

Sermon - Growing in Wisdom
Sunday, December 27, 2015
Scripture Readings - I Samuel 2:18-20, 26; Luke 2:41-52
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Our first scripture reading is I Samuel 2:18-20 and 26. This lectionary reading was chosen for today because Luke draws upon the story of young Samuel in order to tell the story of Jesus' childhood in our Gospel lesson. Samuel's birth occurred at an important juncture in Israel's history. He is not the savior-king, however his life will be the bridge between the time of judges and the first king of Israel. Like Jesus, Samuel is the unexpected one chosen by Yahweh to give hope to God's people. Like Jesus, Samuel's parents play an important role in the faith development of their son. This is the Word of God.

18 Samuel was ministering before the Lord, a boy wearing a linen ephod. 19 His 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. 20 Then 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. 26 Now the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the Lord and with the people. Amen.

Our second scripture reading is Luke 2:41-52. Luke is the only gospel to record this story of Jesus' childhood, giving us a glimpse at the insight Jesus had even as a boy. We also see how rooted Jesus' parents were in their faith and Jewish heritage. Luke includes Jesus' dedication to the temple, the purity rites Mary observed after Jesus' birth, and the family's annual trip to the Passover feast in Jerusalem, to reveal the roots of faith Jesus would draw upon as he grew in wisdom and in years. This is the Word of God.

41 Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. 42 And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. 43 When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. 44 Assuming 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. 45 When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. 46 After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. 47 And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. 48 When 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." 49 He said to them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" 50 But they did not understand what he said to them. 51 Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart. 52 And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.

The title of the sermon: "Growing in Wisdom"

The text: "His mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years..." Luke 2: 51b-52a

Let us pray. Holy and Loving God, as we celebrate the mystery and wonder of you coming to us in the Christ child, we thank you for this glimpse of Jesus as a young boy and for the family and community that nourished his faith and understanding of himself. As we reflect upon your word together, may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

It seems like just three days ago we were celebrating Jesus' birth and in today's Scripture he's already twelve years old... *listening and asking questions* with the teachers; carving out his own identity and asserting his independence from mom, the one who brought him into the world in Bethlehem, on another trip to Jerusalem; the one who wrapped him in bands of cloth and treasured in her heart the strange and wonderful events that followed his birth. It can't be! Where has the time gone? It seems like yesterday he was learning how to walk and now he is sitting and talking with the experts in the Jewish religion. Isn't life just that way? As parents, as grandparents, as teachers, and pediatricians, we watch with amazement, as our children grow up, blossoming into their own person, and discerning God's will for their young lives.

Children growing up in the life of Westminster celebrate milestones on their faith journey not unlike Jesus experienced growing up in Judaism. The rituals around baptism, the third grade Bible presentation, and Confirmation mark transitions in their faith development as our children *increase in wisdom and in years*. These milestones mark the stages in James Fowler's Faith Development. Confirmation, like the Bar Mitzvah, begins around age 12, and marks the end of childhood and beginning of adolescence. In Confirmation our youth learn what the church believes and have the opportunity to ask questions. They begin to integrate what the church believes with their own life experiences making their faith more personal and meaningful in the years that follow.

Luke is the only gospel writer that gives us a glimpse into the faith development of Jesus' young life and for this we are indebted. We learn from Luke that Jesus' childhood revolved around his home, temple and synagogue. Every significant milestone on Jesus' faith journey was in continuity with Judaism. For a male child, these milestones included circumcision at eight days, dedication to God (in Jesus' case at six weeks when his mother, Mary, was purified and he received a blessing from the old man Simeon), Bar Mitzvah at age twelve and public life at age thirty. These are the milestones Luke records in Jesus' young life.

Luke's account of Jesus in the temple at age twelve, the year of his Bar Mitzvah, serves as a transition from the birth narratives to his public ministry, which began at age 30. The sojourn to Jerusalem for the seven-day Passover festival was a requirement of the Jewish law. The journey probably took four or five days from Nazareth, traveling at a pace of about fifteen miles a day. In comparison to some of the apocryphal infancy gospels or other ancient biographical accounts of their heroes, Luke does not include a list of miracles Jesus performed as a child. Neither does he exaggerate Jesus' precocious wisdom. Rather the story reveals a healthy 12 year-old boy, pushing the limits of boundaries and finding his independence. The story reveals Jesus' curiosity about and understanding of the law and his growing awareness of his identity as God's son.

And yes, the story reveals two parents who had very good reason to be worried and not just a little bit irritated when they discovered their son was not traveling with them on the journey home. When they started to look for him that evening and could not find him, we can imagine what they were feeling and thinking. This is every parent's nightmare! Our hearts go out to all parents who have lost a child. There is no more devastating an experience.

By the time Mary and Joseph found Jesus, three days later, surely they were at their wit's end, exhausted and weary with worry. Never overstating anything, Luke chooses these words to describe their reunion: *After three days 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. When his parents saw him they were astonished;...*

According to Webster's Dictionary, to be astonished is: *"to be filled with sudden and overwhelming surprise and wonder."* Surely they didn't know whether to laugh or cry; to hug him or reprimand him. Imagine the relief they felt that Jesus was safe and the irony that he was in the temple all along. Certainly they were pleased with Jesus' interest and curiosity in God's laws. And yet, Jesus needed to know that what he did was not acceptable. Who better to tell him than his mother? Thank God for mothers who are not afraid to be honest with us and say the things we need to hear. *...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."*

Jesus' response is at the heart of this story. They are the first words we hear from the babe whose birth we celebrated three days ago, these are the first words from Emmanuel, which means "God is with us." They are the words of a 12 year-old boy in response to his mother's question and yet, they have meaning beyond the immediate situation: *He said to them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?"*

In the context of the big picture of Jesus' life these words make perfect sense, however in that moment his parents did not fully grasp the meaning of what he was saying. For Jesus, this journey to Jerusalem in his twelfth year took him further than they could know. The circle of his awareness and the sense of a larger duty beyond his home in Nazareth began to widen and deepen for him. God was preparing Jesus for the road only he could travel, a road taking God's grace beyond the law he loved and studied, a road he would take on another day. For now, Jesus returns to Nazareth with his parents and is obedient to them.

Once again Mary finds herself treasuring things in her heart she does not fully understand. And Luke concludes with familiar words from a biblical story about another boy in the temple whom God called to do a new thing for God's people. By choosing these words from the story of young Samuel, Luke weaves together the old and the new not only historically and theologically, but also literarily. (Fred Craddock) *"And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years..."* The one who is already advanced in wisdom grew still further in his understanding. The son who is both divine and human was shaped by the experience of the grace of others and the grace of God.

Jesus did not come into his own without the relationships which influenced him growing up. What is true for Jesus is true for each of us. We learn who we are and to whom we belong in the context of our relationships with our family, friends and faith communities. As we gather a few days following Christmas 2015 and reflect on Jesus' childhood together, may we take this opportunity to treasure and give thanks for the people who have shaped our lives, nurturing our identity as God's children.

And by the grace of God and the faith communities, in which we live, and move and have our being, may we never stop learning and asking questions. May we never stop pushing the boundaries of God's limitless love. May we keep our minds and hearts open to what God would have us do in this time and place as people who are reformed and always reforming... and may we each continue to grow in wisdom and in years. Amen.