

41 Every year his parents traveled to Jerusalem for the Passover Festival. 42 When he was twelve years old, they went up according to the custom of the Festival. 43 When the days had ended, as they were returning, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. His parents did not know it. 44 Since they thought he was in their group, they went a day's journey. Then they began to look for him among their relatives and friends. 45 When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem, searching for him.

46 After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. 47 And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. 48 When his parents saw him, they were astonished. His mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us this way? See, your father and I have been anxiously looking for you."

49 He said to them, "Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be taking care of my Father's business?" 50 They did not understand what he was telling them.

51 He went down with them and came to Nazareth. He was always obedient to them. And his mother treasured up all these things in her heart. 52 Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and with people.

Here we are, a week after Christmas. Where did everyone go that was here last week? Have they moved on with life? Here we are, back to the grind of life, trodding back with life in the afterglow of Christmas, almost to another year.

Maybe that's how Joseph and Mary felt too. The Passover was a great and high festival in Jewish culture. They reviewed and celebrated how the LORD had set the Israelites free from slavery in Egypt. It could be celebrated anywhere from two to seven days. Mary and Joseph stayed for all seven days, along with many other pilgrims from Nazareth who had travelled south. What did they do while they were there? Maybe Zechariah and Elizabeth were still alive. They would have been able to speak with them about what it was like to raise John and Jesus. Maybe they could catch up with other distant relatives. This would have been in some ways similar to our celebration of Christmas or Easter. Passover was a highlight of their spiritual year.

This was even a more special year. Jesus had turned 12 years old. It was time for a Jewish boy to celebrate the Old Testament equivalent of confirmation. The rite made the boy responsible to Jewish law, both to know it and to keep it. According to custom they had to memorize large portions of the Old Testament, some say it was the entire first five books of the Bible! And you thought the catechism was hard!

Some students that go through Catechism or Bible Information Class only seem to go through the motions. They do what they have to do in order to get into membership. They are afraid to ask questions. I would much rather they did! Jesus would have proven himself to be a most faithful student! This was evident in how Jesus was interacting with the rabbis at the temple. He had opportunity to ask questions. They were in-depth questions, ones that required a lot of thinking! The rabbis also asked questions back in order to test the people and get the conversation flowing, kind of like in a Bible study. They were astounded at Jesus' answers! Here was a young man who took His studying seriously and He knew His Word well! What a joy to have as a child!

This is all somewhat amazing to think about. Jesus was going to celebrate the Passover, and all of these sacrifices were pointing forward to His own sacrifice. In humility, He learned of it as we are called on to learn it, even though He was there through it all. How much was He learning about His own destiny of going to the cross? Or did He just know it all because He was the Son of God? I can't help but assume that He chose to learn it all through the Word just as we are called on to do. It's kind of impossible to wrap your mind around it all.

But what happens next when all is said and done? Mary and Joseph left Jesus behind on the way home! How is that even possible? Here they are being given a great responsibility of taking care of and raising God's Son, and they leave Him behind in one of the biggest cities of Israel? Some have said that the women traveled ahead with the children and the men followed behind. Maybe it wasn't such an unusual thing? And Jesus was always a responsible child. But Jesus was still growing both physically and spiritually, in his state of humiliation. They knew He wasn't supposed to try to take care of himself. There is no excuse for it! He was only 12 years old! Even today such behavior would be charged with neglect or endangerment.

So we see that Jesus' parents weren't perfect. Here they were - how can we say it? So much like US! They had gotten so used to having Jesus with them that they forgot what a priceless treasure he truly was. He was to be the center and focus of their lives, and here they went and left Jesus behind. They got caught up in all of the fringe relationships of friends and family that they lost sight of their most precious child. Shouldn't they have known after the slaughtering of the infants in Bethlehem that His life could have been all the more in danger? They had one job, and they had completely lost track of Jesus.

Is it too much to suggest that their behavior serves as a useful object lesson and reminder for us? We too have celebrations that are supposed to be centered and focused on Jesus when it comes to Christmas and Easter, along with baptisms and confirmations, weddings and funerals. And what do we do with these? We make Jesus secondary to it all as we busy ourselves with meals and invites and clothes and gifts. We put ourselves in the forefront and make it all about us. We wear ourselves out with preparations. We revolve our joy around the joy of our children or the presence of family. We allow our sorrow over days gone past drown the glory of the messages of Jesus born, crucified, and risen for us. So when the weather isn't right or the meal doesn't turn out so well, we get upset. Even if it all goes just great, when all is said and done and we head back to routine, we are exhausted and we wonder to ourselves, "Was it all really worth it?" Why? Because we focused way too much on the peripherals of it all.

When that happens, it's time to go back to Jerusalem and look for Jesus again. It's time to look for him, not in the tinsel on the tree or pictures on the computer, but in the Word and the sacraments. That's where He has promised to be. That's where He promised to find you! And that's what we're doing today. Along with Mary and Joseph, we go back to Jerusalem. It doesn't matter how tired we are. It doesn't matter if we have to backtrack. We take the journey back, when everyone else has gone home. The crowd isn't as big. The songs aren't as festive. The cameras are not out. But that's ok. It's easier to concentrate and listen. We remember what we're here for again. We're here for Jesus.

