



## *Round Hill Community Church*

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### **Sermon: December 27, 2009**

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#### **Seeking, Finding, and Being Found, Robert B. Culp**

Luke 2:41-52

I have always found great delight in this story about Jesus as a boy, sensing something adventurous about him ... something in him that dared to push against the limits of ordinary expectations. There are, of course, other stories about Jesus as a little boy that never made it into holy scripture ... rather fantastic tales of the child Jesus doing magic tricks, showing unusual wisdom, and dazzling his childhood friends with his extraordinary powers. But this story in Luke is the only one of Jesus' childhood that found its way into the Bible.

Jesus is 12-years-old. His family has kept the custom of traveling each year to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. After the festival the family routinely returns home. But this year is different, for after traveling a day toward their home in Nazareth, Joseph and Mary realize that their boy isn't with them. Now, going a day's journey before noting Jesus is missing is not unusual, because those making the pilgrimage to and from Jerusalem often traveled in large groups. As you can imagine, this provided all of them protection from highway robbers and wild animals. Children could play amidst the larger group under the watchful eye and care of the group, and they would be safe. But Jesus wasn't with them.

What's unusual about this story is the shared response by both Jesus and his parents when he is found – namely, astonishment! Mary and Joseph were astonished when they found their son in the temple, and Jesus was astonished that his parents didn't know where to look for him. After a brief conversation between the parents and their son (and how I wish I could have been privy to that exchange!), Luke tells us that the precocious Jesus returned to Nazareth with his mom and dad, and he was obedient to them.

Astonishment is a curious response on the part of Mary and Joseph, because it suggests that where they found their son is not where they expected him to be. They looked for Jesus over the course of three entire days, and they never thought to look for him in the temple. You have to wonder just where they were looking for Jesus before they found him in his Father's

house – playing video games in a Jerusalem arcade by the marketplace? or munching on a pretzel in the downtown outdoors mall? or playing soccer with some friends along an alley way? You really have to wonder what they were thinking.

And you kind of suspect that Luke wants us to ask precisely that kind of question of ourselves – where do we expect to find Jesus? Some would immediately suggest that where we would find him is in church, with the church being understood as a building where the faithful gather for worship. Others would point away from any specific structure built by human hands and point toward “where two or three are gathered in his name.” Still others would argue that Jesus is found in the breaking of the bread and the cup poured out, or in loving and merciful service to “the least of these.” And none of these answers would be wrong, for they all help us to become aware of the wondrous and mysterious presence of Jesus.

Jesus answers his parents, “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” In other words, Jesus is saying to his mom and dad, “What did you expect?” Rather surprisingly, Luke doesn’t ask the where question. Instead, Luke is more interested in the what – What do we expect? It is not the “Where?” of finding Jesus that is important. Rather, the focus is on the “What?” of finding Jesus – “What was it that Jesus was doing?”

In a way, Luke is giving us a story of “hide and seek.” But the traditional rules for playing this game have been changed. Instead of finding the boy by looking for him here and there, the game is played by asking, “What is important to him?” The game is about being involved in the “what” aspects of Jesus’ life and ministry. Richard Ascough helps us understand what this means by noting that as we ourselves engage in discovering and doing the will of God (wherever that may be), we will find Jesus. Better still, it is Jesus who will find us.

Ascough, who is a Canadian New Testament scholar, observes that in the film *Jesus of Montreal*, an actor named Daniel is asked to perform in a passion play. In doing research on his subject, a librarian brings him a number of books about Jesus. She then furtively whispers to him, “Looking for Jesus?” When he nods, she cryptically responds, “It is he who will find you.” Sure enough, as the film-story progresses, Daniel’s investigation of Jesus leads him to become more and more like Jesus in his day-to-day life.

