

"SEARCHING FOR JESUS"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York 10028  
December 29, 1991

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### INTRODUCTION

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About two hours later, at a Wendy's Restaurant in Jackson, his parents and his five brothers and one sister noticed that Tyler was missing. Back in Nashville, a woman had heard Tyler screaming and kicking the door and had managed to get the door open for him. All he did was cry, "I want my mommy".

"This is embarrassing, but I'm so glad he's safe" said the boy's father, an electrical engineer for General Dynamics. "We've all had a terrible scare this evening". And sobs turned to smiles when Tyler saw his family pull up in their station wagon. He then showed his brothers and sister the teddy bears, the coloring books and candy that had been given to him by the Metro Youth Guidance group of Nashville while he waited for his parents to return.

"I told you your parents would come back" said Mary Brown who worked at the service station and who comforted Tyler after he was set free from the rest room. His father, Glenn Payne, said later on,

"We normally have a 'head count', but this time we didn't. We were all tired out...too much Christmas."

After they pulled out of the service station, Mrs. Payne did the driving while her husband and the children all dozed. Mrs. Payne had been sick to her stomach when she discovered Tyler was missing and when the family was finally reunited and the smiles had returned and the tension was over, the boy - hugging his mother - said, "Mommy...I'm never going to the bathroom again!"

### DEVELOPMENT

It's very embarrassing to a family to misplace a child, but these things do happen from time to time. It once even happened to Mary and Joseph. They had been "up to Jerusalem" for the High Holy days. Jesus was twelve years of age at the time. They were travelling with a large company of people from Nazareth and it's not really surprising that they were a full day's journey away from Jerusalem when they suddenly realized that Jesus wasn't with them. Where was He? They turned back to search for Him and finally found Him...in the Temple.

In a few days we will be celebrating Epiphany. According to one tradition the Wise Men found the new born King not on Christmas Day, but twelve days after Christmas - on Epiphany.

This is where the tradition of the Twelve Days of Christmas that we love to sing about comes from. The Wise Men came "seeking" the new born King of the Jews. We often see signs posted at this time of the year that say, "Wise Men Still Seek Him". And so they do. This is our theme on this Sunday as we rest in the afterglow of Christmas and make our way to Epiphany.

IS CHRIST MISSING FROM YOUR FAMILY?

One of the first questions that we would do well to ask is this: is

Christ missing from your family?

I think we would have to admit that He is missing from a great many families. As an article in Newsweek pointed out recently....the upheaval is evident everywhere in our culture. Babies have babies...affluent Yuppies prize their BMW more than children...rich and poor children alike blot their minds with drugs....people casually move in with each other and out again....the divorce rate has doubled since 1965 and demographers are projecting that half of all first marriages made today will end in divorce. Six out of ten second marriages will probably collapse. One third of all children born in the past decade will probably live in a step family before they are 18. One out of every four children today is being raised by a single parent.

Such statistics tend to paint a rather bleak picture.

How about your family? Is Jesus missing? Are you doing anything about it? Our family may consist of one person only, but the question is just as relevant.

There's a scene in one of Tennessee Williams' plays where a mentally ill woman is in her garden. She's sitting at a card table working a jig saw puzzle. She's tense. Her hands are shaking. She tries to force pieces of the puzzle together that do not fit. Some of the pieces fall off the table. The pain and the frustration are evident in the face of the woman. She cries to her daughter,

"The pieces don't fit together! The pieces don't fit together!"

I think that Williams could have been describing the person or the family who seeks to live without Christ. The pieces don't fit together. How can they? Without Christ there is only emptiness where there should be meaning and purpose. Think about it. Is Christ missing from your family? From your life? Have you locked Him away in some little closet to be left behind while you head down the road?

WHEN SHALL WE BEGIN SEARCHING FOR HIM?

Here's another question to think about. When shall we begin searching

for Him?

There are those moments when you and I are painfully aware of our need. Somehow we sense the emptiness and the loneliness and the fear. When shall we begin searching diligently for the One person who can meet our deepest needs?

According to an old legend, the Magi were following the Star of Bethlehem and they came to the house of a certain woman and said to her,

"Come with us! We have seen His star in the East and

we are going to worship Him. Do come with us....now!"

