

GROWING PAINS

1st Sunday of Christmas – C

December 30, 2018

Luke 2:41-52

One of the signs that my 4-1/2-year-old granddaughter is growing is that she objects to me “hovering” over her when she is doing something, such as setting the table, picking up toys, or (pretending to be) doing dishes. I can tell you that this is a genetic condition that passes through at least two generations before her. (For that matter, hovering behavior traces itself to at least one generation before me.)

Even at her young age, Allison is showing some signs of moving toward independence. That is what we hope for our children and grandchildren (or other young people we love); yet there is a certain sadness we feel when we realize that they are beginning to need us less and less.

Luke’s conclusion that Mary “treasured these things in her heart” is an understatement, at the very least. Even though the culture of the Hebrew people was more tribal (the antithesis of the modern self-contained nuclear family); even though Jesus’ hometown was filled with people who were extended family, both literally and by the roles they played watching over *all* the children, and not just those who were biologically theirs, I can’t shake the idea that Mary’s heart was filled with more *pondering* and *treasuring* than the gospels tell us about. I believe Mary was startled, not only to realize that Jesus wasn’t with the rest of his village, but also that he taken this bold step of independence because he was beginning to realize something about his own destiny. “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house (or about my Father’s business)?” We don’t hear that Jesus is scolded. In fact, the account almost makes it sound like Jesus is chastising his parents. (I guess you had to be there.) Instead, Luke’s gospel tells us that his parents didn’t understand; but Mary sensed that there was more to the story. (The song, “Mary, Did You Know?” is a modern response to and meditation on texts like today’s gospel; the lyrics ponder what Mary knew, or suspected, about her Son.)

Today’s first reading is paired with this passage of Luke to recall for us another young boy who is about the Father’s business, as he ministers in the Temple. The circumstances were much different, in that Samuel was pledged into service by his Mother Hannah as a thank-offering to God for blessing her with a child.

Both the accounts of these young boys in the Temple say something about service to God as a high calling. While that might validate the call of many of us to ordained ministry, the whole of Scripture and our own church tradition point us beyond the holy-of-holies, beyond the gates of the Temple and the doors of the church.

So we read in today’s portion of the Letter to the Colossians a directive aimed at what Martin Luther would later call “the priesthood of all believers,” what we might call “the people in the pew.” The Apostle writes: “As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another...forgive each other; clothe yourselves with love.... [l]et the word of Christ dwell in you richly; [a]nd whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” [See Colossians 3:12-17]

The old year and the Christmas season are quickly coming to an end. But those things do not signal the completion of our time of peace and good will. They are needed year-round, and the work of the Gospel needs you to make that message real. In Romans, Paul urges us to offer

ourselves “as a living sacrifice to God...[for that is our] true spiritual worship.” [Romans 12:1] More than a token offering for a limited time, we are giving our whole selves over to the Good News, as Jesus gave himself completely for us.

We come together as church to reinforce the message that we are all called to ministry. Because God created us “good” and Jesus called us his children, we have the basic qualifications down.

Long, long ago, the boy Samuel served in the Temple. As he grew, God filled him with the wisdom and the discernment to be a prophet, to speak the word of God, and ultimately to anoint Israel’s first King.

Many centuries later, Jesus would be found by his parents, in the Temple, learning about Scripture, asking questions, and impressing the elders with his knowledge. As he continued to grow, he would remain about his Father’s business, probably in mostly low-key ways until that time when a voice from out of the wilderness pointed to him and said, “There he is! This is the One whose sandal I am not even worthy to untie. He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” [condensed and paraphrased]

Through the example of his life, teachings, healings, arrest, death, and raising, those who followed him would grow from follower to participant, from sinner to saint, from believer to doer.

In the faith movement that began with Jesus’ victory over death, newly baptized members of the church, the *body of Christ* emerged from the water of baptism and were clothed in white robes. We are connected to those first believers and to every other believer, because “all who have received God’s gift of life in Jesus Christ are covered with the character of Christ.” [Gail Ramshaw, in *Sundays and Seasons 2019*, p. 63.] Being *covered* in that baptismal sense means that every part of our being has been touched by Jesus; and that is how Jesus is revealed *through* us.

More than the watchful eye (the hovering eye that too often wants to make a “mini-me” out of those I watch over), the action of *covering* is the complete gift of Jesus, expressed uniquely through each one of us. Jesus’ gift to us is the potential to become our best selves. Amen.