

## SERMON — 2ND SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS

LUKE 2:40-52

JANUARY 5TH, 2020

“WHERE JESUS IS FOUND”

“Seek and you shall find.” Perhaps you’re familiar with this promise from Jesus. Well, no greater hope was had in this promise than by me and the senior pastor of my previous congregation. I sat in my office one morning in December of 2017 when I heard a knock at the door. I turned to see the senior pastor with a concerned look on his face. “Have you seen baby Jesus?” he asked. He was preparing to teach the Christmas story to the children of the church’s preschool and he couldn’t find the full-sized baby Jesus figurine that went with the church’s nativity set. With less than ten minutes before chapel started, we frantically scoured the church in search of baby Jesus.

If you’ve ever searched for something important that was missing, you know how your mind races through all the possibilities of what could have happened. No doubt, this was the mind of Mary and Joseph as they anxiously searched for Jesus after they realized he was missing. This was the Son of God, the promised Savior of the world. The Son whose miraculous birth from Mary’s virgin womb was attested to by angels and praised by shepherds. The Son entrusted to them, whom wise men traveled great distances to worship and whom Herod sought in order to kill.

Indeed, you and I, in fact, all the people of the world, are like Mary and Joseph searching for Jesus. Maybe your search has not begun because you do not realize he is missing. Maybe your search has become anxious because, though you know who you seek, you have not yet found him. Maybe your search has ended, but now you’re in search of understanding who you’ve found.

It seems strange to us that Mary and Joseph would be so careless as to Jesus’ whereabouts as they traveled. But first-century travel was a dangerous undertaking. Few people attempted it alone. It was always done in groups of trusted family members and neighbors. In a culture steeped in hospitality, where if one did not prevent harm to their neighbor they were just as responsible for it as the one who caused it, Mary and Joseph had no reason to suspect that anything was wrong and so assumed everything was alright.

The same is true for those not searching for Jesus. Like Mary and Joseph, you travel this life without too much thought to him. Enough seems alright, and what might not be you tell yourself you will figure out later. But assuming so does not make it a reality. Believing something to be true does not make it true. Believing that we do not need to be saved does not change our need for a savior.

The primary purpose of God’s law, those commands and demands God makes of us are to awaken us to the reality that we need saving. God gives us his law in order to show us our sin, to show us our failure and inability to trust in him above all things, to love him with our whole heart, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. God’s law shows us that we need a savior. It drives us into the outstretched arms of the crucified Christ.

After some time, Mary and Joseph begin to search for Jesus among their relatives and travel companions. Realizing something’s wrong and that he’s not there, they rush back to Jerusalem in search of the boy among the narrow streets crowded by others attending the festival, most likely retracing their steps and looking in the places they remember seeing him last. But they can’t seem to find him. These are all the wrong places.

In the same way, we look for Jesus in all the wrong places, expecting him to be everywhere but where he has promised to be. We search for him in our feelings and intuitions, in abstract spirituality, in the strength of Christian influence on society, in acts of social justice, and in nature. These places are not bad in and of themselves, and God may, in fact, be there. But we cannot know for sure.

Rather, it is in those places where our Savior and our salvation are promised to be found that we don’t look. He could not possibly be in places as plain as word and water, bread and wine. He could not possibly save us by means so simple as his word, baptism, and communion. But he does and those are the places he promises to be found. We look in the wrong places because we have the wrong expectations of who God is and how he works. If we expect that God is about the ideal good life, about love in an abstract, simply make-everyone-happy sense, then we will seek him in wealth and career success and where there is no pain, suffering, or conflict. If we expect that God’s main concern is with our moral improvement then we will seek him in laws and morality and anything that leads to us being better people tomorrow than we were yesterday.

