

Date: December 31, 2015.  
 Scripture: I Samuel 2: 18-20; Luke 2:41-52, Colossians 3: 12-17  
 Title: Kept in Our Hearts  
 Thesis: May the sense of wonder we experience at the nativity of Christ  
 be kept in our hearts throughout the year.

Christmas is over.  
 The advertisements in Friday's *American Statesman*  
 told us that Christmas is over.  
 Now, we didn't need to see the ads of  
 the after Christmas sales to  
 know that Christmas is over.  
 The carols have disappeared from the airways.  
 The packages have been opened.  
 The returns have been made.  
 It's done! It's over!

Christmas comes and goes so quickly.  
 We look forward to Christmas for months  
 and work for weeks and weeks  
 to make it memorable.  
 We decorate a tree and string garland.  
 We hang light from the eaves of our houses  
 and around the trees in our front yard.  
 We spend hours in the kitchen  
 making Christmas cookies and candy.  
 We attend performances  
 of *The Messiah* or *The Nutcracker*  
 and special church services.  
 Then, within the short span of 24 hours,  
 we say hello and goodbye to Christmas.  
 By December 26<sup>th</sup>, it's all over until next year.

When I was a child taking down the Christmas tree  
 before January 1<sup>st</sup> was as important  
 as eating black-eyed peas and ham  
 on New Years day.  
 To insure that we would have a good new year,  
 one free of things that go bump in the night,  
 my mother insisted on undressing the tree,  
 laying the wise men and the holy family in their boxes,

and **storing all** the other decorations **away**  
on December 31<sup>st</sup>.

Although that tradition probably started  
to minimize the fire hazard of dry trees,  
it also shuts Christmas down.

Too soon, it's back to life as usual for most of us.  
Too soon we're back in school or at work.

**Back** to getting up early, working hard, staying late.

**Back** to deadlines and disgruntled bosses and wondering if we will have  
enough energy to get through the week.

**Back** to traffic jams, school buses, and car pools.

**Back** to juggling all the pieces of our lives  
with nothing to break the hectic pace of the days  
or the silence of the long, dark nights –  
no angels;  
no carols;  
no lights shining on a tree.

In today's gospel lesson,  
we meet Mary and Joseph rushing back to Nazareth  
and the routine of their busy lives.

They had gone to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover.

But, they had one little problem,  
and they didn't even realize it.

Jesus was not with them!

It's not that Mary and Joseph were careless parents.

**Granted** they both were busy breaking down the camp, packing up things and  
getting on the road.

**Granted** Joseph was probably thinking  
about his carpentry business ---  
about the business he had lost while gone  
and the orders he had to fill once home.

**Granted** Mary was probably thinking about the long return trip  
and all the work that had to be done once there.

Anyone who has ever gone camping with children  
knows there is always a pile of laundry to do afterwards.

While both Mary and Joseph did have a lot on their minds,  
it was **not** carelessness that caused them  
to overlook Jesus' absence.

Rather, it was the traveling arrangements  
 that allowed Jesus' absence to go unnoticed  
 for the better part of a day.

On pilgrimages to Jerusalem,  
 villagers traveled together in large caravans.  
 Because the women and children traveled at a slower pace,  
 they went ahead of the men.  
 Once the day's journey began,  
 the two groups did not meet again  
 until they reached a previously agreed upon spot  
 that evening.

In past pilgrimages to Jerusalem,  
 Jesus had always traveled with the women.  
 However, that year things were different.  
 Because Jesus had celebrated his twelfth birthday,  
 his bar mitzvah,  
 he traveled with the men, not the women.  
 Both Mary and Joseph assumed  
 he was with the other parent.  
 So, they didn't miss him until they stopped for the evening.  
 Then, when they couldn't find him,  
 they did what any parent would do.  
 They panicked!  
 They looked all over for him.  
 When they couldn't find him anywhere in the camp,  
 they headed back to Jerusalem  
 as fast as their feet would carry them.

Do we stop our busy lives and go looking for Jesus?  
 Do we search high and low for him  
 and keep looking until we find him?  
 An equally important question is,  
 "How do we even know that he is absent?"  
 Let's face it,  
 there are times when all we are doing is  
 going through the motions.  
 We attend worship services.  
 We participate in the church's fellowship activities.  
 We give our time, talent, and treasure  
 to the ministry of the church.

Yet, in spite of all of our activity,  
 something important,  
 or perhaps I should say someone important,  
 is missing,  
 and like Mary and Joseph,  
 we are not even be aware of his absence.

In the third chapter of Colossians,  
 the apostle Paul suggests one way  
 we can determine  
 whether or not Jesus is present in our lives.

He tells us that when Jesus is present,  
 our lives exemplify certain characteristics,  
 which Paul calls fruit of the spirit.  
 Paul defines the fruit of the spirit as being  
 compassion, kindness, humility,  
 gentleness, patience, forbearance,  
 forgiveness, love, peace, and thankfulness.  
 (Col.3: 12-17).

In his book The Fruit of the Spirit,  
 Stuart Briscoe defines the fruit of the spirit  
 as all around behavior  
 that results from a relationship with the living Lord.

**They are spiritual virtues**  
**both to be sought for ourselves**  
**and also promoted within** the community of faith.  
 When any of them is missing in our personal or corporate lives,  
 we can be sure that we have not opened up  
**that area of our lives**  
**to Jesus' transforming love.**

Someone once asked,  
 "If Christianity were a crime, would you be convicted?"  
 That question pushes each of us  
 to exemplify Jesus' transforming love  
 in all areas of our lives.

If we aren't,  
 we can be sure he's missing in those areas.

Like Mary and Joseph,  
 we sometimes don't look for Jesus

in the obvious places.  
 His parents looked all over Jerusalem  
 before finding him in the Temple.  
 When they did find him,  
 Mary, like most relieved parents,  
 expressed her exasperation.  
 But, Jesus said, "Did you not know  
 that I had to be in my Father's house?"  
 Did you not know that I had to be in my Father's house?  
 It was such a precocious response,  
 for it defined Jesus' entire life.  
 He knew even then  
 that his place was in the house of God  
 with the people of God.  
 His place is still in the house of God  
 with the people of God.  
 When we want to find Jesus,  
 we need look no further  
 than the assembly of God's people.  
 We can trust that he is present  
 every time we gather in his name.  
 He is with us here today at HPPC.  
 If we go looking for Jesus,  
 we will always find him in God's house.

Beloved, as we leave the sanctuary this morning  
 and head into the New year,  
 may we make space for Jesus in our hectic lives;  
 yearn for him in the silence of the long, dark nights;  
 seek him when we realize he is absent from our lives;  
 trust that we will find him whenever we go looking;  
 invite him to transform our lives and behaviors.

Doing these things keeps Jesus in our hearts  
 and conforms us more and more to him.  
 AND, if we truly keep him in our hearts,  
 Christmas will never be over.  
 The glory and the joy of Christmas will be with us  
 all of our todays and all of our tomorrows. Amen.