

Faith Mennonite Church
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Heart Talks with Mother God
Joetta Schlabach

Mother God Searches for Her Children

Luke 2:41-48

In her book *Here If You Need Me*, Kate Braestrup, a chaplain to the Game Warden Service in the state of Maine, tells the story of a six-year-old girl lost in the woods. The family had been picnicking and the girl wandered off, following a dog into the woods. When the parents weren't successful in locating her, they called 911, which brought a sheriff's deputy and eventually the game warden service. A full-fledged search began with overhead planes and ground crews. The chaplain came to accompany the parents as they waited.

This wait was particularly hard on the parents who had turned the active searching over to those who were familiar with the terrain and to dogs trained to pick up scent. All they could do was sit and wait. As they waited it was hard not to imagine the worst: that their daughter would not be found alive. The mother voiced the questions that swirled in her mind: "Should I have followed her?" "Wouldn't a good mother have known something was wrong before her baby got so far away that even all these men with planes and dogs can't find her?" "Why can't all these men with planes and dogs find Alison?" (15-16).

The chaplain reassured them with information she'd learned from the wardens on previous searches: "Little kids who get lost in the woods do something really smart. When they realize they're lost, they find a snug place—like under a bush—curl up, and go to sleep. Adults tend to keep moving; they keep trying to find their own way out. They think they have to solve the problem themselves. Little kids conk out and wait for the grown-ups to solve it. If Alison is under a bush asleep, she probably can't hear us hollering" (17).

It wasn't until about three o'clock in the morning that a canine named Grace found "a little girl in an Elmo sweatshirt curled up under some brush." The accompanying warden "let the dog's cold nose awaken her. 'Hey honey,' [he] said gently. 'Do you want to go home?'"

"So Warden Dunham and Alison came walking out of the woods hand in hand, past the Salvation Army food wagon and into the parking lot, with K-9 Grace trotting proudly ahead. And my whole, lovely job at that moment," wrote Braestrup, "was to bear witness to rejoicing and to join in the gladness of the coming day" (18).

Unlike these parents who had to sit and wait during the search, our scripture this morning tells of another set of parents—Mary and Joseph—actively involved in the search for their 12-year-old son Jesus when he disappeared. After realizing he wasn't with relatives, as they had thought, they retraced their steps to Jerusalem, searched the places they'd stayed, the markets where they'd shopped. After three days of searching they finally returned to the temple. We

might wonder why they didn't start at the temple in the first place since that had been the whole point of their trip. But the temple complex was massive, covering 35 acres. Mary & Joseph visited only once a year and this was the first time that Jesus had accompanied them. This was not a well-known place to him. He did not have a week-after-week familiarity with the temple that our kids have with our church building.

We usually approach this passage as the gospel writer Luke's desire to show Jesus' emerging identity as one who is intimately, divinely, connected with the Wisdom and Word of the Jewish faith. At age 12 he was engaging with the seasoned sages of his religious tradition. He was fully at home in the prayerful engagement of scripture with the rabbis, so much so that he was surprised that his parents wouldn't have naturally assumed where he'd be or that they'd be concerned about the time that has passed.

But this story also serves as a parable about God's seeking nature, which we see exemplified in the fretful searching of Jesus' parents, Mary and Joseph. In our text discussion group at Trotter's a couple weeks ago, as we discussed this passage, we wondered whether Mary's frantic concern can be a useful image of God. Would an all-knowing God ever become frantic? Certainly we're more accustomed to the images of a seeking, searching God as the persistent, watching father of the prodigal son story, or the rugged shepherd who leaves 99 sheep alone in order to go search for one that is lost. But the high-strung, anxious Jewish mother who emerges in this story? A mother who doesn't know where her son is? Is this a picture of our God?

Every image, every analogy is imperfect, of course. But if we can imagine God as a mother hen drawing us under her wings, can we not also imagine a Mother God so madly in love with each of us, her children, that she restlessly frets over us and sends out her Spirit to pursue us when we become inattentive or totally lose our way? The 19th-century English poet Francis Thompson, in his famous poem, referred to God as the "Hound of Heaven." This pursuing God has

Strong Feet that followed, followed after.
But with unhurrying chase,
And unperturbèd pace,
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy
They beat....

Strong feet that followed after ... majestic instancy. These are attributes that Jesus' mother embodied as she looked for Jesus. She walked for three days through Jerusalem's streets, tirelessly seeking out her son. Strong feet that followed after. She blurted out her relief and disbelief upon finding him: "how could you do this?" Majestic instancy.

Can we imagine God as a mother, fighting sleep a whole night as she watches over a feverish child, or once that child has grown to adolescence, lying awake until she knows he's home safe? Can we imagine God keeping watch over us through the ups and downs, the meandering paths of our lives? When we get lost in our busyness, in our questions and doubts, in

our disillusionment with life, can we imagine that, like a mother, God is ever watching, ever desiring to come near with majestic instancy, never, ever giving up the pursuit of us, her children?

And yet, we don't have to go far afield and lose our moorings in order for God to seek after us. Like Jesus in the temple, we can get lost *in* God! We can be caught seeking God even as God seeks us! This happens when, like Jesus in the temple, we engage with one another in discussion of Scripture. This happens as we pray alone and with others. This happens in our daily encounters, even when we're not consciously aware that God is drawing near through the people with whom we interact, those we serve and those who serve us. This happens through those who bless us and even those who aggravate us!

And it may well happen when we curl up under a bush, like young Alison. When we let go of our need to try to figure everything out and simply trust, mother God will find us and will show the way.