

Holy Family

The Finding of the Child Jesus After Three Days in the Temple is one of the Joyful Mysteries of the rosary. But as Saint Luke tells the story, there isn't much joyful about it. On a pilgrimage that should have instilled religious values in their son, Mary and Joseph lost Jesus, "thinking that he was in the caravan." Imagine losing your 12-year old child for three days, and not just any child, but the one you were chosen to bear, God's own Son. How could Joseph and Mary have been so careless? Almost every parent tells stories of what happened to a child when they turned their back for even a few seconds; or when, to help an adolescent grow into adulthood, they gave the youth too much independence.

When Mary and Joseph found Jesus, they had reason to be proud of him, teaching the Temple's teachers. But they had a more urgent concern - How did this happen? Mary appears in many New Testament stories, but she speaks in only four of them: the Annunciation, the Visitation, the finding of the child, and the wedding at Cana. The entire bible contains fewer than 200 words that Mary said. Do you know how many of Joseph's words the bible contains? Zero. All we know is what he did. So we treasure the words of Mary. Her words in this story concisely show what mattered to her: "Son," she begins, reminding him of her role, "why have you done this to us?" She did not accuse him or belittle him; she asked for an explanation. Then she reminded him what his absence cost: "Your father and I have been looking for you with great anxiety." They were in pain.

Jesus' explanation delivers his first words in the bible, and Luke says of Joseph and Mary that "they did not understand what he said to them." Parents today know the disorientation of not understanding what seems obvious to an adolescent. Mary has a point. Jesus could have saved them some anguish if he had simply explained what he intended to do before they left Jerusalem.

Mary's question is one that many of us have asked under different circumstances. Because of our baptism, we all carry Christ in our company whether at home, away, or on the way. At times we lose Christ because we focus on the task at hand - finishing a project at work, even if it means lying; correcting a child, even if it means yelling; indulging in pleasures, even if they are immoral. Like Mary and Joseph, who thought that Christ was in the caravan and that was enough, we occasionally let others pass time with him while we make our own way.

When things go wrong, when we don't get the answer to a heartfelt prayer, when something falls apart at work, at school or at home, we turn to God. It may take us three days before we reconnect, but when we do, we may say something to God like Mary said to Jesus, "Why have you done this? ...I have been looking for you with great anxiety." And when God answers, still we do not understand.

Luke says afterwards that Mary "kept all these things in her heart," and sometimes that's the best we can do. We do not understand all the mysteries our heart keeps. But keeping them is better than continuing the caravan when Christ is missing and thinking you can make it the rest of the way alone. No, in times of crisis, we best do what Mary did. Her Son teaches wisdom. Whenever we lose him, we retrace our steps and look until we find Christ.