

## “Lost”

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Losing a child in a crowd has to be one of the greatest nightmares of parenting. If you’ve been a parent, or taken a nephew, niece, or grandchild to a mall, you know the feeling. When they are little, the world is a sea of legs and bums, especially in tight crowds, so it is easy for them to get disoriented. Even when they are older, like the twelve-year-old Jesus, curiosity can lead to trouble. Kids aching for independence can easily wander off to take a look at something they find interesting, and before you know it, you’ve lost track of them.

In today’s scripture reading, we hear about Mary and Joseph’s fear and anxiety when they lost track of the young Jesus. Like all observant Jews of the time, they were expected to go down to Jerusalem’s temple to offer a sacrifice at Passover in the spring. Everyone from the small town of Nazareth would have gone, so it’s no surprise that when it was time to walk back, they would have left with a crowd, rather than just their family. The saying “it takes a village to raise a child” was actually true back then, so they reasonably assumed that Jesus was walking back with them in the same crowd of folks headed for Nazareth, which was a four day walk from Jerusalem.<sup>1</sup> He was probably just hanging out with some of the other teens, whose parents would have been nearby. No biggie.

But as we heard, after a day’s walk, Mary notices that Jesus isn’t with any of them. They now have two problems. The first is that Jesus is a 12-year-old boy in a city full of hundreds of thousands of people who have come for Passover. Whatever money he has, it won’t be enough to stay at an inn overnight, and it may not be enough to buy food and drink for the days while he is separated from his parents. So, young Jesus has some practical problems – where will he sleep, how will eat? That alone is enough to inspire fear and anxiety in his parents.

Then there is the second problem: fear itself. Fear has a very good imagination. Mary has no idea what has really happened to Jesus. But her parental fear can and will fill in the blanks. Perhaps he got on the wrong road? Perhaps he was with them, but some robbers pulled him into the bushes and beat him up, like what happened in the Good Samaritan story. Or, maybe he is in Jerusalem, where Roman soldiers are stationed as crowd control for the holiday, and they have kidnapped him? Fear is a great motivator, but it can also be a source of pain and suffering in itself. And Mary has a long time to worry about her lost son. It takes a day to walk back to Jerusalem, and the scripture tells us she doesn’t find Jesus for three days. That means her fearful imagination was in charge for three or four days as they frantically searched the road and city for their lost son.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ingermanson.com/blog/2019/05/10/road-to-jerusalem-with-jesus/>

Last week, I had an encounter with getting lost and with the fear that comes with it. I was on vacation, camping in Algonquin Park, three hours north of Toronto. My wife and I like camping, and we really love hiking. We set out to hike every day, and we got lucky, the weather co-operated. But that doesn't mean it was dry. Almost everyday, there was rain, sometimes light, sometimes hard. We had enough tarps to keep ourselves dry in camp, fortunately. But on the trails, there was no avoiding the water. Many of the best trails go up the modest hills in the park, sometimes as high as 500 meters. And those trails often become de facto creeks. And when the land is flat, well, dry trails have a habit of becoming bogs. When that happens, the trail disappears, and small ponds appear. Still, you need to get across.

On the third day we were hiking, we came across one of those bogs. I found a path across by walking along a series of long logs, tight rope style. Amanda followed, we used poles to keep our balance. As Amanda tried to avoid falling into the water, she found a phone lying on one of the logs. It wasn't one of ours, so we assumed it must belong to one of the hikers ahead of us. So, for the rest of the hike, when we met others at the lookouts and stops, we asked if anyone had dropped their phone. No luck. When we finished the hike, four hours later, we played with the phone to see if we could discover who it belonged to. Fortunately for us, the owner hadn't set a password. So, by looking into the phone's contacts and calendar, we could see who it belonged to, and that she was staying at another provincial park nearby.

