

# When you lose Jesus

*A sermon on Luke 2:41-52 by Nathan Nettleton, 26 December 2021*

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## Message

We can't take it for granted that Jesus will be where we want to go, for his ways often go contrary to ours and our business is to follow him.

## Sermon

Now that the Christmas trees are being discarded to the nature strip and they've stopped playing schmaltzy versions of Christmas carols in the supermarkets, we are a lot more free to get into the Word of God and explore what the stories of Jesus's infancy have to say to us as his followers. The summer solstice festival known as Christmas finally ended yesterday. The Church's Festival of the Nativity, which confusingly is also known as Christmas, only began on Friday night, and we will now enjoy it at our leisure until the Feast of Epiphany in eleven days time.

As we've journeyed through the gospel according to Mark over the last year, we've had lots of examples of how Mark makes connections between different stories, connections that are easily missed when we hear the stories in isolation from one another, but which make the stories all the more meaningful and powerful when we discover them. Well, Mark was certainly not the only gospel writer who drew connections between different parts of the story of Jesus's life, and tonight we have an example of Luke doing a similar thing.

This one snuck up on me a bit. I have preached on the connection that Matthew makes between the infancy stories and the crucifixion stories, because his story about Herod's attempt to kill the infant Jesus clearly foreshadows the later plot to have him crucified, but Luke doesn't tell that story. But lo and behold, there are some similar shadows in tonight's story of Jesus at twelve years old, on the verge of his transition from childhood to young manhood.

Luke tells us that each year, Jesus's family went up to Jerusalem for the Passover, and this story of Jesus going missing in Jerusalem takes place on one of these annual trips up to Jerusalem for the Passover. Now already we have got our first hint there, because Jesus going up to Jerusalem for the Passover becomes a major theme in the gospel narrative; a theme which Luke emphasises more strongly and deliberately than do the other gospel writers. Much of Luke's gospel is structured around the big final trip up to Jerusalem for the Passover, the trip which culminated in the arrest and execution of Jesus.

In tonight's story, the young Jesus is mistakenly left behind when the big extended family group head for home at the end of the festival, and when they realise he's missing, his frantic mum and dad leave the group and rush back to Jerusalem to look for him. It is three days before they find him. That will probably give you another clue. This is not the last time people will think they have lost Jesus in Jerusalem. And it is not the last time he will reappear after three days either.

It is also not the last time that Luke will introduce us to a couple on the road who are distraught at having lost Jesus but who find him again engaged in a discussion of the scriptures. Do you recognise the story I'm pointing to here? Right near the close of his gospel,

Luke tells us the story of the couple on the road to Emmaus. He tells us that they had put their hopes on Jesus, but now he had been lost and they were devastated, and it's been three days now. And then Jesus appears with them, unrecognised at first, and discusses scripture with them, pointing out to them exactly the sorts of connections between stories that I'm pointing out now, and finally they recognise him in the breaking of the bread.

Both of these stories – the twelve year old Jesus lost in Jerusalem, and the road to Emmaus account – appear only in Luke's gospel, and with one being close to the start and the other close to the end, they serve as something of a frame for the rest of the story.

And to add further colour and light to the message suggested by this framing, Luke is the gospel that puts the most emphasis on images of being lost and found. He is the only gospel writer to include the stories of the lost coin, the lost sheep, and the lost prodigal son. Losing Jesus or being lost ourselves and being found by Jesus are significant theme for Luke, and you will notice of course, that in neither of the stories of Jesus being lost does Jesus himself think he is lost. It is other people who think he is lost, not him, so Luke is begging the question, "Who is really lost when we think we've lost Jesus: him or us?"

For Jesus knows what he is about – his Father's business. And he knows where he needs to go to fully engage in that business, and it is often to places we would neither be expecting, nor perhaps be willing to go ourselves. Sure, a theological discussion in the temple might not be so frightening, although it would be pretty daunting to the average twelve year old, but the image there of Jesus being in his Father's house doing his Father's business is leading up to the later story.

You see, the temple is not only the place of theological discussions (in fact, if that had been the point it would probably have been in a synagogue rather than the temple). The temple is primarily the place of sacrifice, so it is not the place you want to be when a hostile mob has joined forces with the religious and military power brokers and turned their anger on you and decided that you are the one who is going to be sacrificed. "It is better than one man die than that the whole nation face the wrath of Rome," says Caiaphas, the High Priest. A classic expression of sacrificial logic from the most powerful man in the sacrificial system.

And so this twelve-year-old story anticipates the later story where for Jesus to go about his Father's business meant walking into the fires of hatred and hostility and offering himself to appease the wrath of an angry violent humanity and so expose the ultimate religious lie that it is God who demands that blood must be shed.

Mary and Joseph, the couple on the Jerusalem-Nazareth road, thought that Jesus was lost because they didn't know that he would be about his Father's business. They expected him to simply be fitting in with the family business, which at this point was all about going home and getting back down to their ordinary day to day business.

And the disciples later, including the couple on the Jerusalem-Emmaus road, thought that Jesus had been lost because they couldn't comprehend that going about his Father's business could mean surrendering himself into the violent hands of the angry mob. They expected him to fight fire with fire if he was going to walk in and confront the powers that be. They expected him to overthrow the Roman occupation forces and reestablish the throne of David, a throne which of course had been established by one who the crowds lauded in the streets

with cries of “Saul has slain his thousands, but David his tens of thousands.” That’s the kind of king we want, everyone thinks, and that’s what they were hoping for and expecting of Jesus.

So when the powers strike first and Jesus is killed, that’s it then. Jesus has lost, and his friends have lost Jesus. But three days later, there he is, discussing scripture again, and still trying to get them to comprehend that his Father’s business does not involve matching the world’s violence, but absorbing its full force and giving it back transformed into love and forgiveness and extravagant grace.

But even in the far less earth-shattering losing of Jesus in the twelve-year-old story, there is an important warning for us about our expectations of Jesus and where we will find him. If even Mary and Joseph could take Jesus for granted, and just expect him to be going along with whatever they were doing and wherever they were going, then you can be pretty sure that we are very much in danger of making the same mistake. How often do we just head off on our own business, unquestioningly doing whatever we have always been doing or whatever we have decided we should be doing, and just assumed that Jesus would be with us?

Jesus may well have said, “I will be with you, even to the end of the age”, but he wasn’t saying “Whatever you choose to do is fine with me, I’ll just come along and baptise whatever you decide.”

Jesus has not offered to follow us around and bless whatever we want. He has called us to follow him, and to do as he does: as our reading from Colossians put it, to clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, and above all love, and to forgive each other; as he has forgiven us. (Col 3:12-14) The promise of blessing is that blessing is found in following Jesus and in being where he is and doing as he does, even when it means following him into the fires of hostility, clothed only in love, compassion and forgiveness.

If even Mary and Joseph could get Jesus wrong and think he was lost, no doubt we will often make the same mistake. We too will be just going about our business and inadvertently leave Jesus behind, and then panic because we think he’s lost. And whenever that happens, then it is absolutely right that you will have to get searching and retrace your steps and hunt high and low and pray hard and do whatever it takes to find where he is. And when you find him, stick with him. But take it from the twelve-year-old, and take it for a fact: it is not him that is lost.