It took Mary and Joseph three days to find Him. **When his parents saw him, they were astonished. His mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us this way? See, your father and I have been anxiously**

looking for you.” What exactly were they astonished at? The way that Jesus was the center of attention in the temple? The fact that he was in the temple? And what were they anxious about? Probably the health and welfare of Jesus, but perhaps over their own failures as well. If Jesus had died or been abducted, it would have been their fault. They say that after a child has gone missing the first 24 hours are the most crucial. This had been three days! That’s a long time. But once they found Jesus, imagine the sense of relief that came across them at seeing him, especially in the temple!

It’s such a simple answer from Jesus. He’s not trying to be smart with them. It seemed so natural to Jesus. But they certainly didn’t get it at the time. **“Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be taking care of my Father’s business?”** They did not understand what he was telling them. The most natural place for Jesus would be would be in the temple, where His Word was being taught. Had Joseph and Mary forgot where Jesus came from, that He was God’s Son? Wasn’t it a part of His calling, as our substitute and God’s perfect Son, to be learning the Word of God in the temple? Jesus wasn’t trying to torture them by staying as long as He could to learn more of God’s Word from these local rabbis - probably some of the best that Israel had to offer. He was only trying to do what He was called to do. He was fulfilling His mission to be the perfect child and the perfect student - learning the Word living the law in our place.

And it seems like such a simple remedy doesn’t it, to us too? And how often do we miss it? We look for God in everywhere but the Word and worship. We think we can have God by going in nature. We measure His presence by how healthy or successful we are. When all is going smoothly we move on with our lives and assume that God will follow us wherever we go. But then when something doesn’t go according to plan, we start to panic. We fear that God has abandoned us.

How many never come back? So many used to be members here - children and grandchildren - and we don’t see them anymore - not even at Christmas or Easter. They’ve moved on, but something is missing and they just can’t figure it out. Maybe the problem is that they wanted Jesus to stay a baby or a 12 year old. They wanted a god who they could boss around and tell what to do. They wanted one that would always be obedient to them, not one that would grow up - Whom they would have to be obedient to. But when Jesus has a mind of His own, and a God of His own, then they don’t like that kind of God. If they can’t tell Jesus what to do or if He doesn’t want to go where they want to go, well then they’d rather abandon Him and leave Him behind in Jerusalem. Better yet, have Him crucified if that’s who he wants to be and leave Him in the grave. Oh, that they would come back to find the real Jesus!

The beauty of it is that the remedy is so simple. No matter how far you’ve gone, it doesn’t take three days to find Him! If we just take a journey to go back to the Word, come back in repentance over where we’ve gone, we will find the same Jesus on the same cross, dying for all sinners, even the ones that have gone far astray. We’ll always find the same grace and the same mercy. He’s always where He said He would be, holding His gracious hands out to us. He’s always more than willing to do what He said He would do - praying for us and interceding for us - ruling over this world in invisible ways. The problem isn’t that He’s left. The problem is that we left and we didn’t remember where to find Him, through repentance and faith in the Word made flesh.

Joseph and Mary go home with a lesson learned, learned through failure, fear, and finding Jesus. They left with the same Jesus on the same mission that He always had. **He went down with them and came to Nazareth. He**

was always obedient to them. Mary had eighteen more years to enjoy having Jesus at home. We don't know how long Joseph lived after this.

The story concludes with a simple and yet profound statement. **Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and with people.** What an amazing thing, that the eternal, omnipotent and omniscient God in the flesh could grow in wisdom and stature! What an amazing thing! God knows what it's like to grow in a human body and go through puberty. He knows what it's like to have parents over you who make demands of you when you are tired. He knows the mundane things of life: what it's like to stub your toe or cut a piece of wood. Imagine what a joy it would be to have Jesus as your neighbor and your friend. The perfect teenage child, full of a godly energy and a godly joy. How infectious He must have been! What a great worker! What a wonderful young man! What a joy it would have been to have Him as your son or your neighbor or as your childhood friend!

But how much greater is it to have Him as your God and your Lord - much greater than a childhood friend! Mary couldn't keep Him as a young man. She knew He was born for greater things. So do we! This is the God who grew up to live a perfect life and die an innocent death on the cross. He didn't come to fulfill our will, but God's will. This is who Jesus is and who Jesus was and who Jesus was born as and what He also grew to be. We needed Him to grow up and do what He came to do, to be our Savior.

It's probably this week and the week after Easter that are the least attended. But I'm glad you're here today, the week after Christmas. You're here to find the same God - not just a baby anymore! Within one week we've gone from baby Jesus in the manger to 12 years old. The rest of it? God didn't want us to know, and we don't need to know. What we do know is that Jesus was the perfect Son, and His priority was to the Father, so that He could be our Savior. **Mary pondered these things in her heart.** Ponder them in yours this Christmas time. Go home with Jesus, and be at peace. Amen.