We made a few calls to her contacts, left a few messages, and a few hours later, we received a call from one of her friends. Turned out, the owner, Sandra, dropped her phone the day before. She had been hiking the ten-kilometer trail in reverse and had misjudged how long it would take. Sometime after she dropped the phone, she had become lost, and ended up sleeping outside on the trail, overnight.

When we heard this, we were horrified. This is basically every hiker's worst nightmare – to get lost in the dark and have to spend the night outside. Algonquin's beauty comes with real dangers. Black bears wander into campgrounds regularly, and hikers are encouraged to walk with tinkling bear bells to keep them away. There are also wolf packs in the park, and some campers at our site had heard them one of the nights we were there. It was also a rainy week, so for all these reasons, spending a night outside, unprotected, was a dangerous and scary proposition.

This poor woman was lost, outside, without a phone, as the night closed in. Her friend told us when morning came, she did find her way back to her car, no doubt traumatized. Last week was not a warm one, so we shuddered to think of what she had gone through. For my part, anytime I hear a rustle at night I assume there's a bear or something bigger about to climb into our tent. To sleep outside, alone, scared and lost – that's the worst case of all.

So, after we heard this, we left our phone number with the friend, and with the park where she was staying. The least we could do was help this poor woman get her phone back after her ordeal. We also hoped we would get a chance to meet her, and hear her story, firsthand.

When Jesus went missing, Mary and Joseph had to live with their fear for three, possibly four days. The depth of that fear is clear when they finally find Jesus in the temple. Here's Ho, nan Hunt's famous painting of the scene:



Mary says, “Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.” Jesus shrugs and simply says, why were you so worried, didn't you know I had to be in my Father's House?

In typical teenager fashion he assumes that his reality is the only one, so why couldn't his mom know there was only one place he could be? This explanation leaves out all the details, of course, like where he slept, how he ate. What the gospel writer Luke wants us to know is that even as a twelve-year-old, Jesus was the Son of God. He had been dazzling the Jewish elders with his questions and understanding about Jewish law and ethics. Even before he receives the Holy Spirit in baptism, Luke is telling us, Jesus is already imbued with a closeness to God. In fact, he expresses this in the most intimate of ways. He refers to God as his Father. That sounds perfectly natural to us, but that's because Jesus taught us to pray to God as a father. For the Jewish elders and the Hebrew scriptures, that kind of intimacy with God was not the norm. God was more of a distant powerful king than a Father. Jesus in his ministry introduces the idea of God as a loving parent, the kind who would spend days searching for you when you got lost.

But this boy Jesus is saying something else to his mother, too: that he was never lost. He was always right where he should be, safe in his Father's house. In this instance, his father's house means the temple in Jerusalem. But when Jesus grows up, he will show his followers that

