

Where are the children? (Luke 2:41-52)

I have some sympathy for Mary and Joseph.

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To those who have wondered how Mary and Joseph could possibly head back home from Jerusalem without their 12-year-old son, I know from experience that it is quite possible for loving, attentive parents to lose track of their children during religious festivals.

Our home church in Raleigh, North Carolina, had a tradition of a come-as-you-are Christmas morning service. (Kids in pajamas were welcome.) The pastor's firm belief was that the doors of the church should be open on the day of Jesus' birth and that the people of God should be invited to, as the hymn puts it, "Come and worship / Come and worship / Worship Christ the newborn king." For years, our family would gather with other church members as well as folks from other churches who had heard of the service and shared the desire for Christian fellowship on Christmas morn.

It became my favorite holiday tradition, especially when we started sharing Christmas dinner after church with three other couples and their children. My wife and I came to realize that this gathering had become part of us, that seeing a particular set of friends and their children was the greatest gift we could give ourselves for Christmas. After I was ordained to a church in the neighboring city of Durham, we were able to continue to attend, in part because, glad to be free to go back, I didn't push my own church leaders too hard to institute this same practice.

One year, when our children were 11 and eight, like Mary, Joseph, and Jesus we “went up [or down] as usual for the festival.” After the service we lingered with the pastor and friends from the congregation as our children played with other kids and explored once again the building they had known for years.

Eventually we realized it was time to go, and my wife and I drove to our friends’ house nearby where we would continue our catching up and have our meal together. Since our children had been playing with their children, we thought they must have gotten a ride with one of the other families. At the house, we finished dressing the salad and warming various casseroles for the potluck meal. Eventually we sat down to the dinner table and prepared to say grace.

Noticing two empty seats, we asked our friends’ children where ours had gone. When stories of the return from church were compared, we realized that they had been left behind. And so rushing to the car, we began “searching for [them] in great anxiety.” Fortunately, they were “in [their] Father’s house.” Or rather, they were waiting outside the locked doors of the church after having wandered in their pajamas outside empty area storefronts looking unsuccessfully for an open shop with a phone or at least some shelter from the late December cold.

Like Jesus, our children rebuked their parents.

This unintentional exercise in free-range parenting remains a subject of some remembrance in our household. How could we! What trauma had we inflicted? What does this say about us as parents?

But in light of the story of Mary and Joseph heading home without their own child, this question also arises: What is it about celebrating religious communities that allows otherwise responsible parents to take such irresponsible actions?

I can empathize with Jesus’ parents—they were in the midst of relatives, friends, and an entire community all sharing stories of God’s victory. Normal worries about safety and perfectly understandable fears of all that can go wrong dissolve when we are surrounded by such joy, such singing, such fellowship, such shalom. After all, “Perfect love drives out fear” (1 John 4:18). That Christmas morning, we were careless—careless because we were celebrating so thankfully with such great friends that we had become care-less.

Mary “treasured all these things in her heart,” and so do we.