaps that is why Luke decided to write about it in his gospel.

By the way, if anyone thinks it is a bit irreverent to describe Jesus acting disobediently, remember that the core of our faith as Christians is a belief that Jesus, whatever else he is, was fully human. What this suggests to me is that God knows what it means to be a human being, because God lived a fully human life – shared our humanity – in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. As a result, I never have to doubt that God knows and understands me and my flaws, and weaknesses, and failings. Because God also was human, God knows that as humans we are and will always remain imperfect works-in-progress. God knows that we are always under construction as humans. God knows that as Christians we are never completed.

All those years from childhood to age thirty about which the Bible is largely silent concerning Jesus, tell us something about how God works. Those three decades of largely silent years suggest that God takes God's own time before acting. They suggest that God's movements in human history are rarely sudden. They suggest that God does not create change overnight, and God rarely changes people that quickly either. Those largely silent years involving Jesus' development as a human being suggest that God embraces the most ordinary and humdrum activities of our day or week or year, and our ongoing development as humans and as Christians, and God makes them holy.

On this first Sunday after Christmas, as we look toward a new calendar year, we heard two stories about two youngsters who went missing. An anonymous little girl strays into the forest and gets lost in the darkness, and a strong-willed twelve-year old who will grow up to become the most recognizable name on this planet chooses to lose himself momentarily from his family. Both stories have happy endings, for in both the lost are found.

I encourage you to see in both stories a truth about God, who is our divine parent, and who comes to all of us in the person of Jesus Christ and thereby allows us, who are the sometimes lost, to find God.

I leave the final words to Henri Nouwen, one of my modern-day Christian heroes: "God came to us because he wanted to join us on the road, to listen to our story, and to help us realize that we are not walking in circles but moving toward the house of peace and joy. This is the great mystery of Christmas that continues to give us comfort and consolation: we are not alone on our journey. The God of love who gave us life sent his only Son to be always with us and in all places, so that we never have to feel lost in our struggles but always can trust that he walks with us. Christmas is the renewed invitation not to be afraid and to let God – whose love is greater than our hearts and minds can comprehend – be our companion." **Amen**

1st Sunday after Christmas

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