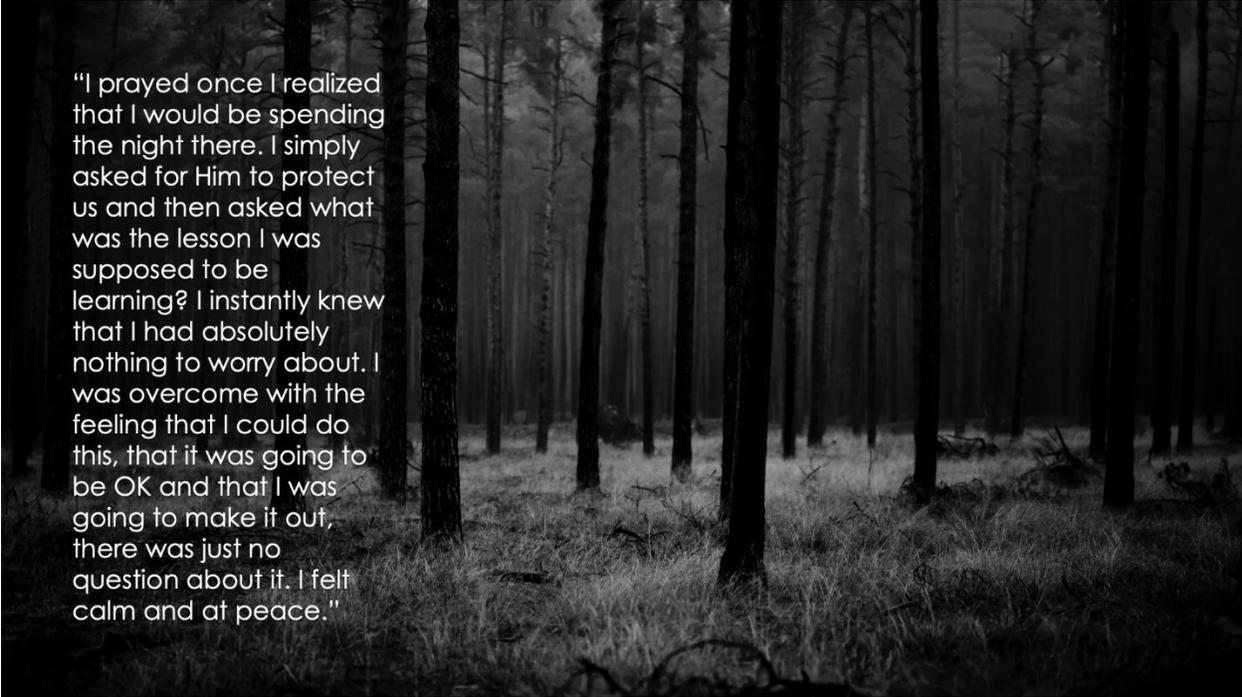
everywhere they go in this world, they are in their Father's house. For the Jews of Jesus' time, God's house was in Jerusalem, because there was a room in the temple, the Holy of Holies, where God's spirit resided. God had an address on Earth. But in Jesus' teachings, he shows his disciples and followers that God is everywhere, on the road, in the fields, in your home, even in the wilderness where Jesus was tempted by the devil. Your Father's house, God's house, is all of the Earth, if you are open to God's spirit, which seeks to dwell in you.

It took a day before the woman who lost the phone drove into our campsite to retrieve it. She got out of her car laughing, and the laughter continued. We gave her the phone and invited her stay for a while and talk. The first thing she said as she sat down was "Do you Kramer from the Seinfeld tv show? Well, I'm the female version of Kramer." She had all of Kramer's frantic energy, although she was not as tall, maybe 5 feet, and in her mid forties.

She told us that the day she got lost, she had made a mistake. She had already done two short hikes when she started this ten kilometer one. But in her mind, she had the idea that this trail was only 45 minutes long. So, she started off on the hike with her little dog at 6 pm, and by 9 pm, it was very dark, she's lost her phone, and she had lost her way. The woods are thick on this trail, so by 9 it was pitch black. She realized she would never find her car, and she had lost the trail, so she only had one choice – find a place to sleep. So, she wandered around until she found a small pond. She stripped some branches off a few evergreen trees, to make a mattress and a blanket. Then she lay down, put her small dog into her sweatshirt, and then tried to get to sleep.

