

COLOSSIANS 3:12-17 (p. 955)

DECEMBER 26, 2021

LUKE 2:41-52 (p. 833)

BLAINE

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Lord, we come to your Sanctuary today, into your Presence to Worship, just as the Holy Family did. We come in obedience, to glean the Truth from Scripture, to learn from the lives of your people, and to receive guidance from your Holy Spirit. We come in Jesus' Name, and ask you now in His Name, to open our eyes to you. Amen!

"AFTER THE FESTIVAL"

Several years ago, I discovered my favorite Christmas Comic Strip. It has Dolly, from *Family Circus*, carefully setting out a Nativity Scene, arranging all the pieces "just so". Mary and Joseph are beneath the roof of the Stable, just left of center. There are two sheep, a goat and a dog, as well as a camel, all crowding-in around the edges. And a solitary Wise Man has already arrived, carrying a gift of course. Everything is just as it should be!

Then, in the second frame, we see Dolly rooting around inside of a box, sorting through the rest of the Christmas characters. There is wrapping paper flying everywhere! And in the last frame, we see an ecstatic Dolly, obviously excited, grinning ear-to-ear and leaping for joy! She is holding up a little Manger with the baby Jesus inside! And the caption underneath it reads, "Here He is! The Star of Bethlehem!"

And that's really the point, isn't it? Discovering the Star, discovering Jesus! That's the point of Advent, the point of Christmas, the "reason for the season", as they say! We too root through all of the clutter, all the people, all the guests from near and far. We sort the decorations and things, wade through all the activities, the wrapping paper even!

We love this season, right! Or at least most of us do! We cherish the traditions, searching for the Star of Bethlehem! And when we finally make that wonderous discovery, we shout for joy, just like Dolly! I mean, that's the goal, right, what all the celebrations are about? We are supposed to find Jesus. Discover the Redeeming Light. Embrace the Star! And then, place the Light of that Star "front and center" in our life, so that everyone else can see it!

So let me ask you. Is that what you just did? You don't need to raise your hands or anything, but think about the question, because I think it's important. Did you discover Jesus this year? Or rediscover Jesus this year? Intentionally, or even unintentionally? Leading up to Christmas maybe, or on Christmas Eve? How about Christmas morning? Did you find the Star of Bethlehem? Is that the "gift" you recieved this Christmas? Or has the entire season just been a great big waste of time?

That sounds harsh, doesn't it? But consider the pieces in your personal Nativity Scene. Is everything in the right place? Do all of the characters direct your focus to the Star? Are you walking in the Light of that Star right now? In other words, is Jesus Center Stage?

You do realize that the gifts of the Wise Men aren't really the point, right? Neither are those from your family and friends. The visitors are nice, truly, especially those from far away. But they aren't the point either. The focus is the Manger. Or at least it should be. Or more accurately, on the One laying in the Manger, the One who will later hang on a Cross, and then sit on His Throne in Glory!

So, I want to know is, did you embrace Him this year? Did you embrace Him as Lord, as well as Savior? Are you holding Him close even now? Or have you, in the swirl of all the hoopla, somehow lost Him? Because that's what Mary and Joseph did.

Right in the middle of magnificent religious celebrations even, surrounded by family and friends, in the midst of Worship, Mary and Joseph lost track of Jesus! During the Passover in Jerusalem, during the greatest celebration of Salvation and Redemption in the Jewish Faith! The theme is Freedom from Captivity, Freedom from Death, New Life for Believers! And yet somehow, during those festivities, with an intentional Focus on Heaven, the parents lost sight of the Star! Apparently, it happens!

You see the parallels, right? They are relatively obvious! The Feast is over, and we are here at the Temple. There are crowds still, but most people are already heading home! So, what I'm asking is, is Jesus lost for you? Or is He currently found? Are you feeling lost, or found? Better yet, are you close enough to the Lord to hear Him, still enough to hear Him, when He calls out to you from the mist?

Luke has already told us of Jesus being presented at the Temple when He was eight days old. Simeon and Anna, two devote Believers, have declare that He is the Promised Messiah. And a couple of verses before that, we heard about Shepherds visiting at His birth, along with a Great Heavenly Chorus, all declaring “Glory to God in the Highest”! We heard how Magi, Wise Men, Scholars from the East, came to honor Him, and lay wonderful gifts at His feet! So how could His parents, let alone us, have forgotten all of that?

Didn't Mary and Joseph both have angelic visits detailing how the baby would be conceived, and what to name Him? Wasn't Mary told that she is “highly favored, and that the Lord is with her”. Wasn't Joseph told that his fiancé would not only “bear a son, conceived by the Holy Spirit,” but also “that He would save His people from their sins”? Wasn't he later told by an angel in a dream to take his family down to Egypt to flee from King Herod's wrath? And then, after a while, told to take them back home? There couldn't possibly have been of a question who Jesus really is!