Most of us are somewhat familiar with George Eliot’s short novel *Silas Marner*, which explores the theme of redemption brought through a little child. When the novel opens, Silas Marner, who is a myopic and cataleptic weaver, is living by himself on the edge of a small rural village in England in the early 19th century. He shuns all company as he keeps to himself, and he wants no one to come near. As a result, all the villagers fear and dislike him. Marner isolates himself because of some devastating and bitter experiences that he suffered in another place some 15 years earlier. There, he was betrayed by his best friend, abandoned by his fiancé, and he was falsely accused and condemned by members of the intense little religious sect to

which he then belonged.

In many respects, Silas Marner was deprived of everything that makes life human – in almost a single blow he lost love, friendship, fellowship, and community, and he lost faith in God. He numbed his pain by turning to his work at the loom, losing himself in the mindless, empty repetitions of weaving. He became a workaholic of sorts, and – like many workaholics today – he compulsively began to hoard his money. He derives no real pleasure from what money can buy, though. His preoccupation is to work and work, accumulate gold and more gold, and thereby blunt the pain of existing without human love and company and the sense that God was with him, which faith seeks to provide.

For 15 years, Marner exists in this alienated, death-in-life condition, with his heart being described as a “locked casket.” Interestingly, he takes his first steps toward redemption when he suffers yet another loss ... when all his gold is stolen. His neighbors are intrigued by this mystery – some pity him and try to be helpful. And Marner begins to become more welcoming of human overtures, and is more vulnerable. This openness is expressed symbolically by his new habit of standing at night in his open doorway, looking out expectantly, hoping for a return of his stolen gold, yes, but also hoping for the understanding of others.

However, something else comes through his newly-opened door. A blond little child, whose opium-addicted mother has just died, wanders toward the light of Marner’s hut one night, toddles through his open door, and falls asleep on his hearth above the hole under the floorboards where Marner used to hide all his gold. As Marner stands in the doorway, he experiences one of his fits of catalepsy, being caught up in a confusing daze. As he recovers, he turns his myopic gaze towards the hearth, and he believes he sees his gold.

Eliot writes, “Gold! – his own gold – brought back to him as mysteriously as it had been taken away! He felt his heart beat violently ... the heap of gold seemed to glow ... He leaned forward at last and stretched forth his hand; but instead of feeling hard coins with their familiar resisting outline, his fingers encountered soft, warm curls.”

Immediately, the little child calls Marner out of his numbed existence and into a responsive, feeling life. She is a bundle of needs, and he has no choice but to attend to them at once. She cries and Marner finally figures out that: “...the wet boots were the grievance, pressing on her warm ankles. He got them off with difficulty, and Baby was at once happily occupied with the primary mystery of her own toes, inviting Silas, with much chuckling, to consider the mystery too.”

Marner comes to understand that something much better than gold has come back into his life. He adopts the baby and finds his salvation in responding to her needs and her love. Her sheer delight in life itself reawakens his own delight. Her physical needs reawaken his nur-

turing love. And her spiritual needs rekindle his faith. Wondrously, she forges renewed links between Marner and his surrounding community; and through his experience of the company of friends, he finds his way back into the worship of God. Indeed, as Eliot puts it, "... the little child had come to link him once more with the whole world."

Marner finds his redemption in caring for another person, one who came to his door helpless, inarticulate, in great and tender need ... utterly dependent upon him. Once, for many years, Silas Marner loved gold and nothing and nobody else; but now he loves another human being .... and, in the process, he becomes a human being once again, as if for the first time.

I suppose, when everything is said and done, we ourselves are often like Marner – you know, looking for only one thing and working for only one thing compulsively, with tunnel vision and perhaps a closed-off heart ... when what we truly need is something else altogether. We play "hide and seek" for the things we want, even when what we truly want and need, ultimately, is the company and companionship of Jesus. In the end, however, it will not be our searching here and there that will gain us what we seek. Rather, amazingly, it will be we who are found, and sought out, and loved, and we will be used powerfully and redemptively in the world of need all around us ... by the child born in Bethlehem.