

Until you are, or see, a parent search for their missing child, you don't know the meaning of the phrase, "great anxiety." I remember when I was at a fair with a good friend and her three sons. When she realized that her youngest was missing, she was beside herself, but also instantly, completely, focused. She improvised a plan: I watched her other children while she flagged down a Sheriff's deputy, who put out a radio call. The tension broke a minute later when her youngest emerged from a nearby porta-john and wondered what all the fuss was about.

Mary and Joseph didn't have it so easy. It took them a day just to get back to where they last saw Jesus, with no way to be sure he was still there. And instead of a fairground, their search area was an entire city. A city policed not by well-meaning deputies, but notoriously brutal occupying soldiers, and ruled by a corrupt family that had already forced them to flee for their lives. St. Luke tells us it took them three days to find him, which sounds plausible, but also foreshadows his three days he spent in the tomb, seemingly lost for good. To say they were days of great anxiety must be a great understatement.

When they finally find Jesus in the Temple, it might come off as inevitable or even slightly humorous, but it's important to remember that Biblical characters usually have no idea what's going to happen. And we are reminded that the saintly, ever-blessed Mary was also a normal human mother, in her own words: "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." Many of us have said such things, or had them said to us. It's important to remember that even the greatest saints were still human, and that our own human feelings don't necessarily detract from our own pursuit of holiness.

Jesus's answer, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" might sound like a lame excuse for hanging back or a flippant dismissal of a mother's concern, but I read it as illustrating the very different perspective, the very different sense of normalcy, that Jesus had and has.

In a way, Jesus took after his mother. She herself had run off to visit her cousin Elizabeth, alone, a decision her society would not have approved of. Just as Mary's profound faith and resulting special closeness with God led her to flout social conventions and expectations, seemingly without a second thought and certainly without making a fuss, so too does Jesus's unique closeness with God lead him to say and do things quite naturally that others regarded as perplexing, aberrant, or confounding.

We already know that children and adults see the world in different ways, have different

interests and priorities. We should also consider the distinction between faithful and unfaithful people to be at least as great.

And make no mistake, the “teachers” with whom Jesus was conversing were faithful people. Too often, Christians, sadly including clergy, casually disparage Jews and Judaism in a misguided effort to make Jesus look good. Not only misguided, but tragically unnecessary and wrong, for Jesus was a radically faithful Jew.

Christians sometimes demonize or dismiss Biblical Jewish leaders as a class, while Jesus himself sought them out for dialogue. He respected them, and they, him. And of course, as an adult, Jesus himself was a Jewish leader. Christians sometimes denounce the Temple and its associated festivals and rituals, even though they were ordained by God in Scripture and Jesus and the Holy Family went to great lengths to visit and participate. God already hallowed the Temple by dwelling in the Holy of Holies, and if that wasn't sufficiently clear, God hallowed it all the more by being there in the material presence of Jesus Christ. Therefore, antisemites who call themselves Christian are either profoundly ignorant or enemies of Jesus, and therefore not Christians at all.

Standing up to evil in its many forms often feels uncomfortable, or even impossible, but that's only because we think of the material world and its many evils as normal, and God's ways as exceptional. We think too much in secular ways and have not sufficiently internalized our faith and its dramatic lessons. Time and again, Scripture shows flawed but faithful people triumphing over worldly powers that first appeared overwhelming. I'm not usually one for new year's resolutions, but I've heard worse ones than resolving to cultivate our own closeness with God, in the hope that we might more readily say and do things that please God, despite what others might say.

One easy way to start improving that closeness is to remember that God's astounding mercy puts all our sins away, and some of our mistakes aren't sins at all, so we can let go of our baggage in favor of holding close to God's grace. That in turn will lead us to be more gracious ourselves, becoming closer still to God in acts of mercy and charity.

We should certainly rejoice that God seeks us out, but it's always worthwhile for us to seek God out. Our only true, abiding peace is in God, so being close to God means leaving no room for anxiety to get hold of us. We need not fault Mary and Joseph for getting separated from Jesus — they were the finest parents anyone could have had, and even the finest parents are still human — but we can also resolve never to lose sight of Jesus.

On our journey through life, we travel with many groups. That, too, is part of being

human. But any part of being human can distract us from what, or rather, who, is most important. Stay focused. No matter what the group says or does, or where it goes, even if the group is our relatives and friends, we should be determined to stay close to Jesus, and follow him into whatever unexpected places he might visit.