

# Sermons at Christ Church

## *Reaching Out In Faith.*

*Christmas II*

*The Reverend Emmanuel Ato Mercer*

*He said to them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?"*

Mary and Joseph thought Jesus was with fellow travelers on their way back home from Jerusalem. And when they couldn't find him among friends and family, it became a missing person case. They went back to Jerusalem to search for him. And when Mary saw him, as joyous as she may have been, she also complained. Why did you do this? Your father and I have been looking for you. But Jesus doesn't appear to understand why they were looking for him. That's what kids do anyway. They don't understand why they are being questioned. They don't understand why parents sometimes feel the way they do.

Imagine finding something you have spent days, months and years looking for. Imagine being found again. To be found means that someone noticed you were missing and searched for you. To be found means you are no longer missing. To be found comes with the assurance that someone cares about you enough to look for you.

But Jesus' response meant that he expected Mary and Joseph to know that he had to be about his father's business. And that meant being in the temple and teaching the ways of God, opening up the wisdom of the scriptures to all who cared to listen.

In the Old Testament reading, the prophet Jeremiah springs with hope amidst the suffering of the people of God in exile. The distress of being in exile was as if they were missing from God's sight-God no longer remembered them nor cared about the plight of being in exile. The words of deliverance from the prophet will echo a hope that would turn their mourning into dancing. Israel will be able to sing again because God came looking for them and found them.

My first experience with a missing person in the United States was Chandra Levy, who went missing near Washington DC. Search parties went out looking for her but never found her. Nine years later, Chandra's decomposed body was found. Imagine being a parent and reliving the daily horror of a missing child for nine years. To be found after nine years meant that the search party didn't give up on finding her. And until we are found, the search continues.

I think about the anguish of Mary and Joseph when they realized that Jesus was not part of the families traveling together. They must have felt betrayed-where is he? What happened to him? There being no answers, they decided to return to Jerusalem to look for him.

I learned that our deepest desires are fulfilled not in the ending but the journey; not in the finding but the searching. For it is in the searching that we are found. The search itself tells a story-that this person, the missing person is important to us. And when the missing is found, mourning turns into dancing.

The search for Jesus meant that Jesus was important to Mary and Joseph. And they searched till they found him in the temple, listening and asking questions about the ways of God as revealed in the ancient text of scripture. This is the line which excites me the most "And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answer."

Those ancient texts which reveal God to us are full of wisdom. They are as much about God as they are about you and me. They are about God's walk with us, and in those texts there are no missing persons, all are found. In those texts, God creates and re-creates because the work of salvation never stops. The point of these ancient texts isn't about science but wisdom because the ways of God are the ways of wisdom and those who find them, find a treasure trove of wisdom.

And so it frustrates me when people use modern scientific methods to determine the authenticity or veracity of the divine word of God. The point of scripture isn't science but wisdom-wisdom that guides us on how to live well, purposefully, meaningfully and to bear the suffering of life as best as we can. That is how come those who delight in the divine word are like trees planted by the water. That is how come those who find God's divine word hide them in their hearts so they

may not sin against God. That is how come those who delight in God's word prefer to spend a night in the house of God than a thousand nights elsewhere.

Not that the church is perfect, but we still find beauty, grace, reconciliation, hope, forgiveness, fairness and mending in the church. Nobody comes to church to hear what they have done wrong. Each knows what they have done. God already knows that. The good news isn't about how bad you have been but how deep God's love is. And to be in the presence of God is to have been found by God.

There is a story of a young Hasidic Jew who approached a Rabbi with this question "Rabbi, what is the way to God?" "There is no way to God" He answered. "For God is nowhere other than here and now. The truth you seek is not hidden from you. You are hiding from it."

The good news is that we don't have to hide from the truth, we don't even have to search for it because we have already found it.

And for us, our truth is not whether we are missing or not, but how long have we been missing? Who is it that knows we are missing, and cares about us so much that they would come looking to find us?

As we begin a new year, there will be times when life will feel like the people we are walking with are missing-they are no longer where they are supposed to be or with the people that they are supposed to be with. There will be times when the challenges of life will make us feel like being in exile and forgotten by God and our loved ones. There will be times when others will make us believe that we don't matter and are not welcomed at the table.

But there's this unique responsibility that we owe each other-and which Mary and Joseph exemplified for us, which is to symbolically go back to Jerusalem and search for those we believe to be missing. People want to believe that others care about them, and our task is to search and make sure that they are found because God cares about each of us.

When we search, we do that with the idea that those whom God has healed must lay bare their scars to help the wounded-those who have gone missing before, but by the grace of God have been found, know how it feels like to go missing, and they must lead the search..

There's a story of a little girl who went to church with the mother. On their way home the mother asked the little girl "What did you learn at Bible Study at Sunday school this morning?" The little girl said "We learned all about how God made man and woman." So the mother asked her "Well, how did God do it?" And the girl said "Well, this is what God did. He bent down and then he picked up some mud, and then he made the man. But then he put the man to sleep, he took his brains out and made the woman."

I do not know the path on which you find yourself this morning-do you feel lost? Do you feel alone? More importantly, is Jesus missing in your life? When was the last time you connected with him? Today presents itself as an opportunity for you to look for him, to symbolically return to Jerusalem, to eagerly search for him till you find him.

And when you find him, you would come to find out that we all share a common task, being about the father's business of mending, healing, teaching, searching and finding.

I hope you had a glorious Christmas. But remember that the glory of Christmas is the reminder that God dwells in each of us. Were it not so, what would have been the point of the incarnation?

The incarnation only seeks to affirm the sanctity and holiness of the God who became exiled in the limitations and finitude of humans, wasn't corrupted by human sin and seeks to restore humans to glory.

I want to share a beautiful 13<sup>th</sup> century prayer by Mechthild of Magdeburg- a Christian mystic.

#### **AND GOD SAID TO THE SOUL:**

I desired you before the world began.

I desire you now as you desire me.

And where the desires of two come together

The love is perfected.

**HOW THE SOUL SPEAKS TO THE GOD:**

Lord, you are my lover, my longing,  
My flowing stream, my sun,  
And I am your reflection.

**HOW GOD ANSWERS THE SOUL:**

It is my nature that makes me love you often,  
For I am love itself.  
It is my longing that makes me love you intensely,  
For I yearn to be loved from the heart.  
It is my eternity that makes me love you long,  
For I have no end.

God desires to look for you-the missing. God desires to find you. God desires to be in a relationship with you. God desires for you to delight in God's word. God desires for you to dwell in God's house-for those who dwell in God's house do not ever go missing, they are always found.

Amen.