I Samuel 3:1-14, Luke 2:41-52

“No fear in growing up”

 Welcome to Christmas Sunday as we continue to celebrate the birth of our Savior Jesus Christ. Usually we have two Sundays but since next Sunday is Epiphany and the official end of the Christmas Season, then we have to get it all out today. This is also our last Sunday in 2012 and so we get to gauge how we did and how we are doing with our goals and aspirations for 2012. Session and the deacons will be doing that at their retreat in a few weeks. I so look forward to that retreat.

 It is also our last sermon in our sermon series of No Fear. I pray you have been able to face some of you fears and that Jesus has come out victorious in guiding you through that process and allowing you to trust Him unconditionally in all things. The first manifestation of fear in Scripture finds itself when? Genesis 3, when God calls out to Adam and Eve while they are hiding because they ate the apple and sinned, God calls out: Where are you? And Adam responds: I heard the sound of you in the garden and I was afraid. Every other encounter with God is marked by fear because of an immaturity that stems from sin.

 The only way that we are able to face our fear is to grow up and face it head on by walking with God daily which will allow us to mature. Today we find two people in Scripture that experience defining moments in their youth which allows them as Scripture states, increase in wisdom and stature, which basically means grow up. But they were also very different. Samuel began as an immature church goer and Jesus as a young God lover. Of course, Jesus is in a league of his own, but for today, try to fit yourself into one of these two models.

 We will see that it is easy to have a relationship with the church, but what our Savior wants is a relationship with him, a walking, talking, relationship and one can’t replace the other. Let’s read.

 **READ**

 Look back over your life and today as we look at pivotal moments in the lives of two pre-teens, think about your own pivotal moments when you are able to identify a moment, or a person, or an event that has shaped your relationship with the Lord. I was 17, an acknowledged atheist, the son of missionaries, who had created his own understanding of how the world worked and why it did. On January 14, 1986, at a winter snow retreat with the youth group God literally spoke to me and called me to his side.

 We aren’t used to hearing supernatural things like that, but that was a defining moment in my life when I know the Holy Spirit manifested himself in a way that allowed me to understand that God loved me and wanted me to serve him for my entire life. Each one of us has had pivotal moments in our lives but they haven’t always brought us closer to a relationship with God. As we look at Samuel and Jesus I want you to think of your own pivotal moments. The death of a loved one, the birth of a child, the loss of a job, the joyful joining together in marriage. What are your pivotal moments that in some way allowed you to grow up, to be more mature, to see the world and your life in a deeper more meaningful way.

 Let’s look at Samuel’s moment. What is fascinating to me is that his moment took place while he was in the arms of the church. Vs. 1 tells us that Samuel was ministering, working, doing God’s work with Eli the chief priest. And it wasn’t just any work, he was helping Eli in the temple of the Lord where the ark of the covenant was. Samuel wasn’t just mopping up, he was responsible for the most important task of the temple to make sure the fire of the sacrifice remained lit. Basically he was a young elder with some very serious responsibilities for the life of the entire nation.

 But, and we know the story, after God calls to him the second time we find this phrase in vs. 7. “Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the Word of the Lord had not been revealed to him.” What? He doesn’t know God and he is working and ministering and responsible for some of the most important duties of the church? How does someone get in that position without knowing God? Maybe because God put them there?

 But as a result of this encounter, read vs. 19 if you can, Samuel grew up, the Lord was with him, and none of his words fell to the ground or came up empty. Samuel soaked it all in. This encounter with God made him grow up. Notice that Samuel was not able to get there on his own. He needed a mentor, an interpreter, someone to walk him through the experience, an Eli who was about to lose his position and his job. He knew he had to be open and expect God to be speaking to him.

 It is this aspect of growing up and not being afraid of being in a relationship with God that I want to address. It is so much easier being in a relationship with a church: coming on Sunday, going to Sunday school, serving in the leadership, being involved in the choir and the band. It just takes showing up and going through the motion. This sermon is not a plug to go to church, it is about being in a loving, committed relationship with God.

 Paul in his letters to the churches encourages them along the same lines, wanting them to grow up by having a faith not based on their institutional allegiance, but rather in their manifested love for God. In I Corinthians 3:1-3, Paul states: “And so brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, for you are still of the flesh.” Paul is not talking to society, to the unchurched, he is talking to us, people in the church. I want you to be mature, grow up.