They've discovered the Messiah! Been blessed by His Presence! Have Christ living in their midst, literally! In their case, physically as well, in their own home! And yet a dozen or so years later, they've lost Him! How could that happen? Again, no show of hands or anything, but can you relate? You've lost Jesus? Or you feel as if you have lost Jesus? You discovered Him for who He really is, only to lose sight of Him later? Maybe it took twelve years for that to happen? Maybe it was more like twelve days? Maybe you found Him at Christmas, but then lost Him before New Year's?

Maybe you discovered Jesus at a Special Occasion—at Worship, while studying Scripture, at a Spiritual Retreat? Maybe you discovered the Lord in a quiet moment of contemplation, or during an exuberant hour of Praise? Maybe it happened as you knelt in prayer? Regardless, you once knew that you were in the Presence of the Lord! You were walking together side-by-side! But after a while you got distracted, and eventually noticed that He was gone! How did that feel? Or, how does that feel? Did you panic? Start a frantic search? Are you looking around now, but only casually? Have you simply given up?

“Every year,” it says, as was their custom, as required by Law, “Mary and Joseph went up to the Temple in Jerusalem to Worship.” They gathered with the faithful, to celebrate the High Holy Days. Aunts and uncles, cousins, grandparents, whole clans of people, would come together and journey to the Temple to Praise Almighty God. It was like a Family Reunion on steroids, combined with a Special Service at Church on Christmas Eve! Some Scholars suggest that there were well over 250,000 people in Jerusalem during Passover! You can see how Mary and Joseph might easily lost track of an adolescent twelve-year-old, surrounded by such a crowd of relatives and friends! Think Kevin from *Home Alone*. Whose car did Jesus get into when we left the Church?

Maybe He was walking with his cousin John at the time, the one pretty close to His own age, the one who liked to talk about religion and repentance, and the beauty of the Jordan River! Maybe He was chatting with his uncle Zechariah about what it was like to work as a Priest in the Temple, and how he had lost his voice for several months, way back when!

Maybe He was eating some of Aunt Elizabeth's sweetbreads, or playing hoops with His niece, chasing goats through the streets of the city! Who knows! But you can see how easy it is to lose track of Him, can't you? You might even be able to imagine why it took a while to notice that He was gone?

Unfortunately, that's how it happens! Maybe that's even Luke's point? We tend to get distracted, sidetracked, by the people around us, or the things around us, especially at the Holidays! It may actually take a while for us to notice that Jesus is missing! We get involved in conversations, or meal preparation, or just blindly stumble along through the events, totally oblivious to our surroundings! We stop to fix something that's broken. Glance at the GPS, or a map. Plan our route home. Pause to feed the sheep! I mean, you're trying to keep everyone headed in the same direction, right? And ironically, even when you notice that you are no longer traveling in the Presence of Jesus, it sometimes takes a while to start searching for Him again! So, can you relate?

You know, I used to think that the Scholars who chose the Lectionary texts, just plopped this one down on the first Sunday after Christmas because they didn't know where else to put it! Why highlight losing Jesus at the Temple right after watching for Him during Advent? But when you stop and think about it, it does kind of makes sense. I mean, here we are wrapped up in the Celebrations too, with family and all coming together to Feast and Worship, just like the Holy Family! Only now that the Celebrations are over, or almost, it feels as if something important is missing?

By the time we get to the end of Luke's Second Chapter, the Birth Narratives are over. But he hasn't quite gotten to Jesus' ministry yet, let alone the Cross. And in the Church, Advent is over, but we haven't quite arrived at Epiphany yet. We are in transition, in-between if you will, traditionally, and scripturally, and ecclesiastically! And some of us might just be in limbo spiritually too! There was a time when we clearly saw Christ entering our world, a time when we also boldly declared "Glory to God in the Highest", a time when we recognized Emmanuel, God with us! But now, with all the distractions of everyday life, well...!

Even the ritual of Worship, hearing the Word of God proclaimed, doesn't seem to be enough to keep us focused! When we pause and look around, it almost appears as if Jesus is actually gone! Again, you don't need to raise your hand, but from where you currently stand on your Journey of Faith, does it appear as if Jesus is missing? If so, there are a couple of things in today's text that just might help.

First of all, notice that when Mary and Joseph discover that Jesus is gone, they began to search for Him! They don't wait for Him to come running to them, to embrace them, as they plod along on their own path! They take responsibility for themselves, stop what they are doing, and go and look for Jesus! "Anxiously", it says! They don't wait for someone else to point Him out, or for someone else to find Him and reintroduce Him! They go looking for Jesus themselves! They start searching among their friends and relatives at first, but quickly realized that won't work! They search through the streets, the marketplace, everyday life, but quickly realized that won't work either!

They then go to the Temple, the last place that they encountered Jesus, the last place they were in His Presence! They go to the House of God, together! I wonder if there might be a lesson in that? And notice that they don't blame others for Jesus missing. Ugly people, or ugly surroundings aren't the cause of the loss. You don't lose Jesus because the surroundings are bad, or the lighting is off, or the music is fading. You lose Him when you stop paying attention!

