

And Whatever You Do ...  
Sunday, December 27, 2009  
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church  
Rev. John M. Cleghorn

Scripture:  
1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26  
Luke 2:41-52  
Colossians 3:12-17

As I have mentioned to you a time or two before, I attended one school for 13 years while growing up in Atlanta. No, I did not repeat that many grades.

It was a K-12 school and I was the son of a faculty member. Especially in my elementary school years, this often afforded me a few hours between the end of my classes ended and the end of my mother's work day. For me and a couple of other faculty kids, this was time to explore parts of the large campus and – as well as the line between what we called play and our parents might have called mischief.

But I never forgot that I was being watched. It was as if we faculty kids were being raised by the entire faculty and staff, from the headmaster to the grounds crew. So, for all of my years there, I knew there were clear expectations of me – whether I was thinking about crawling inside the storm drain to see where it led, or, in later years, applying myself in the classroom or competing on the athletic field.

In the hallways of one of the main buildings hung a plaque I came to know well. It captured this sense of community investment and expectation I felt in those years: It bore the words we just read from the Gospel of Luke: "And Jesus grew in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor."

We actually find essentially the same phrase in two of our readings this morning. It appears first in the account of the life of Samuel. It's repetition is not by accident. Though separated by thousands of years, the lives of Samuel and Christ followed similar paths, to the degree that we can draw parallels between Christ and any other servant of God. Samuel heard God's call to serve as a boy. He grew into a great prophet who led Israel through a pivotal time in its life, a transition from being a group of loosely connected family tribes into becoming a unified nation.

Christ, of course, Emmanuel, brought into the world the new covenant, salvation for all. Now your reaction to encountering this story of Christ as a youth just two days after

Christmas may be similar to mine. Part of us isn't ready to read about Jesus growing up so fast. We want to dwell by the manger and soak up the wonder of Christmas for a while yet. But, if anything, the sudden, even jarring arrival of this passage in the lectionary reminds us how urgently the world – then as now – needed Christ.

That is the tension that frames each of our lives, isn't it? With Christmas, we hope to be born again, in a sense, not in the fundamentalist sense but renewed by the gift of Christ in our hope and our assurance that God is with us. But, then as now, the world cries out for Christ's ministry. We feel that same tension in the secular world, don't we? We want to stay on holiday, even if it's just mentally. But already the media is wrapping up 2009 and rushing predictions about 2010.

Whether you are eager for the new year, and you may well be for all sorts of good reasons, or whether you want to remain by the manger for just a while longer, we can pause and consider how we might grow in wisdom in stature and in favor with God and all people, as individuals and as a church.

Now for the three years or so that I've had the privilege to stand in this pulpit, I don't think I have submitted you to the pulpiter's fall-back, fail-safe approach to preaching ... the tried-and-true three-point sermon. But deadlines were tight this week and the turnaround time for today's offering was short. So, with that disclaimer, let us explore three themes from the stories of Samuel and Christ that might shape our own growth in 2010 and all the years to come.

In a word, the first theme is trust. However, as we will see, it applies more to the parents of these two youths and it plays out differently with both families.

Samuel's mother, Hannah, had prayed urgently and completely for a son with the love and hope that only a woman seeking to be a mother can understand. When Samuel came into the world, though, Hannah and her husband gave the child over to God ... or, we might say, she gave him back to God, to be raised in the service of the temple.

Hannah and her husband loved Samuel and visited him every year, but their love had that quality that is so extraordinarily rare – it was unconditional love, rooted in complete trust that their son would be safe with God. In return for the gift she had given God, God gave her more children.

As for Mary and Joseph, for all the good things we can say about them, we might note that they didn't seem to muster quite the same level of trust, at least from what we know from today's passage in Luke. It is the familiar story of how 12-year-old Jesus traveled

to Jerusalem for Passover but then stayed behind to be about God's business in the temple. For three days, Mary and Joseph frantically searched for their son before finding him.