But God is not focused on those things, because those things can’t save us. God is about freely forgiving our

sins in Christ who can save us. And he delivers to us the forgiveness and salvation which Christ won for us by his death on the cross, in his word and sacraments, in plain words and water, in simple bread and wine because that is how God works. He speaks and it is. His words do what they say. So he attaches them to tangible means, real things to deliver real forgiveness to real people for real sins. And he does so in the midst of real suffering and unites us to himself.

**Where our sins are forgiven, there God in Christ is to be found.**

After three days, Mary and Joseph find Jesus in the temple among the teachers. In a mix of relief, frustration, and disappointment, Mary asks, "Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you." Jesus replies, "Why were you searching for me? Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" But they did not understand what he was saying to them. Mary and Joseph found who they were looking for and they knew who Jesus was, but they still didn't fully grasp what that meant.

In the first recorded words of his life, Jesus makes a powerful statement about who he is and what he came to do. Contrasting Mary's reference to Joseph as his father, Jesus claims a personal relationship with God as his Father. And by calling himself God's Son, he claims to be God.

With his initial question to his parents, "Why were you searching for me?," Jesus does not scold them for losing track of the only begotten Son of God. Instead, he wants them to think about where it is they found him: the temple, the dwelling place of God.

In those days, for a son to be in his father's house meant he was doing his father's business and employed to carry out his father's transactions. Jesus is not just there in to be in his Father's, but to carry out his Father's will. Furthermore, Jesus says he *had to be* in his Father's house. Jesus' location in Jerusalem and his work there are of divine necessity. They are a must. He is supposed to be there carrying out his Father's will and nowhere else doing his own will. As he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, "Not my will, but yours be done."

This story foreshadowed what would take place 21 years later when Jesus would return to Jerusalem for the Passover Festival and once again stay to carry out his Father's will by suffering and dying on cross for the forgiveness of our sins and rising from the dead after three days to bring us new life in him.

So it goes with those who, like Mary and Joseph, have found Jesus. We are amazed and astonished, but now we seek to understand what's going on and what it all means.

The crucified and resurrected Jesus is still about the same thing he was before his death and resurrection. Jesus death and resurrection did not turn him into a moral standard for us to achieve powered by the Holy Spirit in order to show God how worthy we are of being saved.

He is still about the will of his Father, for which we pray in the third petition of the Lord's Prayer, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Luther explains what this petition means in the Small Catechism: "The good and gracious will of God is done even without our prayer, but we pray in this petition that it may be done among us also." Luther goes on. "How is God's will done? God's will is done when he breaks and hinders every evil plan and purpose of the devil, the world, and our sinful nature, which do not want us to hallow God's name or let his kingdom come; and when he strengthens and keeps us firm in his word and faith until we die. This is his good and gracious will." To pray for God's will to be done among us is to pray that God would sustain and keep us in the one true faith and disrupt every scheme of the devil, the world, and our sinful nature that would hinder our faith in Christ and his death for the forgiveness of our sins.

This is what Jesus is about: the forgiveness of our sins, since, though we are baptized, we still sin, and will continue to sin this side of eternity. He's about sustaining our faith in him by delivering that forgiveness to us and reassuring us by his word and sacraments that we are still forgiven.

So then, what does it mean that your sins are forgiven, that you no longer have to justify your existence to the world, nor try to please God with your good works?

It means that you are free. Free to acknowledge God as the giver of all that you need for this body and life in praise and thanksgiving, as we prayer in the 4th Petition of the Lord's Prayer. Free to love your neighbor as yourself as you forgive those who have sinned against you in the same way God has forgiven you, completely and without requiring your permission or confession, not holding your sin against you.

So, whether your search has not yet begun, or you have not yet found who you're looking for, or you have found him, but still struggle to understand what it means, we all have the same need and in faith receive the same gift: the free forgiveness of our sins. And with that forgiveness comes life and salvation. **A MEN.**

*You may still be wondering if we found baby Jesus in time for chapel. Sadly, we did not. But, we found him later in the simplest of place: the box we originally stored him in.*