But she said,

"Oh, I would love to go. I heard that He would be coming one day and I have been looking forward to it. But I can't come now. I just set my house in order; then I will follow you and find Him."

But when her work was done, the Wise Men were already far out of sight and the star shone no more in the heavens and she never did get to see Jesus. There is a lesson here. We dare not put off those truly vital matters of life and it is so easy to slip in to such a pattern.

At one time or another most of us have visited the beautiful National Cathedral in our nation's capitol. Construction has continued on this magnificent structure for many years. The pace has been determined by the amount of money donated. And proceeding on this basis....building only according to the funds available...this has resulted in some problems and difficulties.

For example, radiant hot water heating was installed in the floor of one section. This floor was left exposed to the elements awaiting funds to complete the structure above it. Four years later, the structure was completed. But unfortunately during those four years, the concrete had eaten pinholes in the heating pipes and the pipes had to be dug up. This would not have happened if there had been heat in the pipes. The delay in taking action and completing that section was a costly one.

The last words written in Sir Walter Scott's diary were, "Tomorrow we shall...." But there was no tomorrow for him. He died with good intentions to accomplish a certain goal....a goal that was not reached by him. Every thinking person has goals and dreams that he longs for....and plans for....and even begins to reach for. Yet, there are many people who fall short of their goals simply because of limited time or opportunity. And this is why it is always important to get busy and do the right thing immediately.

Never delay that which needs to be done today. Is Jesus missing from your life? From your family? When shall you begin searching for Him? Tomorrow? Next month? Next year? When?

AND WHERE SHALL WE FIND HIM?

This brings us to the last question of today's sermon. Where shall we find Him?

The answer, of course, is everywhere. Some people find Him in the beauty of nature.

A great artist credits his father with teaching him to see and to love beauty. His father used to take him out in the evening and the father and son would lie in the long grass beside the wood. There they would watch the rabbits play and the birds swoop by and the corn field rippling like the waves of the sea beneath the wind. And one evening there was a sunset of rare beauty...majesty and splendor. At the sight of it the father stood up, removed his cap and looked at the splendor of the sun setting in the West and said, "My son, it is God!" Some people find Him in the beauty of nature.

About this time last year according to some news reports, quite a few young service men and women were finding Him out in the Saudi Arabian desert. On Christmas Eve, 1990, 28 soldiers shed their guns and world burdens and dipped into the warm Saudi waters. This was no idle swim under the stars, but rather it was a baptism...a ceremony admitting 28 souls to the Christian faith.

According to these same reports many of the soldiers of Operation Desert Shield were not only being baptized, but also were doing some praying and witnessing and making their confessions and reading their Bibles. After five months of waiting for war, more and more soldiers were turning to military chaplains, sharing their innermost worries about life and death and the loved ones they had left behind. "In 25 years in the Army I have never seen so much spirituality" said Colonel David Peterson, Chief Chaplain for our forces in the Persian Gulf.

Many people do find God in such circumstances. Times of great stress, great heartache and great concern...all will often turn our hearts to the One who is there to meet and answer our deepest needs.

But far better it would be if we took the time to settle the vital issues of life before the time of crisis hits us.

Where, then shall we find Him? Most of us, I believe, will find Him just where Mary and Joseph found Him long ago - in His Father's House. Here, in the community of faith is where most people will find God.

Now, I know that the Church is not always the most exciting place to be, but we're in there trying...to excite and inspire those who come within our walls. A mother recently wrote the Reader's Digest that she once asked her young son what the highest number was he had ever counted up to. And he replied, "537". And then she asked him why he stopped there? He replied, "Church was over!" It reminds me of the time I picked up a bulletin left behind in one of our pews and on it was written (by a child), "Daddy...how much longer is he going to go on?"

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PRAYER

Make us sensitive to Your spirit in these moments, O God. Make us receptive to Your presence and nearness. Wrestle with us in the deep places of our lives.

"Our hearts are restless until they  
find their perfect rest in You".

Let the search for You end in these moments for some one in this congregation this morning...a long search that goes back across the years and in many places. Let us hear Your "heartbeat" and let us hear You whisper our name. In the spirit of Christ, we pray. Amen.

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