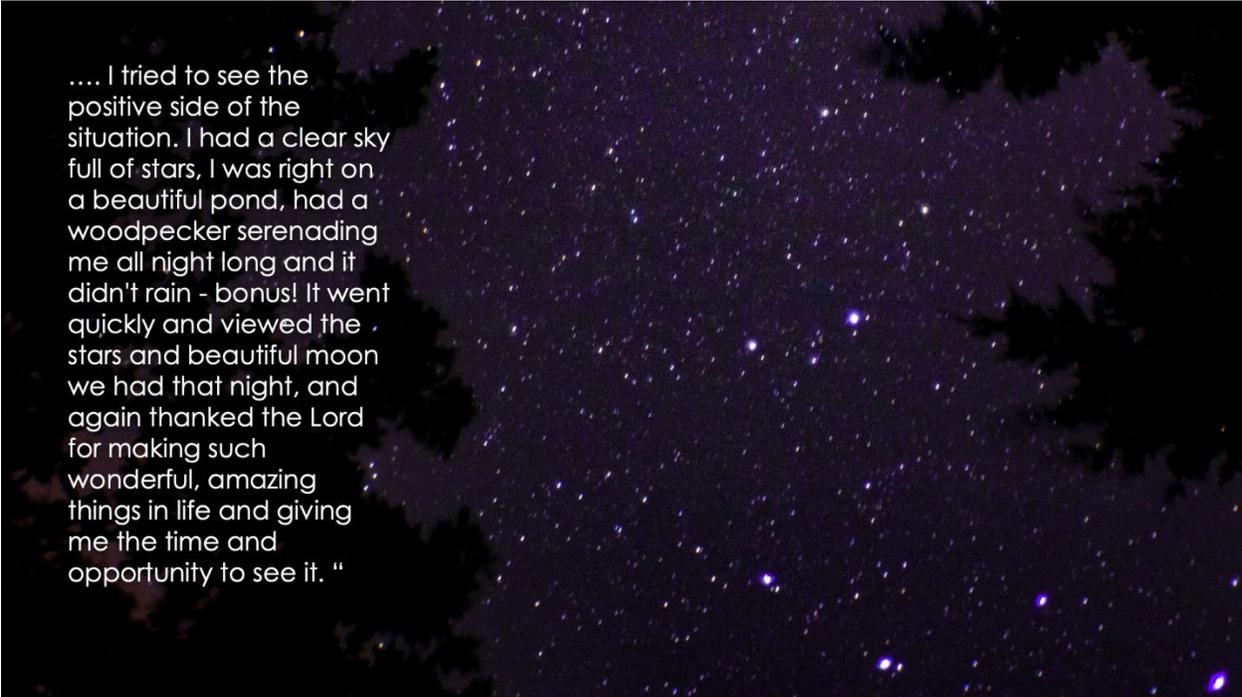
Now, as I said before, the park had black bears and wolves, so we asked, how scared was she? Her answer surprised us. She wasn't scared at all. She explained that she had grown up in Kirkland Lake, in northern Ontario. She knew that black bears don't eat people, and rarely want anything to do with us. Wolves also rarely approach people, so she didn't have anything to fear from the animals. She had her dog to keep her warm, and thankfully there was no rain. So, any fear we had felt on her account wasn't needed. She was fine.

In an email, I asked for permission to share her story, and I also asked her whether there was a spiritual dimension to her experience. She explained that she has a close relationship with God, and that this wasn't the worst experience she had ever had. This is what she told me in her own words:



"I prayed once I realized that I would be spending the night there. I simply asked for Him to protect us and then asked what was the lesson I was supposed to be learning? I instantly knew that I had absolutely nothing to worry about. I was overcome with the feeling that I could do this, that it was going to be OK and that I was going to make it out, there was just no question about it. I felt calm and at peace."

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Sandra was able to sleep because she wasn't consumed by fear. Fear has its uses – it can give us the strength to run away from danger, and to fight back when necessary. But that other kind of fear, the one of the imagination, that one can be debilitating. It can cause us to worry for days, weeks, even years on end. That can wear you down, mentally, and physically, too. Prolonged stress and fear are bad for your immune system. That kind of fear is truly an enemy, yet one many people live with.

But when I hear Sandra's words, I am struck by her lack of fear. She was confident she was safe, that the reality of her situation did not merit fear. She felt like she was in her Father's House, safe under the stars and moon, lucky to see these glorious sights. She told us that if it weren't against the rules, we should hike in there and sleep where she did, it was a lovely spot. Sandra knew that when you know you are in God's house, even in the middle of nowhere, then you can set your fear aside. Faith replaces fear, and it is a much better companion. It can give you the strength to sit still, confident, and safe. It can give you the peace of mind to be open, to wonder at the grace and beauty of what is around us, even in the darkest places. Knowing that you are in God's House means you can feel at home everywhere.

And that is a great gift indeed. Amen.