

A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away... well, at least that's how all the Star Wars movies begin, including the seventh and most recent one, which is in theaters now. And yet, as soon as that trademark crawl is done disappearing in the distance on the screen, amidst the stars of some distant galaxy, moviegoers are ready to enter the story. That it was long ago or far away doesn't seem to matter. What captures us is the drama of a story that is both strange and familiar. It doesn't feel far away or long ago. It feels exciting and immediate. Good and Evil are at war. We are immediately more than just passive spectators. We *want* the nice underdog to prevail. We *want* the powerful bully to fail. Star Wars gives us that story with lots of strange lands and characters and a spiritual power called the force that can be used for evil and darkness or for good and light.

St. Paul is no George Lucas or Disney Films, but he also writes of a drama between good and evil that took place long ago and far away that plays out today in the immediacy of our times. And although we can't go to the movies to get this story, with a bit of quiet and some time for prayer, the powerful storyline comes to life in just a few words found in the Bible. We can still read Paul's words today, even though they were written 1,956 years ago, more or less. As Eugene Peterson paraphrases it in the Message, Paul writes to the Ephesians, "A long time ago, long before God laid down earth's foundations, God had us in mind and had settled on us as the focus of his love, to be made whole and holy by his love. Long, long ago he decided to adopt us into his family through Jesus Christ...every time I prayed, I'd think of you and give thanks. But I do more than thank. I ask—ask God to make you intelligent and discerning in knowing Jesus personally, your eyes focused and clear, so that you can see exactly what it is he is calling you to do, grasp the immensity of this glorious way of life he has for his followers, oh, the utter extravagance of his work in us who trust him—endless energy, boundless strength!"

Paul's prayer asks that we might know three things. That, "with the eyes of our heart enlightened" we may know

1. what is the hope to which he has called us,
2. what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and
3. what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe.

Hope, inheritance, power. Hope that doesn't disappoint. An inheritance greater than goods. Power that doesn't overpower and is always available because God is always giving it to us. We are God's children, and therefore we are also beneficiaries of what a loving parent wants to give to his or her child. We don't just get gifts, as in capacity, capability and aptitude. We get God's constant help and power at work in us through the Holy Spirit, which is the power of Jesus to show up in the midst of our daily struggle in unexpected ways. The question is, do we want him to? Do we hope he will? Are we looking for him there, or are we dreaming of when things will be how we imagine they should be for God to fit into the picture?

The day Mary and Joseph went looking for Jesus, things were definitely not the way they imagined they should be. Jesus was missing. In fact, he had been missing for an entire day, and they hadn't even realized it. Should they have paid closer attention? Should they have checked in with their friends and relatives more carefully rather than assuming that everything and everyone was taken care of? Were they feeling inadequate and irresponsible? Did they feel like bad parents? AS parents, we have probably all been there. I have had my Walmart moment when I let Caleb go to the toy section and then when I turned the corner to find him and he wasn't there, I had to call the store manager. All the doors went on lock-down. No one was allowed to exit the store. "Caleb Briggs, please come to cash register number 6". We waited anxiously by. We gave descriptions of what he was

wearing that day and showed the staff his school picture. I was already imagining him in the hands of his abductor...

We can imagine how anxious and afraid Mary and Joseph were of NOT finding Jesus. Jerusalem was a big city and it wasn't until the third day that they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers.

But his parents were not impressed; they were upset and hurt. His mother said, "Young man, why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been half out of our minds looking for you." He said, "Why were you looking for me? Didn't you know that I had to be here, dealing with the things of my Father?" But they had no idea what he was talking about.

Why had Mary and Joseph not known to go look in the temple? Why wouldn't this have been the first place they would have looked, instead of the last place? When Jesus tries to explain, they still don't get it. It's as if the message of the Angel, that the child to be born would be holy and would be called Son of God, had been forgotten amidst the business of raising a teenager. Besides, all that angle stuff was twelve long years ago.

Frantic, panicky searching for your child is not what family time is supposed to be about. It is not the place of peaceful prayer and God-filled sentiment. It completely upsets any other plans you may have made for that day. All your worst fears play in your head. Adrenaline renders clear thinking nearly impossible. For Mary and Joseph, the worst **would** come to pass, just not right then. Right then, they would find Jesus. And even though Jesus would come home with them, and be obedient to them, things would never be the same.

The son they had desperately searched for and then found was not the one they recognized from home. The boy they saw and heard in the temple was holding his own with the teachers of the Law who were amazed at his questions and answers, and impressed by his understanding. Since he was only twelve, we get the sense that an inner knowledge and affinity for the things of God have inspired him and are at the root of his curiosity and hunger to know more. Had his parents not intervened, who knows how much longer the conversation in the temple might have continued.

Jesus' hunger for God and to know God is stronger than his need to be safe in his parents' protection, even in a strange city. He risks staying behind because he feels just as comfortable with the teachers of the Law as he does with his own family. This is shocking to his parents, just as it is shocking to us as parents when our children go off and do the unexpected thing. It's as if we are living with a stranger: the child we had been raising to look and act just like us is suddenly expressing viewpoints and likes and dislikes that differ from our own, sometimes radically. Even though his parents find Jesus and bring him home, they know that life with their son is not ever going go back to normal. They have caught a glimpse of the desire of his heart, and even though life might look like it did before, it will now be turned toward a future open to Jesus's desire for being about the things of his Father.

What if we were to identify with the characters in this story? Would we be more like Jesus, awakening to the desire of our hearts and simply be so taken by it that we let ourselves become absorbed by it to the point of taking steps to put God first in our lives? Would we be more like Mary and Joseph, trying to be good parents and love our children in the best way we know how?

If we let ourselves get drawn to the desire of our heart, what steps will we take to nurture that desire? How much time in our week will carve

out to make sure that it doesn't get forgotten or shrivel up? If we are trying to be the best parents we know how to be, how will we pay attention to the growing stages of our children so that we know where to look for them? How will we be present and available to them, ready to listen, ready to lay aside our adult preoccupations in order to enter their world with listening and empathy, rather than with judgment?

Most importantly, will we be willing to offer the gift of empathy and forgiveness to ourselves, knowing that this is the hope to which God calls us, the glorious inheritance of which Paul speaks and the amazing power of God which is not to be defined by our own sense of failure because that is not how God sees us? God sees all of us and each of us as his beloved child, not limited by our sin and failings, but open to a future filled by our capacity to receive the gifts God wants to give. Because, a long time ago, God had us in mind and had settled on us as the focus of his love, to be made whole and holy by his love.