

The Left Behind Child



Luke 2:43 "When the festival was ended and (Mary and Joseph) started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. After three days, they found (Jesus) in the temple."

I remember this story like it was only yesterday, but it happened a long time ago, when my youngest child, Stephen, was only five years old. One Sunday morning, our son's Sunday School teacher asked his mother at coffee hour where Stephen was that day. His mother was confused by the question and asked what she meant. Well, Stephen wasn't in class that morning, she said. Stephen's mother quickly found me to ask whether I had brought Stephen to church that day or not. No, I said, I thought you brought him. No, his mother replied, I thought you had brought

him. We quickly telephoned home, but no one answered, and then we began to panic. Poor little Stephen. It became apparent that for some reason or another our five-year-old had been left behind at the house more than two hours earlier. In a frenzy we rushed down the street to the Rectory, where we found Stephen quietly sitting outside in the front yard. As it would usually happen, I would come home each Sunday after the 8:00 Service and before the 10:00 Service to help our four children get dressed for church, and then took those who were ready with me, while their mother brought the rest shortly thereafter. Stephen had intended to go with the second wave of our family to church that morning, but by the time he got his own shoelaces tied by himself, they had left, thinking he had gone with the first wave. Stephen rushed outside to catch up to them, but they were already out of sight down the street, and the front door of the Rectory locked behind him. He didn't know what to do. He considered walking the couple of blocks to the church on his own, or venturing across the street to a friendly neighbor's house, but he knew that he wasn't supposed to cross the street alone, so he just sat down on the front steps and waited. Eventually a neighbor walking her dog spotted Stephen and sat down with him and waited until we came barreling down the road looking for him after church. Stephen was a little scared and had a few tears in his eyes, but overall, he had managed being

lost quite well, better than his parents had. We were stunned and frightened and scared. For the first time in my life, I feared the loss of one of my children. And every possible thought of him suffering some tragedy had crossed my mind by the time we saw him quietly sitting there on the front steps with our neighbor.

I can only imagine how traumatized Mary and Joseph must have been when they realized that Jesus was not with them on their return to Nazareth. They must have been desperate in their search for him among their party of travelers. Like us, they must have hurried back along the road to Jerusalem looking for him anxiously down every alleyway, and imagining, as I had, the very worst. Our short time of anxiety does not compare to their long hunt of three days. And the obvious tension between parents and child when Jesus is found in the temple rings so very true with its natural mixture of anger, fear, and immense joy, that that which was lost is found, and is safe and sound. Mary and Joseph, like us, were lucky. We found our lost children, and life eventually went back to normal.

But that is not always the case. Sometimes the lost are not found and what happens to them not even known. Think of those lost after recent hurricanes or tornadoes or flooding or wildfire, or the building collapse in Florida. Many of their

relatives clung to the hope for days on end, and often even longer, that their family members would be found alive and well.

As you probably know, when Joshua led the Hebrews into the Promised Land, they divided up the territory among the twelve tribes of Israel. Later when the great kingdom of the Assyrians attacked the region in the eighth century B.C.E., they captured the land and the peoples of the northern ten tribes of Israel. When the Assyrians returned home, they carted away with them the Jewish tribes of the north as slaves. The two remaining southern tribes, Judah and Benjamin, believed that God had spared them from the Assyrians. God had spared them, they thought, because they had remained faithful and true. And yet a few hundred years later the mighty Babylonians attacked the region of Judea and carted away the peoples of the south, just like the Assyrians before them.

In today's first reading, the prophet Jeremiah yearns for a time when *all* the tribes of Israel would come home safely. In beautifully poetic language, Jeremiah dreams of their return. God is 'going to bring them from the land of the north, and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth. . . With weeping they shall come, and with consolations (God) will lead them back, (God) will let them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble; for (God) has become a father to Israel. . . They shall come and sing aloud on

the height of Zion, and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the Lord. . . Then shall the young women rejoice in dance, and the young men and the old shall be merry. I will turn their mourning into joy, I will comfort them and give them gladness for (their) sorrow, says the Lord.'

Those two southern tribes survived captivity in Babylon and were eventually released by the conquering Persians and allowed to return to their own country, to their own land, to rebuild their homes and even the temple, but it was not so with the northern ones, the so-called Ten Lost Tribes of Israel, who were carted off by the Assyrians and never heard from again. They were lost, never to be found. And the prophet's heartache for God's lost children goes unanswered to this day. It is like the heartache of thousands of parents who have lost their children and cannot find them, but who cannot, who will not, give up hope for their return, that somehow against all odds, they will be found someday, they will return home, they will come walking in through the back door, and life will go on as before. But it never does.

Many devout Christians believe that God protects those whom God loves; that bad things do not happen to good people, that if one is faithful, God will preserve them. Mary and Joseph found Jesus. We got back Stephen. The southern tribes were released by the Persians from their captivity in Babylon. If we are

faithful, all will be well, will it not? Does God not protect his chosen ones?

There are two schools of thoughts about why what happened to the northern tribes happened. One of them over a period of many, many years tried to explain away their downfall and their loss. This school of thought finds fault with them for their own dispersion by the Assyrians, blames them for their fate, weaves together a long narrative about how they were not faithful, about how they refused to honor the city of Jerusalem and King David's heir, how they worshipped false Gods on the wrong mountain. The prophet Jeremiah, however, represents the other school, the school of compassion, which accepts the sorrows of their loss and dreams of their return --- and portrays God as doing the same. There is no finger pointing in Jeremiah's imagery, no 'I told you so', no shaming, blaming, or criticizing self or others, just the painful embrace of the loss of that which was loved, and a passionate longing for its safe return.

It has been my experience as a priest over many years that whenever tragedy strikes us, we react in similar ways. Sometimes we accuse ourselves or others, we focus on the blame game, we rush to determine responsibility and explain away the tragedy as getting what one deserves. That is the easy response. The prophet's means of acceptance is the more painful course of action. It accedes to the senseless tragedies of our lives and

doesn't try to explain away or justify them. It requires great courage, and trust in God. That kind of acceptance is reminiscent to me of the Cross. And it is, I believe, the way we are called to respond as Christians.

As Paul writes to the Ephesians in today's reading, "I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe." For I am convinced that we are called to exercise the power and the hope of compassion in all our interactions with one another. Amen.