

According to our trustworthy ushers, there were 260 people in worship with us on Christmas Eve.

I don't think we have quite as many this morning.

The festival has ended, and people have turned again toward home.

I know that it's still Christmas in the church, only the third day of twelve, as John Roberts explained so well in his email devotion this week.

The introduction on the bulletin insert with the Bible readings reminds us, "It is Christmas, still."

And surely both John and the writer of the insert wrote what they did because nowhere else in the world will there be any indication that *it is Christmas, still*.

Popular culture, which has been promoting Christmas since Hallowe'en, has packed up and moved on the same way we so often do after Sunday worship: the religious part of our week is over, completed, duty done, and now it's time for brunch and chores and the Sunday walk or nap or afternoon play.

Monday comes quickly, looming large, full of work (if we're lucky) and responsibility and all that we casually call "reality," so saddle up and grab the coats and the children and let's get on our way.

We can always find Jesus back in the temple should we happen to need him for something.

Of course, there are those who take their faith too seriously, which by definition, I think, is anyone who takes it more seriously than you do.

These include the people who talk about Jesus as if he is part of their daily life, a member of their family or entourage, traveling with them wherever they go to provide blessing or wisdom or guidance or moral policing, one kind or another of sacred interference.

They are the model Christians, the good students who ruin the curve for the rest of the class, the Ned Flanders neighbors and hyper-righteous rabbi's pets that Jesus must adore but the rest of us distrust, resent or do our best to ignore, the overly friendly, underly popular ones who turn us off to doing or receiving anything that smells like evangelism.

You bring them along as the designated driver but never the prom date, because they are so trustworthy and reliable and earnestly dull.

You don't call these people, as a rule, but you keep their number in your cell phone, because you know that wherever they are, Jesus is always with them should you happen to need him for something.

In either scenario, and in so many others that you can no doubt imagine, we are prone to assume that we know where Jesus is.

He is in the sky, sitting by waiting for you to pray just like the pastor sits by the phone all week in case you should call, or he is in your heart, safely locked away in one of those dark, safe nooks you never show to anyone else and rarely visit yourself.

He is somewhere in the Bible, which is somewhere on your bookshelf, or he is everywhere, like water and air and marketing, so present and abundant and commonplace that you never notice him until he is suddenly, strangely missing.

We assume and on good days even believe that he is with us, somewhere, somehow, and if we can't find him right away, we know he's with someone we trust.  
We can always find him if we happen to need him for something.

Then comes the day when we turn to find him and we can't.

The festival has ended, and no one else is around, and that trustworthy religious friend doesn't know either, because he or she assumed Jesus was with them too but in the face of rape or racism or cancer or crisis they are left scrambling and searching for him too. Maybe they fake it with a canned answer and a forced certainty, but you can tell from the piety and judgment in their response that they've given you a plastic, dashboard cover Jesus, not the real thing.

We search frantically for God-with-us and find that God isn't, that we've lost the Messiah, that in the busy movements of community and traffic and religion and responsibility and the daily grind of life, we've lost him and have no idea where he is and it is time to backtrack, to turn around, to repent and go look for him.

It took Mary and Joseph three days to find him in the temple.

It would later take his disciples three days to find his corpse, because no one thought to look for it among the breathing or anywhere other than that tomb as dark and safe as a sealed stone heart.

Finding him doesn't always happen so quickly, either, though three days looking for a lost child or a savior, never mind both, is an excruciatingly long time.

There are so many places to look.

Surely Mary and Joseph combed Jerusalem as we would--he was not with the police, and thankfully he was not (yet) at the morgue.

He was not in the marketplace or with the relatives, though we certainly repeat those mistakes enough ourselves.

There were three long, desperate days full of places he was not.

There were lots of empty guesses and good hypotheses and smart trails and realistic suggestions that all proved empty, like so many blind alleys through the long maze of church history and the little labyrinths of our own stories, too.

It is not so obvious as we might think where Jesus is or what he is up to.

So we keep looking.

When we do finally find him, more times than not, we don't like his answer.

Awash in relief, still shaking from the anxiety and the fear that take a while to dissipate, we are startled by the impertinence and detachment in what he says to us.

*Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?*

Did you not realize that I was about God's work, which is to say that whatever we were doing is not as important, and that whoever we are is not as important as God is, that our very real anxiety was misdirected and our crisis too small to faze him?

*Why were you searching for me?*, he asks, which is a terribly insensitive question, snotty even, and all of our hard-line, unexamined assumptions about who he is and what is really important get toppled over like a moneychanger's table and there is a chaotic mess on the holy floor.

It is exactly the kind of mess that Jesus always creates, from shattered assumptions to subverted power structures to broken bread to a bludgeoned body on the cross.

When we do finally find him, often the experience of it is at first worse than the searching.

He replies with some insensitive truth we do not want to hear.

He asks a question that keeps echoing in the chambers of the soul, that haunts us long after the lights have been turned off.

He turns up in places we don't want to be...too long in the temple or in the troubling and mystifying texts, in the company of sinners and snobs, on the poisoned skin of the leper, in the deep, aching eyes of the poor, in the neighbor we avoid, on death row bleeding from a cross...and finally, three days later, not conveniently and manageably dead but terrifyingly alive.

What's a mother to do?

What's a Christian to do?

We do not understand what he says to us, yet we treasure them in our heart and we begin to see that he was never really ours.

We keep listening to him, keep pondering, keep wondering, and eventually we hear him all grown up and irritating and exasperating the same teachers of the law who were so impressed with him until they couldn't control or pigeonhole him either, telling stories about a woman who found a lost coin and a shepherd who found a lost sheep and a parent who found a lost child until finally it hits us.

We were the ones who were lost.

And he came to find us.