

Sermon Text for December 27, 2015

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I Samuel 2:18-20, Luke 2:41-52

“Is Christmas for children?”

What a great Christmas Eve we had here at FPC. For the first time in nearly a decade we eclipsed the 500 person mark, that is exciting! And it was exciting, it was a zoo. Children were everywhere, some call that type of service a screamer service. No sermon is preached but the Gospel message rings out loud and clear as the kids act out that first Christmas day. It was a wonderful service. And then we had our later two services and I need to tell you I think they were the best Christmas Eve services that I have been associated with. Tim Yoder was able to pull together a choir, chimes, a duet and organ music and all within the service. We are blessed, and we were blessed.

You know there is a bit of a sense that the last two services are the real services and those screamer ones just kind of hold a place so that kids can have a crack at it. I'm not perfectly sure if that first service is even considered a church service in some schools of thought. We find that same skepticism about children and their limited role with some people in Scripture, that they are subjects and not really able to contribute much.

There are a couple cartoons about baby Jesus that you might like. At least in all of the Scriptures in Luke that we have read he is the primary character, he is front and center and today is no different. In fact our story today is one where Jesus and his family create a memory. We all have memories growing up as kids. One of my most vivid memories includes food. Growing up in Italy I used to swim quite a bit and after every practice my mom would bring me a salami sandwich. It would be starved and it always tasted so good. One day she pulled it out and gave it to me and there was only $\frac{1}{4}$ left. She was hungry and had eaten $\frac{3}{4}$ of it. I was decimated but we laugh about it today.

What about Samuel and his parents? Samuel lived in the temple and every year his parents would go up to see him at the time of the sacrifice as they were supposed to. The Scripture tells us that every year she would make him a new little robe and give it to him when they were together as a family. But Samuel was ministering and every year they would develop a memory as they saw each other.

In this Scripture today Jesus and his parents create a memory. Years later the conversation would go something like, mom remember that time, when that strange man picked

you up during your dedication? No, no, when you all left me in Jerusalem. Yeah, those were good times.

Scripture teaches us continually that children are not mere spectators but actually can contribute tremendously to our faith journey. Christmas shows us that children can play a role that we don't normally attribute to them. Is Christmas for children? Because after all, what do they know about the incarnation, or Emmanuel, God with us in the flesh? For unto us a child is born and one day, a child shall lead them. Let's read.

Let's make our way through both of these Scriptures because what you will find is that there are some very obvious parallels between the childhood of Samuel and that of Jesus. The first similarity is that we read about Samuel that his parents were very religious. Every year they go to the temple and every year they would see their son who was there.

Missionary kids historically are no strangers to boarding school, that is in essence what Samuel was doing. Their parents would drop them off and then in the summer they would pick them up. Many of them would not go home for any holiday in between.

As a missionary kid we never lived in boarding schools growing up, we always attended the public schools of wherever our family was, but when I graduated high school my parents dropped me off at Philadelphia College of the Bible and then left the country. I would see them on Christmas break and that was it. I had to work during the summer so couldn't see them while they lived in Honduras. We would send cassette tapes back and forth and usually it would take between 2 or 4 weeks for them to get from Langhorne or Swarthmore or Atlantic City to Tegucigalpa.

The Samuel Scripture begins with this statement: Samuel was ministering before the Lord, so already he was on the clock, even as a very young boy he was wearing a linen ephod which the priests would wear as they ministered.

So all we hear about Samuel is that he is doing the Lord's work even while he was wearing little robes that his mother would bring him. If you look a little further in vs. 26 we read: "Now the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the Lord and with the people." Does that sound familiar? 1,000 years later it would be said of Jesus that he increased in wisdom and in year and in divine and human favor.

This story of Jesus is amazing. It is the only one we have in Scripture after his infancy and before his ministry begins, so it is precious and it is rare. Let's look at it again, vs. 42 tells us as if it is no surprise and totally expected that Jesus' family would head to Jerusalem once a

year as their religious obligations demanded. We know they were a religious family, but again this confirms it.

The detail we get here is that Jesus is 12 in this story. This is a significant detail because that was an important year in the life of a Jewish boy because at 13 you are held accountable to the laws as an adult. At 12 you had to learn all that was expected of you to know, not dissimilar to our confirmation class around that age before you become a member of the church as a youth. Today in modern Jewish families at that age of 12 boys would be having their Bar Mitzvahs.

The 7 days of the festival are over and the caravan leaves Jerusalem, the big city. We read in vs. 44 that they were traveling with relatives and friends so there were a lot of families represented which meant a lot of kids as well. It would have looked a lot like it did here on Thursday evening, except you would know all the kids and the adults because they were either related to you or from your home town. Jesus knew they were leaving so he must be with the neighborhood kids.

But what we find out in verse 43 is that Jesus stayed behind on purpose as his family was leaving and it isn't until vs. 46 that they find out, and then 3 days later as they search they actually end up finding him. Remember it would be like you are a day away from New York City and little Jimmy isn't in the caravan so you have to go back to the city. Where would you start? We don't know where they start but we do know where they end up finding him. Don't overlook that little details of 3 days later. We know that Jesus was in the grave that long.

So what was Jesus doing in the temple? I have heard some people describe this scene as Jesus teaching in the temple, even art history depicts it in this way. But look at what our God was doing in vs. 46: "they found him in the temple, sitting among teachers, listening to them and asking them questions."

The temple was an amazing place, you would have groups of people scattered all over the grounds outside sitting and talking and debating and discussing points that were of interest. Even today you see this happening and I'm guessing when Mary and Joseph arrived they saw a scene pretty similar to this one.

The exchange between parents and child is pretty interesting. You can definitely sense a little family tension taking place. Mary is the one who speaks, and I don't want to buy into the whole protective Jewish mom stereotype, but it just might fit in here. She was definitely the spokesperson of the two in this Scripture, even if the Scripture states that his parents were astonished in the midst of the people who were amazed at his answers.

But they were astounded not because of his wisdom as those around him and them were, but because he had been lost and was now found. Mary's words say as much that they were not astounded by his astuteness, but rather were astounded at how he had treated them. Why did you treat us in this way? You father and I were very anxious, we were worried about you. You can assume that her tone of voice might have been a bit severe, maybe even a tongue lashing.

When Jesus answers I can't say he talks back, but he does answer her and he answers her in a way that would mark his responses in years to come. He answers her question with another question. Why were you looking for me? You knew right where I was, I had to be in my Father's house. From there we are left with Jesus choosing to be obedient to his parents as they head back to Nazareth. Jesus chose to obey, it reminds me of Philippians 2:7 which tells us that Jesus chose, he made himself nothing by taking on the very nature of a servant being made in human likeness. What do children know about the incarnation, about Emmanuel, about Jesus coming in the flesh? How can they be trusted with such profound truths?

It seems that my work has been working with children ever since I was ordained. From the beginning of my ministry at Casa Materna an orphanage where children taught me the simplicity and the power of Jesus' words that there are many rooms in my house. An orphanage where above the portico it reads lasciate I fanciulli venire a me, let the children come unto me.

There I discovered the child who brought the loaves and the fish which John turns into the eucharist. You see, we complicate things and Jesus says as much in Matthew 18:2-4 where he states unless you change and become little children you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Now I'm wondering if Christmas is for adults.

I am so grateful that we are a church that loves little children and allows them to eat the bread after communion. I do want to encourage you to see in the words of children the truth of God Himself as we are taught to follow him with a more simple, childlike faith. Amen.