



PART 3: "WHY ARE YOU SEARCHING FOR ME?"

By Ricky Stephen

Luke 2:49 (Jesus' answer to his mother)

Searching for Jesus

When you're a kid, few things are as freaky as losing your parents. At the end of Luke 2, Luke tells the story of Jesus, just twelve years old, being left behind by Mary and Joseph in Jerusalem. Ancient people traveled in large caravans with their families and friends, so Mary and Joseph are a full day on the road before they realize Jesus isn't with them.

When they return to Jerusalem, they find Him after three days in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking questions. Everyone is amazed at His understanding and His answers. His parents, understandably, are astonished. Mary asks why He has treated them this way and tells Him that they have been anxiously searching for Him.

Jesus responds with the first words He speaks in Luke's Gospel:

"Why were you searching for me? Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" - Luke 2:49

The word "house" is actually an addition in the NIV. The Greek can more naturally be understood as "I had to be doing the things of my Father."¹

There is something almost playful in Jesus' response. Why were you searching so hard? You should have known where I would be.

In Luke's Gospel, we will often find ourselves like Mary and Joseph, searching for Jesus. And, like Mary and Joseph, when we find Jesus He'll have some clever way of saying: you should have known I'd be here.

Jesus isn't hard to find, but He's often where we should have expected Him, but didn't.

Jesus Shows Up Where He Is Wanted

When you put together the human desire for novelty, late-stage capitalism, and social media, out pops an ugly little baby called religious consumerism.

Orange County soccer moms with a shaman on speed dial. Moon-charged crystals to keep the bad juju away. Another Christian conference, book, or podcast promising to finally change your life.

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Underneath it is an assumption, an implied promise: there is something you don't yet know, and it is going to change your life.

But Jesus' birth narrative is full of ordinary faithfulness.

Mary and Joseph do what faithful Jewish parents are supposed to do. They circumcise their boy, offer sacrifices for Mary's purification, and present Jesus at the temple. Anna and Simeon pray, fast, and wait for God at the center of religious and cultural life, the temple. Jesus Himself, at the end of the chapter, isn't off with some fringe guru in the wilderness. He is with the religious teachers of His day, listening and asking questions, learning and growing as He should.

Ordinary faithfulness. Everyday spirituality. The newest and most exciting thing in history breaking into stuff people had been doing for millennia.

Anna and Simeon waited for decades, but not simply because of their personal revelations or feelings. They were waiting inside the promises of God. The Lord had promised Abraham that through his family all peoples on earth would be blessed (*Genesis 12:2-3*). He had promised David that one of his descendants would establish an enduring kingdom (*2 Samuel 7:12*).

Anna and Simeon knew what to expect; they just didn't know when. They knew God was going to act; they just didn't know how.

Most of the extraordinary things God has done show up in places where people are being ordinarily faithful.

Jon Tyson, a New York pastor who has studied revivals for years, summarizes his conclusion this way: "God shows up where He is wanted."² He points to the Hebrides revival in the early 1950s, when a revival in a tiny Scottish church touched hundreds of lives and inspired thousands more. Accounts of the revival trace its beginnings to two elderly women, Peggy and Christine Smith, who were praying and waiting on God twice a week because they were concerned that not enough young people had been invited to church.³

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God's extraordinary power. People's ordinary faithfulness.

Christian spirituality isn't always a thrill ride for adrenaline junkies.

Christian spirituality can be a lot like fishing.

You can spend weeks tying new flies, days watching YouTube videos, and thousands of dollars on waders and the perfect fly rod. But you won't catch any fish.

To catch a fish, you've got to get your line in the water.

Simeon and Anna would probably out-fish any of us. They spent decades in prayer, fasting, worship, and study of the Scriptures. Around year fifty Anna wondered whether she had wasted her time. As Simeon grew older, he must have had moments of doubt. 'Did I really hear God promise that I would see the Messiah?'

To move towards the life the Lord wants for us, *we probably already know what we have to do*. It's just boring sometimes. It's like sitting on a lake for hours watching a fishing line.

Prayer. Scripture. Church. Obedience. Fasting.

God has given us these ways to wait for Him and promised to meet us in them. As James says:

"Come near to God and he will come near to you."
-James 4:8

Eugene Peterson calls the Christian life "a long obedience in the same direction." Jesus promises to be with us. You never know when, after coming through the doors of church for the hundredth time, the promise you have been waiting for may come. At your kitchen table, the glory of the Lord may hang thick in the air tomorrow.

We don't know when. We don't know how.

But will we be ready when He does?

Jesus shows up where He's wanted.

So, get your line in the water.

In The Bleak Midwinter...Or The Dark Desert

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Jesus shows up where He is expected. But the response is underwhelming.

The Son of God, Saviour of the world, Messiah of Israel, Yahweh in the flesh, arrives at the temple and is welcomed by two people.

