

Finding Jesus

Luke 2:41-52; Colossians 3:12-17

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

By: Ryan Dueck

December 30, 2018/First Sunday After Christmas

We have reached the last Sunday of 2018. Like many, as a calendar year approaches its end, I find myself in a reflective space.

I think back upon the year that was, upon the year that might be, about the things that I want to embrace and the things that I want to leave behind.

I think about the state of the church, the state of *our* church and about what God might have in store for the future.

I think most of us do this kind of taking inventory as a year ends. We quite naturally think about our triumphs and failures over the past year, and the things we hope to improve upon in the year ahead.

Into this kind of a naturally reflective space, near the end of a calendar year, in the time between Christmas Day and New Year's, every three years the lectionary gives us a story about Jesus' parents losing and finding their twelve-year old boy.

On one level, it's a strange text for the last Sunday of the year. We've barely celebrated Jesus' birth when we encounter him as a pre-teen boy in Jerusalem. We're still pondering the miracle of the Incarnation, the glad tidings of the angels and the shepherds when we're with Jesus in the temple, hearing him declare that he must be about his Father's business.

But over the last few years I've come to think that this is actually a great text for us to read in the middle of the Christmas season on the cusp of a new calendar year.

It is a text that launches us out from the miracle of Jesus' birth into a life that steadily increased in the wisdom and favour of God (things that I think all of us hope will characterize our lives will do at the outset of a new year).

It is a text that reminds right away that that Jesus would become so much more than a child in a

manger—that he would be truest interpreter and final fulfillment of the Jewish law.

It's also a text that resonates with me on a more human and personal level.

I've shared this story in a number of different contexts over the past few years, so there's a good chance you've heard it before.

If so, I'm sorry. I can only say that we preachers only get so many good stories to work with, so we have to make the most of the ones we get. 😊

In the summer of 2015, on an oppressively hot Wednesday afternoon in New York City, like Mary and Joseph, I lost my son in the big city.

It's hard to lose a guy like Nick—even then at fourteen he was 6'5. But I did it.

Our family had tacked on a mini-holiday in NYC after Mennonite World Conference in Pennsylvania and had spent a good chunk of that Wednesday wandering the streets of Manhattan.

Naomi and Claire were snooping around the shops of Little Italy and Nick and I were, predictably, growing weary of shopping. So, we decided to hop on the subway go see if we could find somewhere to get a glimpse of the Statue of Liberty.

We had been riding the subways for two days prior and I thought (unwisely, as it turns out) that I had it pretty much figured out. So, we agreed to meet Naomi and Claire later for dinner and off we went.

We found the nearest subway station and jumped on one of the southbound trains. Once inside, I began to peer curiously at the maze of lines and arrows on the subway map on the wall of the train. I soon discovered that we were, in fact, on the wrong train. So, we hopped off.

Or, at least I hopped off.

No sooner was I through the train doors when they closed behind me, Nick's face pressed up against the glass on the other side. And no matter how hard I pounded on the doors, they wouldn't reopen. I was left alone on the platform, helplessly beating on the train while it took him away.

I spent the last few seconds before the train receded from view frantically trying to motion at him to get off at the next stop, but I had no idea if he understood what I was trying to say. I probably looked like a crazed lunatic to those who had the misfortune of observing this sad scene.

I have never felt as sick in my life as I did as that train disappeared into the dark NYC underground tunnel. I spent the next 7 minutes stalking the platform, praying, sweating, berating myself, praying some more...

You've lost your son in Manhattan! You idiot! How could you do such a thing?

I had visions of my son stumbling confusedly up from a random subway station, wandering alone around some far-off corner of Manhattan. All manner of terrifying scenarios and scenes from bad crime movies began to unfold in my panicked and suddenly quite irrational brain.

I began to imagine what I would tell Naomi. This was even more terrifying than the scenarios I had been pondering. ☺

Finally, the next train arrived to dislodge me from my panic, and I leapt on. After what seemed like an hour (about seven minutes, in truth), I got off at the next stop and raced around the platform like a mad man, hoping and praying with a desperation that I cannot recall feeling before or since, that Nick had gotten off.

All of a sudden, I saw the top of his head, peering anxiously (although he will dispute the "anxiously" part) above all the others. I have rarely been happier to see him. I grabbed on to him and clutched him for dear life.

He seemed a bit bemused by his father's hyperactive anxiety ("What else would I do, dad? *Of course I'd get off at the next stop!*"), but I think he was pretty happy to see me, too.

We walked back out on to the street a profoundly relieved pair. For my part, it took about half an hour before I stopped feeling physically sick.

So, I think I know a bit of what Mary and Joseph must have felt like when they realized they had lost their adolescent boy in the big city.

Recalling that day in New York in the summer of 2015 reminds me what it feels like to think you've lost one of the most important things in your life.

It's a terrible feeling.

It is a disorienting and destabilizing and unnerving feeling like few others. It feels like the ground is shifting underneath you.

Your heart sinks down to the soles of your feet. You are suddenly overwhelmed by a frantic confusion that no light of reason seems capable of penetrating.

So, that's kind of the human side of the story. But what if we think of this story beyond its original context?

We know that Mary and Joseph would not be the last to experience the discomfort of thinking that they had lost Jesus.

Many of us who have come to Jesus since have also had times where we are convinced we have lost him, too. For a few days. Or a few weeks. Or a few years.

We thought he was there, right beside us, but when we looked up, he was gone. Or at least we couldn't see him anymore.

