



Sermon for Sunday, January 5, 2025

Come Thou (Un)Expected Jesus

One of my favorite Christmas movies is *Home Alone*. After a busy turn of events, Kevin McCallister is left home alone by accident while the rest of his family goes on vacation. While the family tries to figure out how to return to Kevin on the busiest travel day of the year, Kevin has to take care of himself and protect his family home from burglars. There are some hilarious moments as Kevin tries to figure out just exactly what has happened to his family, and how he should move forward.

Much like Kevin, our scripture today tells of a boy left home alone, but Jesus doesn't use his time to pull off some creative hijinks. Jesus is a bit older than Kevin, on the cusp of adulthood, when he stays behind in Jerusalem while his family returns home. This is an exciting scripture passage, at least to me, because it gives us a glimpse into a side of Jesus' life we don't see very often. This is really the only story of Jesus' pre-teen/teenage years in the Bible, one of the only opportunities to see what Jesus' life was like between the story of his birth and the start of his ministry.

While Mary and Joseph are frantically searching for their child, they don't understand, can't understand, that Jesus has already found his place. I imagine them panicked when they realize their son is gone, and relieved when they finally are reunited. And Jesus asks them, "Why were you searching for me?" When Mary and Joseph go to find Jesus, they do ultimately find what they are looking for—but not in the way they expect to. They find their son safe, not at all worried or anxious. "Where else would I be?" Jesus asks them. This is a somewhat shocking turn of events, and Mary and Joseph aren't able to fully understand what Jesus is telling them. After finding their son in this unexpected place, they all return back to their home. And that's a wrap on teenage Jesus—it's all we get. We know that Jesus "increased in wisdom and in years and in divine and human favor" (v. 52) but we get no more details. Just this story of Jesus lost, then found again, his parents left confused by an unexpected turn.

And how often does this happen to us? Because just as Jesus came to earth not as a powerful king but as a baby born in a manger, just as Jesus is found calmly waiting in the temple among the teachers, I think God often shows up for us in ways we do not expect. Our prayers are answered, but not in the ways we had planned for or anticipated.

As we enter this calendar year, I think it is worth asking ourselves some of these same questions: What are we searching for, and why? I find it to be very easy to ask God for the things I want, easy to know the things I would like God to do in my life, but much harder to be paying enough attention to realize when they actually happen. When the Holy Spirit shows up in unexpected ways for us, do we even recognize it?

Some people have a tradition of choosing a word for the year, along with or instead of setting a resolution. It's a way of setting an intentional focus on something we'd like to cultivate in our own lives and in the world. A few years ago, I was introduced to the idea of Epiphany stars, a star shaped card you pick at random during the season of Epiphany. Each card has a word written on it and comes with the invitation to see how the word shows up in your life over the next year. It's an invitation to pay closer attention to how the Holy Spirit is at work in our lives, especially in ways we don't expect.

Last year, my word was "delight". I keep my star pinned above my desk at home, a conscious reminder to be on the lookout for the ways that joy and delight enter into my life. I invite each of you to choose a word for this year as well. If you are watching online, or receive sermons and prayers by mail, we will happily mail you a star. If worshipping in person, please take one at random when you come up for communion. The goal is not to force it—just to use it as a tool to bring awareness to the often-unexpected work of God in our lives. I hope they will serve as a gift to you as we enter into this new season together.

Vicar Jesse Hershberger