 Again, in Hebrews 5:12-13 “For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again about the basic elements of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food; for everyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is unskilled in the word of righteousness.” I guess No Fear in growing up should be an examination of all of our time and energy that we spend as individuals with our Savior. How much time do we spend reading His Word on our own, or is that just for the weak. How much time do we spend in prayer by ourselves, or is that only in a crisis, how much time do we spend fasting, or is that only for the Catholics?

 A manifestation of our love of God has to be manifested somehow in our lives, and just going to church doesn’t count. We have increased attendance over the past year and a half by about 30%. That is very significant, and I wouldn’t want to jeopardize that with this sermon. You know what is interesting, and for some reason this also happened in Florida at the beginning of the growth there. We had this constant growth in attendance, which is very unusual in any Presbyterian Church, but our giving is down by about 3% compared to last year.

 But being mature in Christ isn’t about going to church, or even giving, but it is about a relationship one on one with you Savior that no on here will know you have. As it was in the day of Samuel, the Word of the God is sparse these days and the reason why is because we don’t take the time to read Scripture or pray to our Savior by ourselves and outside of contexts of such as prayer breakfast, or Monday prayer service, or in schools. I think it is a real cop-out to say the shooting at Newtown took place because God isn’t allowed in school. It is our responsibility to bring God at home in our individual lives, and that is not happening. Do our kids have exposure to Scripture and prayer at home or do you leave it up to the church or school?

 Here at First Presbyterian we could have a lot of Samuel’s who serve the Lord but maybe don’t necessarily know the Lord in a personal way. Jesus’ example in Luke is the exact opposite and, as always, a great example for us to follow. Let’s turn now to Luke. I love Luke and his details. He is the only one who gives us Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary and Gabriel, the shepherds, and now this account of when he was 12. Every year, he tells us, his parents used to go to Jerusalem, as good church people as they were, to sacrifice for the Passover. It was the law, they had to. But boys didn’t have to follow the Torah until they were 13 so probably this was their first year taking Jesus so he could see what he would be required to do the next year when he turned 13. Scripture tells us this year he went along.

 Jesus finds the temple and doesn’t want to leave. I’ll be right back dad. But he lingered while the caravan of Mary and Joseph and all of their family with the 50 or so kids in tow left the capital. Not difficult to do. We had 7 kids over at the house over at Christmas and it was hard to keep track of all of them. Night comes and everyone goes back to their tents, but Jesus is nowhere to be seen. Now Mary and Joseph start to get worried, anxious, even afraid.

 Have you ever lost your child in a crowd or someplace for a period of time? There was a missionary family that was serving in Moscow with us and they lost their daughter who was 9 at the time, in the subway. She didn’t get off the train with everyone else. She was lost for 6 hours. Mary and Joseph head back to Jerusalem hoping beyond hope to find him. Two days have already passed and then they search for 3 more days. Five days have passed, someone probably picked him up and sold him to slavery. Let’s go to the temple as a last resort and sacrifice to our God, who knows. As an act of desperation they go to the temple, not as a line of first defense.

 Why do we go to the pastor normally as an act of desperation, instead of a first line of defense? Jesus said as much, if you hadn’t wasted your time and come right to the temple you would have seen me. But they get to the temple and there he is, just hanging out with the padres. Their relief turns to discipline as Mary states, “We were in suffering pain searching for you.”

 But Jesus answers, and it is an answer that some of us might consider a bit cheeky for a child at 12, Why were you searching for me? Duh, didn’t you know I had to be, and this Scripture states, in my father’s house. But the literal translation is: I had to be involved in my Father’s affairs. It’s all about my personal relationship with God. Different from Samuel where he had to hear from Eli that God was choosing him for service, here, Jesus was teaching others about how God was going to work in his life. Jesus was not afraid to be mature in God, to grow up with his Father.

 But vs. 50 tells us they didn’t get it. It also states in vs. 51 that Jesus was very obedient to them after that. He knew his parents could only take so much, and they were at their limit. Here is another instance where the child is more mature than the parent and figures it out before the parents are able to.

 No fear in growing up. The way we treat each other at times as Christians I often want to say: grow up. Going to church means nothing if we don’t have a personal relationship with God. Samuel learned that while in church, he grew up, had a pivotal moment in his life and I pray we will too. You don’t get points for coming to church. A challenge for next year is to look back over this year and see how we have matured. Maybe we took the step of coming back to church or coming to church in the first place. 30% of you took that step. Praise God, that is great news. But now there is another, even more important step to take, and one that no one is going to be able to check up on you. The next step is growing up by knowing and loving God personally. Jesus has to become more than a name to you. We can help in that process as Eli helped Samuel. May God bless us and keep us as we grow up in the Lord. Amen.