I've known these times—times when Jesus seems far away, indifferent, useless. Times when what I thought were my surest convictions about Jesus as the clearest picture of who God is and how God works seem to crumble all around me.

Times when the idea of a love that stands at the centre of all that is, that holds all things together, preserving and protecting the world from descending into unreachable darkness, seems a laughable fiction.

Times when the most obvious explanation for what I see around me seems to be that there is no one and nothing out there that is interested in or concerned by our plight as human beings.

Times when I think I've lost Jesus—lost the one that I have given my life to, the one in whom I have anchored the hopes and fears of all my years, at the very least, to say nothing of the world's.

Maybe you've known these times, too.

But I have known other times, too. Times when I have been stumbling around the platform in a manic fog, searching for the thing that matters most, and I see a face that stands out amidst all the others.

Times when I see a love and a beauty and a pure goodness that I am convinced is the one, true source of all that is and could ever be, the fulfillment of every hope that finds laboured and incomplete expression.

I have known times when I have felt such a deep and profound relief that there should be such a person as Jesus of Nazareth, that such a love could have made its way into our world of fear and hate and death, that this love could summon and surround us, setting our feet on the path that leads home.

It is a terrible thing to think that you have lost the thing that matters most. But it is a glorious

thing to discover (or rediscover) that the thing that matters most is the very thing that is looking for you. That has always been looking for you.

The title of my sermon this morning is “Finding Jesus.”

There are two ways of interpreting this title. The first is the obvious one. Jesus’ parents thought they had lost him and then, to their great relief (and probably annoyance) they found him.

We occasionally think we have lost Jesus, and then we find him again.

The second one is to make “Jesus” rather than “finding” the centre of the phrase. “Finding” describes the sort of person Jesus is. Like “loving Jesus” or “caring Jesus.”

Finding Jesus is the Jesus who finds.

I think both are important, but maybe the second even more so because it reminds us that ultimately it is Jesus who finds us.

How? How does Jesus reclaim us when we’ve wandered? How does Jesus come to us and remind us that we are together to be about his Father’s business?

This finally brings us to our text from Colossians. It is a simple text, not at all difficult to understand however difficult it is to put into practice. We are to “put on the clothes of Jesus Christ”:

- compassion
- kindness
- humility
- meekness
- patience

These words, these behaviours, these dispositions are to govern our lives, our every interaction.

We are to “bear with one another” and “forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven us.”

Above all—above all... in other words, at the top of the list, the most important thing, the most absolutely crucial thing that we need to remember...

...clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

Put on these clothes, Paul says, and the result will be peace—not a peace that we summon up as

a kind of personal accomplishment or New Year's resolution, but the "peace of Christ which will guard our hearts" (Col. 3:15)

The promise is not a life free of suffering, not an easy life by any means. But it will be a life marked by a conviction that what we have received is what we are to extend out into the world, into our daily relationships.

Colossians 3 reminds us that the Christian life is supposed to be an expression of gratitude for how we have been treated by God in Christ.

If you look at that list of the clothes we are supposed to "put on," we realize of course that this is exactly how Christ has treated us.

Each one of those words that Paul said should characterize the behaviour of the church in Colossae describes Jesus' disposition toward us.

- compassion
- kindness
- humility
- meekness
- patience

This is how Jesus treated us. This is how he treats us still. This is how he "finds" us and this the way that we find our way back to him.

By putting on these clothes.

By taking off that ratty old sweater of selfishness and pride and impatience and ingratitude. It doesn't fit, it's got all kinds of holes in it, and it's not nice to look at.

Rather, we put on Christ. And we *keep* putting on Christ.

We don't wait until we feel 100% certain that God exists or that prayer works or that the disciplines of faith are worth the effort. If that were the criteria for finding Jesus, some of us would never get started.

Rather, we find Jesus by trying to emulate him. And in so doing, we realize that we have been found by him.

A new calendar year stands before us. It is a year that will yield joy and fulfillment, and opportunities for participating in what brings life and light.

It is a year that will contain many challenges and obstacles. It is a year that, for some, will contain

suffering and trial.

It is a year that will also bring temptations to settle for lesser stories than the story of Christmas.

Sometimes, the world will seem futile, hopeless, meaningless... Sometimes, it will not be easy to believe that love is the reason for this whole story we are a part of.

Sometimes it will be all too easy to look at the child in the manger and think, why couldn't you have set things up differently? Why is there still suffering in the world? Why does the road often seem harder than it needs to be?

Why is doubt easier than faith and fear easier than love?

It is at these times that we most need this reminder of how we have ultimately been found by God in Christ.

We have been given an example of what a human life is supposed to look like.

We have been forgiven, healed, and set out on the path to freedom.

We have been invited to participate with God in the restoration of all things.

We have been given a light and a life like no other and trusted to represent these to a watching world.

We have been loved.

The Christmas season is as good a time of year as any to be reminded of these things.

Christmas declares that God has searched us out and found us with love, humility, grace and mercy, with patience and a fierce determination to drag us from darkness to light and to rescue us from bondage to fear and sin and death.

This is the hope that the child in the manger and the pre-teen in the temple holds out to each one of us this Christmas season.

My prayer for you is that 2019 would be "finding" year. A year where you find—again, or for the first time—the thing that matters most and respond by putting on the way of Christ like a new set of clothes.

A year where you recognize that the One whose love holds all things together has been searching for you all along.

Amen.

