

Sermon – “To Grow in Stature and Wisdom”
Sunday, December 30, 2018
Scripture Readings: 1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26 and Luke 2:41-52
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You may recall a reading from the book of 1 Samuel from about a month ago, in which a woman named Hannah was troubled by having no children, suffered unkind treatment because of it, and sought the Lord’s help, promising if she had a son, he would be specially devoted to God. She did bear a son, named him Samuel, and while he was young she followed through on her promise by giving Samuel over to care and upbringing by the hand of the priest Eli. Our first reading for today comes several years later, while Samuel is still a child. Hear God’s Word to you in the book of 1 Samuel, verses 18 through 20 and 26.

¹⁸Samuel was ministering before the LORD, a boy wearing a linen ephod. ¹⁹His mother used to make for him a little robe and take it to him each year, when she went up with her husband to offer the yearly sacrifice. ²⁰Then Eli would bless Elkanah and his wife, and say, "May the LORD repay you with children by this woman for the gift that she made to the LORD"; and then they would return to their home.

²⁶Now the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the LORD and with the people.

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Our second reading is from the Gospel According to Luke. We hear in this narrative of Jesus as a young boy. Listen for God’s Word in Luke chapter 2, verses 41 to 52.

⁴¹Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. ⁴²And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. ⁴³When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. ⁴⁴Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day’s journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. ⁴⁵When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him.

⁴⁶After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. ⁴⁷And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. ⁴⁸When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." ⁴⁹He said to them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?" ⁵⁰But they did not understand what he said to them. ⁵¹Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart.

⁵²And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.

“Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?”¹

It is in a house of worship that both our scripture passages are set today. The first reading briefly visits the childhood of Samuel, who had been devoted to the Lord’s work in fulfillment of a promise by his mother after the Lord heard her cries and gave her a child.² Samuel attended to Eli, who was priest in Shiloh, where the Ark of the Covenant was located and which therefore was the center of Israelite worship before the temple was built in Jerusalem. Samuel was later to become one of the great prophets of Israel, the one who would anoint their first King.³ Here, we see mainly that he spends his time growing up in a house of worship of the Lord.

Jesus, also a boy at the time of the story told in Luke, is also found in a place of worship, where he made himself right at home in what he calls his “Father’s house.” In case you missed it, he spent three or four whole days there, while his parents frantically searched for him, making his nonchalance astonishing. “Of course I was here! Where else would I be?”

And what was he doing there? “[S]itting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers.”⁴ There he was, debating and questioning, absorbing and answering, challenging and being challenged, thriving in it all.

The scripture does take care to note that after he was found by his parents, he “went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them.”⁵ This whole episode, the questioning and being questioned in the temple and the obedience that followed, all seems to be a part of what is summarized at the end: “And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.”⁶

We often talk about following the example of Jesus, but this episode of devotion, listening with care, questioning with insight, and obeying with faithfulness, does not seem to be one ordinary humans can fully imitate with ease.

I was talking recently at a church gathering with someone who currently works in my former profession, software development. Someone else, overhearing us, asked me, “Do you sometimes miss that kind of work?” Now, if you can sympathize for a moment with the lament of every preacher who stands in a pulpit, year after year, and finds that, despite his or her best efforts at putting some kind of corrective words out there, the people and the world have gone on largely just as before, you’ll understand when I say my answer is, “Yes! Of course I miss computer programming! Computers do exactly what you instruct them to do!”

¹ Luke 2:49 (*New Revised Standard Version*).

² See 1 Samuel 1-20.

³ Samuel would actually anoint Israel’s first two kings, Saul and David, in 1 Samuel chapters 10 and 16, respectively, in a dramatic and interesting story in which he first warns Israel against having kings at all, then reluctantly anoints Saul when the people demand it and God agrees, and finally is again reluctant to name David as the next king after Saul has fallen from God’s favor.

⁴ Luke 2:46b-47 (*NRSV*).

⁵ Luke 2:51 (*NRSV*).

⁶ Luke 2:52 (*NRSV*).

Now, I hope you'll recognize I mostly jest, for during my tenure here I can hardly complain—my words have almost always met ears in this congregation willing at least to give a fair hearing to whatever comes from this pulpit, whether it be my strongest sermon or my weakest.

Moreover, we preachers know that we ourselves are rarely much better than anyone else when it comes to being ready to accept and follow instruction from those who have pieces of hard-won wisdom we don't care to hear.

Most of all, having been a programmer of computers, I have a healthy fear of the idea that everyone would actually obey every word that comes from me. A high proportion of the work of any programmer is debugging, which is to say, finding and correcting one's own mistaken instructions to the computer. When microprocessors are sent down the wrong path, it can be costly and time-consuming, but with human lives the stakes are much higher.

Nevertheless, any preacher's imperfections aside, it does serve all of us well to examine, from time to time, our readiness to be challenged by the Gospel. The Gospel is a radically challenging thing, after all. Jesus Christ did not come to leave things as they were, and his message was one of hope and salvation by following him through death and resurrection, which is not at all the same thing as a message of reassurance that we are fine continuing on as usual or remaining more or less where we are.