Which tells me that when I find myself alone, out on a dusty road, even in the midst of a crowd—when I suddenly notice that Jesus is missing—I need to stop immediately and lift up my eyes. I need to start looking for Him, anxiously! You can't just mope around. That won't help. You can't wander off in a strange direction. That won't help either. You need to start looking for Jesus! Don't panic. Don't run away. Don't hide. And don't ever, ever give up! Jesus is right where He should be, teaching in the Temple Courts, sharing the Word of God with all who will listen!

And don't feel sorry for yourself either! Look at what happened when Mary tried to put a personal, earthly spin on the situation. She said, "Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you". To which Jesus, at twelve mind you, immediately shifts the focus towards Heaven. "Why were you searching for me? Didn't you know that I had to be in my 'Father's' house?"

Oh, and be patient! Hang on to your Faith! It took Mary and Joseph three days to discover “where” Jesus was. And it took three days in a Tomb for the Disciples to discover “who” Jesus was. So, go ahead and give yourself a little time. Maybe three days? Maybe more? Just don’t stop looking! And help others in their search as well! You’re a team you know, the Body of Christ, part of the Holy Family! So, look for Jesus together!

That’s Paul’s point in his letter to the Colossians, by-the-way. You are God’s Chosen People, Holy and Dearly Loved! Together, you are signposts that point the way! Signs that either point others to the Lord, or point others in the wrong direction! So, polish up your life together, so that together you’ll reflect His kindness and compassion, His gentleness, and humility. You want folks headed in the right direction!

And forgive one another. That’s really important. Be at peace with one another. Let the Message of Christ dwell among you richly, so that other folks looking for Jesus will notice His reflection in you, and discover which way to turn. Live in thankfulness and unity, so that you will radiate His Presence. And make sure that whatever you do, whether in word or deed, you do it all in the Name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him. Make sure that, as the Body of Christ, you all point in the same direction. To paraphrase, be the “Spittin Image” of Jesus Christ!

Did you know that according to Linguists, that phrase, “Spitting Image”, is actually a contraction of the words “Spirit” and “Image”? To say that someone is the “Spittin’ Image” of their mother or father, is to say that they embody both their “Spirit” and their “Image”! Which means, to say that you are a Christian, is to proclaim that you bear the visible markings, the imprint if you will, the “Spirit” and “Image” of Jesus Christ! Or at least you are working on it!

So, look around at our world right now. Do you see all the hurting people who are searching, searching spiritually? Whether they know it or not, they are actually searching for Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world. Some have outright lost Him. And some have not yet had a chance to meet Him. But others have gotten a glimpse, walked alongside of Him, been awed by His presence. Some have spent time kneeling at His feet even, and bowing before the Cross! But now they’ve gotten distracted and wandered away. Some poor-spirited signpost pointed in the wrong direction. Or some over-bearing light has blinded them. Regardless of “how” it happened though, Christmas is over for them, and Jesus is gone! Which is where we come in.

“You are a Chosen People”, says Paul, “Holy and Dearly Loved!” You are the Body of Christ, called to seek and save the lost! You are called to bear the Light of Christ, reflect the Light of Christ, model both “His Spirit” and “His Image” in an ever-darkening world! What we say, and what we do, really matters! And all of God’s people said, Amen!

PASTORAL PRAYER

When we are at our best Lord, our souls magnify your Name, like Mary. And our spirits rejoice, like John's! We recognize your Son, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! At our best, Lord, we point to you and help guide others into your Holy Presence! Only we are not always at our best. So, please, help us when we are not.

You have blessed us in so many ways Father, beyond our wildest dreams! You came to us when we were steeped in sin and washed us clean. You have broken into our world as a baby in a lowly manger, and have broken into our lives as the Holy Spirit guiding our hearts. And you will break into history once again, in power and majesty and might, when it is time to take us home. We are awed by your true gift of Christmas, Lord, salvation and redemption and freedom.

Thank you for all of the blessings that you have bestowed upon us, most especially the gift of your Presence. Thank you for family and friends. Thank you for this Church, and the Faith that we share together. Thank you for our leaders and our teachers and our guides. And thank you for making us these things for others as well.

Lord, we know that you are ultimately in charge of all that happens in your world. And we know that your love for Creation has no limits or bounds! But sometimes we feel lost, Lord, or we get worried or scared. We lose track of you in the "busyness", and sometimes even panic, and think that you are gone! Help us, in these times, to stop and begin anew our diligent search for you. And when we worry, Lord, pour out an extra measure of Peace upon us, please.

In that Peace, Lord, and in Faith, and with Great Thankfulness, we lift up before you.....We ask you to bless these loved ones with your Peace. We ask you to

pour out Compassion, and your own Boundless Love! We ask you to heal the hurts Lord, and to touch hearts in ways that only you can do! And we ask these things as your family, in Jesus' Name, with the very prayer that He taught us saying, Our Father...