



St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

The First Sunday after the Epiphany, January 11th, 2009

✠ **In The Name of The Father and of The Son
and of The Holy Ghost. Amen.** ✠

Each year the parents of our Lord went up to Jerusalem for the Passover. When the festival ended they returned home. They traveled in companies, and would talk and play as their caravans moved along the hot dusty deserts. Luke says in 2:44 that Mary and Joseph traveled for a whole day taking it for granted that Jesus was with them when he was not. This is a poignant picture for it describes the situation of many in the Christian Church today. There are professing Christians who journey along in a religious life never thinking, assuming that all is well--going on with the journey, with our programs, our meetings, and our religious affairs; saying our prayers; going through the liturgies, and taking His presence for granted. D. Martin Lloyd-Jones puts it like this, "On and on they go in life's journey, concerned about anything and everything and everybody, except the one thing that matters most of all, and the one person who alone really counts."

Jesus must have been an unusual child. Can you imagine raising a child without sin? Mary and Joseph could assume he was there. They need not be concerned about Him. And in the visible Church there are those who assume His presence because they have been told they can. Of course I am a Christian, they will say. I was baptized. I was raised in the Church. Going to Church has been a part of my life. I always make this journey from Nazareth to Jerusalem. I have sat on the boards of the Church; I say my prayers; I have given to the Church. I am a moral person; I have always tried to do what is right.

This is the most fatal thing, and renders a person in greater peril than the most profligate sinner. It is a false peace, a false sense of well-being. Going on in life without worry or concern is fine when you have nothing to worry about, but when the house is on fire and you are happily soaking in the bath you are in the

greatest of all dangers! Karl Marx called religion the opiate of the people. Well, this is an opiate. This false peace is a drug. It lulls us into a false complacency.

Sometimes God has to shake us to the very core of our being to shake us out of this false peace. There are people who go through life with this thoughtless disregard for the things of God, assuming all is well with their souls, assuming they are right with God. Then some disaster strikes, some terrible sorrow. It might be a job loss, or the death of a loved one, or some sudden crisis, and they turn to God to find they do not even know how to pray. They have never prayed. They are utterly alone. They know nothing of the reality of Christ in their lives. It has all been a dangerous assumption and now there is no substance to their hope. Can you imagine the consternation when they suddenly realized He was not with them. Can you feel the panic, the agitation, the weeping!

Mary and Joseph had been living in a kind of malaise. Now they are frantically searching for Jesus, looking among their friends and their families. Eventually their search takes them to the Temple and to the seat of the Rabbis back in Jerusalem.

My friends, until we begin to think and abandon this thoughtless life there is no hope for us. As long as we go on assuming the presence of Christ, assuming all is well with our souls, but never ever confronting the hard questions of faith and truth we will likely find ourselves on the final day of our accounting confronting a Christ we never knew. There is hope for us when we stop and think and ask ourselves some very serious questions. Do I know the presence of Christ in my life? Have I ever experienced the joy of sins forgiven? Have I ever known what Jesus talked about when He said one must be born again to

see the kingdom of God? Have I ever experienced the power of His love, the experience of conversion, of entering into a real possession of the gifts and graces He died to provide for me? Do I experience His nearness in prayer? Do I pray? Have I ever prayed? Is Jesus just a name or a person I know? Until we come to such questions and really examine ourselves we are in great peril. But once we begin to ask such questions and begin to search for Him we have this promise, He will be found of us.

Luke says they *found Him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening and asking them questions*. His parents were astonished, though it was his mother who spoke, *Why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety*. Jesus responds with his own version of astonishment, *Why were you searching for me*. The words in verse 49 can be translated thus: *Did you not realize that I must be concerned with my Father's affairs*. The passage is difficult because Mary has a very good point. What parent has not endured the agony of a lost child who has wandered away on a beach or at the mall? What parent has not felt angry at the behavior of a child old enough to know better? It is also fair to ask, who were the careless ones here? Had not the parents of Jesus journeyed almost an entire day before they even thought to check that their son was with them? Indeed, that's the point I have been making.

Nevertheless, we can still sympathize with Mary. What is interesting is the fact that Luke does not say that his mother was angry but that his parents were astonished. But it's the response of Jesus that is the key to this passage. What Jesus said to his mother comes down to this: You and I are not in control of this relationship and do not set its terms nor determine its priorities. "You are astonished at my behavior? Well I'm astonished at your astonishment. Why were you searching for me as though you had no idea where I might be? Where did you imagine I would be? Who do you imagine is leading us? Who do you imagine sets the terms and the conditions for our relationship? Whose priorities do you imagine I follow?"

My friends, we do not determine the terms of our relationship with God or how we approach Him. God does! You listen to how some people talk and you would think they were God. Some of us even imagine we make up our own rules. We talk about our priorities. We expect Him to be there for us no matter what. We can go on ignoring Him but He'll be there when we need Him. We imagine we can come and go as we please. My friends, it is not so!

We are told of the years that followed that Jesus obeyed his parents and *increased in wisdom*. It is to emphasize what was going on here. This was not a disobedient teenager. This was a young man who knew God, and who knew who set the priorities for his life--**I must be about my Father's affairs**. That is what the cross is all about. People say, why the cross? Why can't we just pray and ask God to forgive us? We want to set the terms, you see. But God is the creator, God is in control. We were not put in this world to dictate to Him, but to enjoy Him and to know Him, and to know Him according to His terms. **I must be about my Father's business!** He sets the terms. He orders our way. He establishes the conditions by which we know Him and come to Him. Oh, my friends, can you now see why this presumption we have been talking about is so serious and so dangerous. How dare we presume on the favor of God and take it for granted? We are talking about God!

I recall a time 12 years ago, I preached on the necessity of conversion and the new birth. Afterward, a prominent lady in my congregation—served on every committee in the church approached me and said, "I don't understand the need for this talk about conversion and being born again. I never have. All I know is that when I go to bed at night I pray, 'God remember me.'" You see, she assumed all was well between her and God. She didn't need to worry about Him. Worry about the economy, or the latest political controversy, but God?! Do I need to concern myself with God?! No! God is love. God is safe. He's there in the corner of my life available when I need Him. I simply turn to Him and like a little lap-dog He jumps to attention.

My friends, God sets the terms, not us, and it is incumbent on us to give all diligence to make our calling and election sure. Work out your own salvation, says the Apostle, and do so with great fear and trembling. This is a serious matter. Don't take Him for granted. Set yourselves to take hold of the Savior, and press into His kingdom, calling upon His name. Even then never take His presence for granted. Always seek Him, earnestly seek Him, take hold of His promises and like Jacob of old if necessary wrestle with Him but tell Him, I won't let you go until you bless me. And He will bless you. He will fill you with His love and His grace and with the sweet influences of His Spirit

To the Only Wise God, Our Saviour, be Glory and Majesty, Dominion and Power, Both Now and Forever. AMEN.