We are coming into a new year, and the passage from one year to the next is a moment many people use to evaluate where they are and what direction they would like to be headed. It is a time when we make decisions and resolutions of self-betterment, and part of this is examining our habits of mind.

So in that context, I offer one possibility to consider with ramifications for our faith lives, and in fact for most aspects of our lives and relationships. Here is my question for you: how do you react when you hear something that challenges you? How much room do you give for the possibility, when there is a dispute between another way of looking at things and your way of looking at things, that it might be the other one that is right? Put another way, when someone says something you don't like, do you assume the fact that you don't like it means it is wrong?

When there is a confrontation between a point of view someone else expresses and one you hold, it probably stirs up anger, or fear, frustration, or discomfort of some other kind. And of course it does, because if you care about what is true, you probably have some passion about it when someone assails your conception of truth.

But a careful look at what's going on in that moment should also remind us that when hearing challenging words, whether in a sermon, from a family member at the Thanksgiving dinner table, or anywhere else, the greatest driver of our emotional reaction usually is simply our desire to keep holding onto the same point of view. We rarely find attractive the work of changing how we look at anything. It is kind of a wrenching process. If it is a major pillar of one's worldview, changing it out for another is highly disorienting and throws into question one's identity and purpose.

And yet, what are we here for? What is our goal in the world? To get from one end of life to the other without ever being forced to change? Is that success? More specifically, why are we gathered in this room? What do we hope for when we come together as Christians? To be left as we are? Or to become something better?

We can help each other with either goal. But I am pretty sure one of them does not quite live up to the kind of earth-shattering grace and knee-bending awe that we must contemplate when we encounter God who made us, incarnate, in Jesus Christ, here to save us. We don't have to follow the path that this revelation invites us onto, though. Our Bible studies, our times of fellowship, our services of worship can all be times of patting ourselves on the back and saying, "Nicely done, all of us, for being here," followed by going home and living just as anyone else does. Or they can be moments of stimulating encouragement and honest wrestling, times of opening ourselves up to hearing from one another's differing arrays of experience, remembering that we are here for no less a reason than that we have been met by the living God, and taking seriously what that means for playing a part in one another's lives.

"[L]et us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds," the book of Hebrews instructs us.⁷ Provoking is a strong word. Doing it in a mutual fashion, provoking "one another", means being willing to offer and receive that which challenges us.

If you've ever been a part of a hard-working team—I'm thinking, for instance, of my high school wrestling team—you might already know this as a good thing. I certainly found wrestling practice exhausting and hard. I was pushed to weariness...and to excellence. I, a fellow who at that age was not at all a natural at the sport, would never have been a conference champion wrestler my senior year if I had walked out the door in anger when my teammates and my coach refused to ever let me get away with being less than I could be.

Maybe it is because of that sort of experience that through much of my walk as a Christian, at least since I came to an age and position in life where I took my faith seriously, I've commented from time to time that I don't feel like I have been preached to unless, somewhere in the sermon, I have been challenged by something I heard. It could be something challenging that I had to begrudgingly come around to and admit was true. It even could be something challenging that I would ultimately decide I disagreed with, because those sermons could still provoke me to think something through thoroughly, understand it better, and give newfound solidity and depth to some part of my faith. But a sermon has always seemed to me to have little real substance if it does not push me on something, make me reexamine something, or remind me of something I did not really want to hear but needed to.

Once upon a time, I used to think literally *every* sermon needed to be like that to be a true sermon. I don't quite think that anymore. Walking alongside others in their faith lives over time has given me a dose of recognition that sometimes a more basic form of nourishment is needed, too—simple comfort and assurance of hope, for instance. We need a regular diet of protein to make our muscles strong...but we also thirst at times for simple, pure, clean, refreshing water.

⁷ Hebrews 10:24 (NRSV).

The culture in which we are immersed is very low on both of these things, really. Human interaction in the public square, in our divided times, does not often include persons caring for one another with healthy, clear, life-giving water. We've substituted something over-sugared, over-caffeinated, and ultimately poisonous, for it isn't any assurance of true hope we find out there, but social media feeds that reassure us on our political loyalties. Nor does our public diet include much growth-inducing challenge; we've substituted fury and disdain, aimed not at building up or persuading but at insulting and ridiculing.

I hope we in the church can find our way to model something else. We are surely meant to grow, together, as a family. That does involve growing pains. And no child who ever grew up in any family anywhere ever learned all that they learned or grew beyond a child's level of maturity without hearing things that were true but which they did not want to hear.

We all need it. I encourage people in the Bible studies I lead to go ahead and be okay with voicing and hearing opinions and interpretations that not everyone will share. If you can reach the point of trusting one another enough to do this, it makes, interestingly, for closer relationships, I think, to see everyone seriously and respectfully examining things they don't agree with. It is the ongoing dream of every preacher, of course, that every sermon would be taken to heart with care and with faithful examination, even when it is disagreed with. And certainly people have made me a better minister and a better Christian by telling me things I was internally resistant to but needed to hear. We are but children of eternity, here in the house of the Lord. May the Lord bless us to grow here, in wisdom and in nearness to God. Amen.