

The movie *Home Alone* has become something of a Christmas classic. How can a family leave a house, ride all the way to the airport, board a plane, and only then, midway over the Atlantic Ocean, realize a child has gone missing? “How in the world could something like this ever happen?” we want to ask. Seems far-fetched but you must believe it for the film to work. Of course, we could ask, “How in the world could something like this ever happen?” of Joseph and Mary. They did, after all, take off from Jerusalem one day without their boy. Worse, they took off without *God’s* boy. Does it get any worse than being entrusted with the one and only Son of God and then you lose him?

That’s just got to be somebody’s textbook definition of a “bad day.”

And consider the fact that Jesus was the Son of God AND he was Mary and Joseph’s son. As any parent reading this story knows, there is no panic like the panic you feel down in your stomach when a child goes missing. This narrative at the end of Luke 2 tells us that Mary and Joseph just assumed their son Jesus 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 through an entire day’s worth of walking. Didn’t see him at breakfast, but he must be around. Lunchtime? Well, no, they didn’t see him then either, but he must be grabbing a tuna sandwich with the other boys. Finally, after dinner, still don’t see him but it’s getting dark, and all the other children returned to the safety of their parents to settle down for the night. At long last it dawns on Mary and Joseph: He’s not here! And upon checking with some cousins and the other kids, as it turns out, no one had seen him all day.

It’s a curiosity of Luke’s gospel so see how these voluminous first two chapters of Luke end. These *long* chapters feature no fewer than three angel visitations, miraculous pronouncements, lyric songs and, above all, the story of birth of the Savior of the world. Yet, it all concludes with a story as mundane, as utterly human and simple, as they come; a lost child; panicked parents; a frantic

search. The whole drama starts with angels appearing and then seems to end with Mary and Joseph paging for a lost child on the P.A. system at Walmart!

It takes them 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 about done Mary in. Fifteen minutes of this kind of panic is enough to make the average parent feel like throwing up and on the verge of mental or physical collapse. Even five minutes of this can feel like a lifetime.

Someone recently noted that 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 after you find it, you stop looking! But behind that phrase there is a certain truth: the longer you look for something, the more unlikely are the locations you have checked. 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, or some such thing. If by some chance you locate the keys in the freezer, you might remember how in the world you “accidentally” left them in there. But the freezer certainly was *not* among the most likely of spots to check.

So also, in Luke 2. Mary and Joseph spend 48 hours before finally stumbling on the idea that just maybe they should check the Temple. “I can’t imagine he would be *there*” they must have said to each other, “but we’re running out of likely places, so let’s check.” For his part, Jesus is somewhat confused. The Temple was the *first* place they should have looked, not the *last*. Jesus was not exactly “home alone” but he was “home” at the Temple. However, his parents don’t understand. They are too flush with a combination of intense relief and a little taste of post-traumatic stress to be able to sort it all out just then.

Who knows what Mary and Joseph had been thinking or why they actually managed to lose God’s only Son for a time? In its own quirky way, however, this conclusion to Luke 2 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 in the sky concludes with an utterly mundane little story about parental error, deep panic, and great relief, all of which is played out on a very ordinary stage.

This story comes to us on the Sunday after Christmas. It fits this Sunday. After all the tinsel and the glitter, all the hyperventilating of the media (and sometimes the church too) to make this season so “special,” we need to come back down to earth and watch God’s drama of salvation unfold quietly and steadily. We come back down to earth because that is what God’s Son did, too. He came down to earth in order to redeem that same earth and all the lives we lead here.

There’s also something I had never before seen in this story. Notice that in Luke 2:51, after being found by his parents and scolded by them to boot, suddenly it is Jesus who is in the lead. In verses 41 and 42, when this story began, we are told that they all went up to Jerusalem from Nazareth. But in verse 51 the subject of the verb becomes “he,” as in Jesus. He went down to Nazareth and his parents are said to accompany him. Jesus the child leads the way out of Jerusalem. This may indeed have been Luke’s subtle way to set up the next portion of his gospel in which Jesus’ active ministry takes center stage.

Luke 2:51 is also the second time Luke says Mary “*treasured all these things in her heart.*” The first time was after the shepherds popped in to see the infant Jesus. But now this second time follows a troubling and frightening incident. It seems Mary at least discovered that when it came to her son Jesus there would be plenty of opportunities to treasure up both wonderful things and perplexingly painful things. We sometimes forget this in the Christmas season and in its aftermath. We view tragedy, illness, or bad news that comes during December as an unwelcome Advent guest.

If we, blessedly enough, can get by without any real sadness within our own family circle during December, then we shut out and buffer for a few days the tragedies we hear about others. But if we are forced to deal with a tragedy during the holidays, we conclude that Christmas may be ruined forever for us.

If from now on Christmas Eve will remind us of that night when grandpa had a stroke, then we have the uneasy feeling that this unfitting event will keep us from ever really observing Christmas the only way we think it should be celebrated, namely, with a sparkle that must not stop for or include sorrow.

But Mary's wrinkled forehead, as she pours over even more ponderings in her heart, gives a different picture. It must have been the incongruities of it all, the cross currents and contradictions, that motivated Mary to do all this pondering. That's why you get the feeling that the woman who gathered up those myriad events and pondered them in her heart would not find pain and sadness out of character with "the holiday spirit." Mary had no other way to ponder what we call "Christmas" except to recall her own personally hurtful memories.

Throughout her son's life, Mary tried to make sense of it all. How well she succeeded we don't know for sure, though it seems a lot of confusion remained for Mary even by the end of the gospel story. But at least she recognized that the birth of the One whom the angels hailed as Savior and Lord had something, and maybe had everything, to do with the world's hurt and pain.

We don't know what, if any, conclusions she may have drawn. But a few decades later, as she wept over her baby boy writhing on a Roman cross, she most certainly renewed her perplexed pondering. She may have pondered once again her son's answer to her question, "*Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you.*" He answered by asking, "*Why were you searching for me? Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?*" (Luke 2:48-49). This son of hers just never had an easy road—not when his life began and certainly not when it ended.

"What could it all mean?" Mary seemed to silently cry out. We do well to ask the same question—to ask it and then to trust God's Spirit to help us answer it. Amen.

(Thanks to Scott Hoezee for sermon ideas)