It's possible, I suppose, that this was just the kind of communications breakdown between parents and their adolescent that happens. But scripture tells us that Mary and Joseph still didn't understand Jesus' explanation and we find that beautiful phrase that connects this story to that of Jesus' birth: Mary treasured these things and pondered them in her heart.

The truth is we are more like Mary and Joseph than Hannah and her husband, Elkanah. As many times as we are reminded to let go, and as often as we see evidence that God is in charge, not us, we still want to look frantically for ways to be in control, to insist that it's all up to us.

It may take us three days to discover we're wrong, three weeks, three months, three years, three decades or, perhaps we never will get it in the way that provides true peace. But perhaps one thing we can pray for in 2010 and beyond – in regard to our lives, our relationships, our work and perhaps especially our church - is the ability to trust and rely on God's sovereign greatness. As we seek to grow in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and people, let us pray for the strength to be weak in God's favor, just as Christ was, from his birth in what the hymn calls "mean estate" to his submission to the cross.

My second point ... is that we are not fully formed. Not today, not ever, really. As the stories of Mary and Joseph, Hannah and Elkanah, Samuel and Christ remind us, we are all works in progress.

In the great mystery that is the balance of Christ's humanity and divinity, we can forget about the humanity. The story of Jesus in the temple as a youth tells us that he had early instincts about his identity. But surely there were days when he needed to be told to do something more than once, when he talked back to his parents, even when he explored the line between mischief and fun. To say otherwise is to deny his humanity.

Why else would scripture include the affirmation that Jesus *needed* to grow in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and people? The same goes for Samuel, a remarkable boy by any measure, but one who was still on a journey, still in need of God's formative influence.

What scripture does indicate, about both Samuel and Christ, however, is that neither fought their identity. They may have needed to grow into their calling and surely some days were better than others. They suffered, just as we suffer. But they didn't fight God, perhaps because they knew God knew them better than they knew themselves. And in that they were liberated. As Desmond Tutu wrote, "What a tremendous relief it is to discover that we don't need to do anything to prove ourselves to God."

Third and finally, wherever we are on the journey of our growth in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and people, we still must make choices, we have free will. Life with God is not the yellow brick road, cleanly marked and always easy to follow, right up to the door of the wizard's castle.

You see, Samuel was not the presumptive heir to the priestly role he served. Before he was born, the Chief Priest was Eli, who had two sons who stood in line for the high privilege of their father's seat. But Eli's sons were scoundrels. They took offerings meant for God and they lay with the women who served at the tent of the meeting. As great as their sins were in the eyes of their father, they were even greater in the eyes of God. So God chose Samuel over them.

Christmas reminds us that we are given a gift, freely offered by a God of grace, but also a God of expectations. You and I will never be asked to muster the obedience of Christ, who paid the cost of grace. That is why Christmas is Christmas, because as much as we may rightfully want to hover by the manger a few more days, the manger still leads to the cross.

But God's grace does not erase the truth that we stand accountable for the choices we make – accountable to each other and how our choices affect others and accountable to God. In 2010, let us pray that we can have the wisdom to make good choices and the stature to admit when we don't, as well as the stature to forgive others when it is not easy.

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Now, I fully recognize that on this first Sunday after Christmas, you may be groggy from rich food and egg nog, or much in need of a little emotional space or even ready for the holidays to be over because, for you, they were mostly blue. Any or all of those things may well mean that you quickly forget my three points - to trust in God, to submit ourselves to God's formation and to own the choices we make in God's sight.

If so, try this: How many of you got clothing for Christmas?

Well, today we are given one last Christmas present, the beautiful words from our third scripture reading, from the letter to the Colossians. This passage gives us not just a pair of socks or underwear or a blouse or a scarf, but an entire wardrobe, a way of being, our clothing as children of God.

Many will soon start packing away the presents and decorations. But, whatever we do, whatever we do, we might all keep this one passage nearby throughout 2010, as we strive to continue to grow in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and all people:

Colossians 3:12-17:

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the creator, through Christ.

Let me again take the personal privilege of wishing each and every one of you a Merry Christmas and wishes for the best of all New Years.

Amen.