

The New Testament only has one story about Jesus between the time of his birth and when he reached the age of thirty. It's a profound story about what happen when he was 12 years old and not where his parents expected him to be. But Mary and Joseph are not the only ones who have to lose their expectations about Jesus.

It was Passover – a time when Jews from all over Israel made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to remember their deliverance from slavery in Egypt. Joseph and Mary took the trip with their son. The text says this was their usual practice. Certainly, they told him the great story of the Exodus during Passover, maybe even along the way on these trips to Jerusalem. That means Jesus grew up knowing it was God's business to deliver humanity from anything that enslaves or oppresses. Like all Jewish parents, they told him their people were waiting for a deliverer, a messiah. And as a 12-year-old, who was old enough to read the Hebrew scriptures in the synagogue, Jesus was expected to take these messianic hopes seriously. He did. That's when his parent's confusion began.

After the Passover celebrations, the people from Nazareth took the road to head back home. But a day into the trip, Mary and Joseph discovered to their horror that Jesus was missing. The text says they assumed he was with the group of travelers, which is reasonable. We know life was communal in those days, and the village raised the children and traveled together in community. Twelve-year-old boys have always preferred to be with other boys rather than their parents, especially on a trip like this. Jesus had been on this trip before. And he was old enough to know it was his responsibility to be on the caravan home. Maybe his parents had even recently had "the responsibility talk" with him. When I was in seminary it didn't make sense to me that you could lose a 12-year-old boy. Then I became the parent of one, and now I find this story very believable. Frankly, I find some comfort in knowing that even the holy family had at least one bad holiday. What follows, after Mary and Joseph discover they have lost Jesus, is a fascinating journey in emotions.

The first emotion, not surprisingly, was "great anxiety." Maybe even panic. Few things are more frightening to a parent than a lost child. After checking with the others on the trip, they discovered Jesus never began the trip back home, which meant he was still in Jerusalem. Their son was alone in the city. No doubt, their minds were racing with terrifying fears of what could happen to him.

After looking for Jesus for three days his parents finally found him in the temple talking theology with the teachers there. I would have thought that the temple was the first place to look for him. But we've already read the gospels and know more about Jesus than they do at this point. That's significant because it means in spite of all the miracles surrounding his birth for the last 12 years, they've been raising what they thought was a normal boy. That's the way the incarnation works. After finding him in the temple, we see their second emotion when the fear turns to astonishment. Who would expect to find a normal 12-year-old kid in a house of worship? Talking with the clergy? Discussing theology? Astonishing. But something snapped in Mary. Some parent chromosome kicked in as the astonishment quickly gave way to the third emotion, which was anger. She exclaimed, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." Notice, she is turning the attention away from the theology and toward the family. She calls him "child" and focuses his attention on his parents when she says, "Look, your father and I..." It is a way of saying, "Look at us, look at our search for you, look at our great anxiety."

So, there is the emotional journey: from fear to astonishment to anger. Maybe you and Jesus have had a similar journey. Maybe you're in one just like it today. Having just passed through Christmas when we told ourselves the great news that the Savior is now with us, we then set out on the road back to normal. We assume Jesus would still be with us. Even if we can't see him, like Mary and Joseph, we expect him to be near.

It would be frightening, that first emotion, to discover Jesus is not as near as we thought. Just two weeks ago we were singing "Joy to the World." But the world after Christmas looks a lot like the world before Christmas.

Those who assumed they were taking the Savior with them on the road to a prosperous new year, may have already discovered he's hard to find when their dreams are in trouble.

When you lose sight of the Savior, like his parents, you may search anxiously for salvation moving quickly from Plan A to Plan B to C, and D. You update your resume or try to get a new client. You think about giving online dating another go. (Yeah, that'll lead to salvation.) You search the internet for good summer vacation plans, as if your only hope is to move from holiday to holiday. Maybe you even decide to come back to church on a cold wintery day. But Jesus may not even be where the church expects him to be.

When we do finally stumble into the place where we encounter some glimpse of salvation, it is always astonishing—the second emotion in this text. Salvation seldom occurs in the places you expect to find it. In fact, it's our expectations that typically keep us from finding where Jesus is at work. Parents are astonished to find Jesus blessing their children who've chosen a different path. Children, when they get older, are astonished to discover how wise their parents have become. Liberals cannot believe Jesus could be found with conservative, and conservatives are astonished to find Jesus with liberals. Those who are accustomed to success will be astonished to find him in their failures. And those who are accustomed to their hurt and grief, will be astonished to hear him say, it is time to "Rise, take up your mat and walk away from this."

Not just in this text, but throughout the gospels Jesus is often not where we expect him to be. The Pharisees were dismayed to find Jesus eating with sinners. The disciples were dismayed to find Jesus determined to go to a cross. And we are dismayed to find Jesus is not on our side in the culture wars. Truth be told, that's enough to make you angry—the third emotion. So, we echo Mary's lament: "Jesus, why have you treated us like this?"

The response of the young Savior is striking: "Why were you looking for me? Did you not know I must be in my Father's house?" Or as in the old KJV and RSV translations say: "Did you not know I must be about my Father's business?" In other words, "Did you not know that my mission is the business of salvation?" Jesus' business is not to drive an ambulance when we call. He's not a magician or a fix it man. He has no political affiliation, cannot be contained by ideology, and is not a lobbyist for our cause. He doesn't even protect us from the things that give us "great anxiety."

Jesus Christ is the mission of God on earth. In the tradition of the Exodus his business as Messiah is to bring salvation, to restore and heal, to lead us to a new kingdom. But how he conducts this salvation, when, and where it breaks into the world—well, that's his business.

When you have suffered a great loss or disappointment, you have not lost Jesus. You've only lost your expectations of him. He's not far but near. And as the Messiah he has more business with your life, more of the holy gifts of hope, peace, joy, and love than you've received. He is not done with your life, with our congregation or with the world. You have only to lay down your expectations to see that.

There is a fourth, final response by Mary to all of this. She doesn't stay angry. We're told that she "treasured all these things in her heart." It was the same response she made to the shepherds when they told her the astonishing things they saw and heard in their fields the night Jesus was born. Then, we're told she "...treasured all these things, pondering them in her heart." There would be a lot of treasuring and pondering for Mary in the years ahead. It would all culminate on another Passover, twenty-one years later when she found her son on a cross. It was another place she did not expect him to be. But that is where the business of salvation was being accomplished.

You don't have to understand the work of Christ. You don't even have to be able to see it all the time. You just have to join Mary in taking it to heart. Amen.