

December 27

Doing God's Business

Luke 2:41-52

Do you remember the movie Home Alone? Some of you have probably seen it a half dozen times. But for the benefit of you culturally disadvantaged few who have not seen the movie I'll give you a thumbnail sketch. Around Christmastime, a large family is preparing to leave for a vacation in Europe. They plan to get up early in the morning to catch their flight. Unfortunately, during the night the electricity in the neighborhood gets knocked out. Consequently, the alarm clock goes off late. The house breaks into total chaos as the family frantically dresses, packs, loads up, and dashes off to the airport to make their flight.

Once the plane is in the air, the mother has this haunting feeling that she forgot to do something. Were all the doors locked? Yes. Was the garage closed? Yes. Was newspaper delivery cancelled? Yes. With an explosion of realization, she cries out "Kevin!" In the rush and jumble of leaving, Kevin—the youngest child in the family—was left behind. The rest of the movie deals with his antics as he copes with being alone and as he foils the efforts of two bungling burglars to rob his house. Kevin, who began the movie as a little boy who can't tie his own shoes or pack his suitcase, quickly learns to be independent.

I can't help thinking of Home Alone when I read our text for this morning. Of course, the star of the story is not Kevin but Jesus. In the bustle and confusion of getting ready for a trip, he gets left behind. Jesus' mother, Mary, was even slower than Kevin's mother to realize he was missing. Instead of a few hours, it took a whole day for Jesus' parents to notice that he was gone. The family had been in Jerusalem for the Passover, the most important religious holiday of the year for Israel. After the festivities, they packed to head back home to Nazareth, their hometown. Jesus' family was traveling with a group of others. Apparently his parents thought he was with some other people. I can't imagine the shock they must have felt when they realized they left him alone in the big city.

If I had been looking for my child for three days, I'd have exploded when I found him. But Mary and Joseph ask, "Child, why have you treated us like this? In other words: "Jesus, we've worried ourselves to death because we thought you were lost. You should be ashamed of yourself for making us feel so terrible." I wonder why Mary and Joseph looked for Jesus in all the wrong places.

Why did it take them three days to figure out that Jesus might have stayed at the temple? Had things been so blessedly ordinary for so long -- no more angels, adoring shepherds, and Old Testament prophecies -- that the mystery surrounding their son's birth had begun to fade like a dream? Or maybe Mary and Joseph were aware of what their son would do and become, but figured that was years away. They wanted things to remain how they had been, simple and quiet. This confusion leads us to believe that Jesus grew up a very normal little boy, not exhibiting miraculous traits as some stories about him in books that did not make it into the Bible suggest. Perhaps Jesus hadn't shown any signs of theological curiosity and so his parents couldn't imagine him hanging out in the temple. Maybe Mary and Joseph simply failed to see that their baby was growing up. Jesus would soon be 13, the age of Bar Mitzvah, the time when in Judaism he was accountable for his actions and seen to be a man. At 12 he would be training for this event and this looming responsibility to the community might have begun to change his thinking. Regardless of Mary's tone, the tension between Jesus, son of Mary and Joseph, and Jesus, Son of God, is heightened. For now Jesus returns to Nazareth. He disappears back into the fabric of his hometown. For perhaps two more decades Jesus is in an out-of-the-way place, far removed from the centers of religion and politics, in the company of ordinary people, just like us. Here Jesus continues to grow "in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor." But it is clear that his priorities have changed. Jesus' primary concern is not the will of his parents but the will of God and the mission that God's will entails.

As we approach the beginning a new year this story of Jesus makes me ask the question, "Where are we called to be about the business of God? What plans do we need to put into place now for the coming year to make this happen?" For Jesus at age twelve to be about the business of God was to spend time at the temple in theological

reflection. Wouldn't it be interesting to know the questions he asked, to know the questions he answered? All we are told is that his responses surprised the religious elite of his day.

What business does God want from you this year? Are you being asked to, like Jesus, spend more time in study and theological reflection? Do you feel God nudging you to become more involved in some activity that will benefit the community in the name of the church? Are you feeling guilty about your lack of time spent in prayer and know you should do better? Have you even asked the question recently of what God wants from you?

The start of a new year is a time for resolutions. They get a bad rap because often we break them before the ink is dry on the paper. I think that is because we rarely place action steps with our resolutions. Without a plan they become wishful thinking that often does not go any further than that.

Look at Jesus for an example of how to do things differently. At twelve he is having these theological stirrings awakening in him. He doesn't think, "I should do something about it someday." No, he goes looking for answers and the best place for that was the temple and the priest located there. Now it would have been better to inform Mary and Joseph of his needs and asked permission but perhaps he was acting on the principal that it is better to ask for forgiveness since permission probably won't be given! Later in his life, following his baptism, he did not just begin his preaching ministry. He instead went into the wilderness and wrestled with what God wanted him to do. He came up with a plan that he began to put in place when his time of testing was done.

So not only do we ask, "What business is God wanting me to be about?" We also need to ask, "What steps do I need to take now to make this calling a likely reality?" If you are thinking you need to spend more time in study and reflection start attending one of our classes or seek me out about a class you would like and we will see what can be done. If your call is to more involvement, talk to Diana Stoffer our Faith-in-Action person. We have plenty of places where we could be doing more if we had the people.

If it is prayer, find a prayer partner who commits to praying for and with you at a set time each day or week. Exchange emails and hold each other accountable. You get the idea.

I recall visiting with a man who ran the soup kitchen in Missoula many years ago. He had graduated from college, wanted to stay in the community and job opportunities were not great. He went to his church one Sunday and heard how they were opening this soup kitchen to provide hot, nutritious meals to homeless and low income people in the area, and teach people life skills. They had the cook but were looking for some other volunteers. He didn't have anything to do, since he was unemployed, so he volunteered to help until a job came along. He had been there a week when he was talking with the cook. The cook mentioned that they were looking for an executive director. They needed someone who had business skills and would be willing to work for the little they could pay. Guess what his degree was? Right. Business. That night he wrestled with why this was entirely impractical. Yet he felt this is what God wanted him to do. So he filled out the application and was hired immediately. Ten years later he was still running it. He had several other part time jobs on the side to supplement his income and his wife worked as well. He was a natural at the job and, when the cook resigned, he took over that aspect because he had attended all of the training events the cook had done. I saw that the soup kitchen is still in operation for over 40 years. It has grown into an intensive program to help the homeless with food, shelter and job training all because someone was open to being used as God intended, instead of telling God what they wanted to do. It led him to a surprising and joy-filled life.

Let us all say, as next year comes to a close, we have been about the Lord's business this year and if people are surprised at what we are doing, we can just smile and say, you shouldn't be!