

How unfortunate that Mary and Joseph did not know the Bible verse in which Jesus says, “*Lo, I am with you always.*” They would not have needed to return to Jerusalem in search of Him. And Joseph could have calmed Mary’s fears saying to her, “No need to be upset Mary, remember that Jesus really is with us always.” As silly as this may seem, there is something here we would do well to ponder and treasure in our hearts as Mary did.

Consider the story in our text. Mary and Joseph leave Jerusalem, we’re told, assuming that Jesus is with them. When they discover that their assumption is incorrect, they return to Jerusalem to search for Him. For three days they scour the city. Finally, they find Him in the temple, the house of God.

There are far too many people who make the same assumption as did Mary and Joseph. They assume that Jesus is with them. Mary and Joseph traveled only a day’s journey before they realized that their assumption was wrong. Nowadays, people travel much farther. Not just one day’s journey, but many days. Even months and years. There are some, probably more than we might think, who travel through their entire life assuming that Jesus is with them.

But isn’t He? “*Lo, I am with you always,*” He did say. Yet think on this question. Did He give these words to excuse us from worship, or to lead us to worship?

These words would not have given any comfort to Mary and Joseph. Their fears were calmed, their distress at an end only when they entered the house of God. There was Jesus. He had been there the entire time.

And yet, their distress actually was a blessing. God showed mercy toward them in leading them to Jesus, yet not before He showed them every place where Jesus was not.

For us also, God is being merciful when He brings Jesus to us and us to Him. Yet His mercy toward us does not end there. For how truly blessed are we who also know where we are not to look for Jesus.

Mary, we’re told, treasured up all these things in her heart. She treasured Jesus in her heart. But she did not search for Him there. Jesus certainly dwells in the hearts of all believers, but we are not to look for Him there. “Trust your heart...listen to your heart” we’re told. Yet, out of the heart comes all manner of wickedness, is what Jesus tells us. So do I trust Him or do I trust my heart? Do I listen to my heart or do I listen to Jesus? When my heart speaks to me, I need to remember what God says through His prophet Isaiah, that my thoughts are not His thoughts.

It is as important for us to know where not to look for Jesus as it is where to look for Him. If you look within yourself, instead of finding Jesus, you will find doubt, you will find guilt over past sins, you will find everything but Jesus.

God leads Mary and Joseph to the one place He is to be found. To the temple, the house of the Lord where Jesus is engaged with those who study the Holy Scriptures. Here is where Jesus finds you and you find Him. In His holy house, in holy words, holy water, and holy food. “*Search the Scriptures,*” Jesus tells us, “*for they testify of Me.*” But do not search your heart.

History shows us that when people, yes Christians, begin to listen to their heart, to their reason and their thoughts, they turn away from where God leads us. God led you to Holy Baptism, for there is Jesus for you. But since my thoughts are not God's thoughts, my reasoning mind and sinful heart will try to turn me away from my baptism into Christ. God leads you to the Holy Sacrament of Christ's body and blood for you. But here, too, my own thoughts will conclude that Jesus cannot be in, with, and under the bread and wine for me to receive.

Like Mary and Joseph, let God lead you to where Jesus is, away from yourself to the Holy Gospel. The Apostle John writes about this, "*Whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart.*" My heart condemns me every day. Does yours? How comforting, therefore, is the truth of God that He does not condemn us. He condemned His Son, Jesus Christ in our place. This twelve-year-old Jesus in the temple, twenty-one years later, would suffer and die on a cross taking all of your sinfulness and mine to Himself.

This Jesus, for whom Mary and Joseph searched, is He who searches for lost sinners like you and me. And He baptizes you, washing away all your sins. He teaches you to seek Him in the Scriptures. He feeds you with these, His own words of life. He enters you through His Holy Supper. Through these holy things Jesus is with us always. And He is not just with you, my friend, He is for you. He gave Himself up for you, and He now gives Himself to you.

If you have been using Jesus' words, "*I am with you always,*" as an excuse to live your life apart from His Word and Sacraments, begin this day to see these words as an invitation to seek Jesus, not in yourself, but where He truly is for you, in His Gospel.

And hear this comforting Gospel, that God does not hold your sin against you. He forgives you. Whoever you are, whatever you have done, you are forgiven. This is not what your heart will tell you. But God is greater than your heart, and He tells you and leads you to the truth, Jesus Christ. Amen.