

Christmas II 2014

Luke 2:41-52

Holy Searches

Those of us who are parents, or who just know adolescents well, have to smile at the Boy Jesus in the Temple. We know it because it is so intimately part of our experience, either remembered from our own childhood or in the care we have given others. But it is a part of all of us, a story about how deeply we search for our own identities in this God-among-us. It reminds us how intimately we can be formed by what we seek, how much we want to be found by the incarnate God for which we all search.

The beginning of Luke's gospel is full of searches: the search of the Holy Family for a place, however humble, in Bethlehem, the shepherds' looking for the Christ-child after being tipped off by a host of angels, the end of the old man Simeon's search, looking upon the face of a Savior he had never seen but knew he would recognize. But the trip back from the Passover celebrations in Jerusalem stands in a different category. It appears in no other gospel, and it lacks the kind of glitter that the heavenly host give the other stories; there is absolutely no danger that you will go home and find a card on your mantle about a boy getting lost in a crowd while his panic-stricken parents try to simultaneously embrace him and chew him out for taking five years off their life. For those of us who have had such children it is far more likely that we will find those moments lodged in our own memories, when junior got lost at the fair, or overstayed his curfew by two hours and arrived just before you were ready to call the authorities.

When we have these experiences with children, whether our own or those of others we are watching, we usually are ready to call them growing pains, kids who are searching for an identity, no matter how many gray hairs they give us. But at twelve Jesus knows his identity; it is his parents who are doing the searching. Why were you searching for me? Did you not know I must be in my Father's house? Even before his baptism and the formal beginning of his ministry, with no mangers or angels in sight, he is aware of his relationship to the Father and he is unafraid to declare it. Like his parents, we are seeking the meaning of our relationship with this child, fully human and fully divine, a relationship that will determine our sense of what our identity really is.

So why are we hearing this story in the midst of Christmas, when we are fed by accounts of virgin birth, or about the eternal word entering our time? Part of the answer has to do with the collect for today, which is one of the oldest in the prayer book: in it we ask that "we may share the divine life of him who humbled himself to share our humanity". It is what is called the Great Exchange, the gift of a life made sacred in all its parts by a God who emptied himself into human form for our sakes, that by becoming human, we might be divine. As St Augustine said many Christmases ago, "God became human like us so that we might become God... The Lord of angels became one of us so that we could eat the bread of angels." By this God-among-us going through all the stages of our life, all of what we do and feel, including the anxiety of parents for a beloved son, all of it is blessed. Most of all, it sanctifies our own search for a relationship with a God who continually asks us, in the midst of all our questions, "Why are you searching for me"?

There are as many answers to that question as there are seekers: comfort in distress, hope when, like Mary and Joseph, we feel torn by anxiety. But I believe, in the end, that we seek relationship, relationship with a God that is with us but whose purposes can sometimes feel remote. Thomas Merton talks about what it is to seek the divine, and, like someone looking for one who is beloved and lost, does not know where to start:

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. Nor do I really know myself and the fact that I think I am following your will does not actually mean I am doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope that I will have that desire in all that I am doing. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust you always, though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear for you are with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

We search because it is what we were born to do, to seek out the holy when all that is divine seems utterly fragile, collapsed into the frail body of a young boy. We search because at the heart of all our seeking is a God who searches us out, especially when we feel most vulnerable, who is with us always and knows us more deeply than we know ourselves. And at the beginning of that search is trust, trust in a God that refuses to abandon us at our most anxious hours, through the remainder of the year and for the rest of our lives.

One of my own moments of searching happened several years ago, among a group of teenagers in the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in NY. It was a place I had been many times before, often by myself or alone in a sea of fellow seekers at a service. But touring the building in detail with young people from all over the country, hearing about lives given to the construction of that huge edifice among a group of kids, all of them with expressions frozen in wonder, I began to understand what trust leavened with the need to seek out the holy was like. For that evening, that building was our temple and we knew it to be so, raucous and reverent as we were. Our only task, however, was to seek and seek again as the deeply fallible, human creatures we were, having a front-row seat at the divine life which we all had been promised.

What we search for has a great deal to do with the people we are becoming. The insistence of that question, "Why are you searching for me" pushes us from this place into a world of endless need, of limitless possibilities for our gifts. Because in the midst of those searches, God is continually seeking us out, hearing our own questions. So as we approach the end of a season of celebrating a God-among-us and look toward discovering the meaning of that enfleshed God, our rejoicing is in a God that cannot leave us alone and in fear, whatever we face, who finds us at the end of all our searching.