Luke's birth narrative is anything but tinsel and glitter. Jesus shows up amid geopolitical unrest, poverty, aging and death, and the promise of future conflict. He will not be the Messiah everyone expected. He will be a line drawn in the sand, causing the falling and rising of many in Israel.

Jesus Breaks In Where He Is Needed

But there is tinsel. There is glitter. There is light. The glory of the Lord does shine, and the angels do sing.

The question is: where?

Not at the temple. Not in Jerusalem. Not in the palace of the king.

God deploys a host of heavenly choristers to shepherds laying on the grass among the sheep turds.

Shepherds were thought to be unclean by the religious elite because of their work with animals. They could not testify in court and were often migrant workers. These were not the rich, famous, powerful, or respectable.

And to these people, the angels sing:

*"Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his **favor** rests."*

- Luke 2:14

The Greek word translated "favor" appears only a few times in Luke, and one of its most striking parallels comes at Jesus' baptism:

"You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." - Luke 3:22

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The Father is pleased with His Son, the eternal Son whom He has loved from all eternity. But the Father is also pleased to have the angels sing His favor over the shepherds, people whom the religious world was not pleased with.

This turns out to be part of the Father's character. When Jesus' disciples return rejoicing that even demons submit to them, Jesus says:

"I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do." - Luke 10:21

The Father in heaven is happy with the people we aren't happy with. He is delighted to dote on the people we kick to the side.

This challenges the instincts of anyone who thinks they know who is worthy. The temptation is to look at someone and decide, "No way. You're not up to this." But the angels remind us that we do not get to decide where God's favor rests. His standard is not our standard. His ways are not our ways.

You may have walked this earth and never had anyone sing over you. You may be able to count on one hand the times someone said something good to you. Life may feel like fighting from one rejection to the next.

Take a seat on the grass by the shepherds. Look to heaven.

The angels sing:

Glory to God in the highest.

Peace on earth to you.

For you are where His favor rests.

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Jesus does show up where He is wanted. He sits at tables with Pharisees, corrects the teachers in the temple, dines with elites, and stands before kings.

But Jesus also breaks in where He is needed. He laughs with tax collectors, feasts with known sinners, and receives the tears of a prostitute.

He shows up where He's wanted. But sometimes, those of us who think we want Him get more than we bargained for.

Because we look across the street, and there He is, breaking in where He's needed.

Jesus Searching For Us

Jesus becomes offensive because of the way He shows up where people don't expect Him. But as we think about this, we return to the boy Jesus questioning His mother:

"Why are you searching for me?" Why are you surprised by this? Why are you shocked by where you find me?

"I have to be about my Father's work."

Luke, more than any other gospel writer, captures the angst of the Jesus story. The leaders and experts are angry at Jesus primarily because of who He spends His time with.

It reaches a pinnacle with Zacchaeus. Jesus, typical tricky Jesus, shows up and goes straight to Zacchaeus, inviting Himself to dinner. The people are furious. And Jesus says:

"...the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

- Luke 19:10

Jesus' first words in the gospel:

Why are you searching for me?

Near the end, Jesus says:

I'm searching for you.

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This is His Father's work: to seek and save the lost. The shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine for the one. The Father who welcomes the wayward son home.

For those of us searching for God, get your line in the water. Pray. Read Scripture. Go to church. But there's another place the fishing is good: with the people nobody else wants to be around.

And maybe it's not just the lostness out there. Maybe it's the lostness in here.

Sometimes, we pray like we've got something to prove. We pray our spiritual resume, all our good habits, and expect God to listen because of them.

But maybe, He listens deeper when all we've got in us is to pray: "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me." ⁴

The good news of great joy for all people is not our ability to force God's hand. The good news of great joy for all is:

The light has come, and He's looking for the lost.



Open Up

When have you experienced Jesus doing something in unexpected places?

Dig In

Take the time to read **Luke 2** in its entirety.

- What moments or characters stand out most to you?
- What questions do you have? Take time to explore together.

Live It Out

- What examples of ordinary faithfulness do you admire?
- What do you know you should be doing, but find it hard to do? What's the blockage?
- Who are you prone to count out or kick to the side? What might Jesus be doing to break in for this person or these people?

Pray

Pray God would empower us to keep up our ordinary faithfulness, but also that we would be open to seeing Him where we might not expect it. Pray for any other requests which come up in with your group.

LUKE

good news
great joy
for all



REFERENCES

¹ See Joel B. Green, The New International Commentary of the New Testament: Luke, pgs. 154ff. N.T. Wright, Luke for Everyone, pgs 28ff.

² See the Church of the City podcast series 'God Comes Where He is Wanted' starting January 13, 2025.

³ See Alex Dunn, The Hebrides Revival and Awakening 1949-1953

⁴ See Luke 18:9-14