

“Childhood”

Luke 2:41- 52

31 December, 2006, 2 Christmas C
the Rev. Todd R. Goddard, pastor
Zion West Walworth United Methodist Church

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Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. Assuming that he was in the group of travellers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. 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; 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.' He said to them, 'Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?' But they did not understand what he said to them. Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart.

And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.

Prayer.

Childhood waxes and wanes
in the early teens
when hormones give moxie
and a growth spurt gives
false confidence.
It is an awkward time.
Neurological connections
that operate
coordination
and good judgment
have yet to be sewn
by biology's thread.
Females lead the way
(who's surprised?)
and are the first to make
progress towards
a transformation
from a child
to a woman.
Males are slower to mature

(who's surprised?)
insisting on holding on
to childhood's last vestiges;
refusing to part with toys
from ages past.
Contemporary developmental
psychologists
report insightful treasures
unlocked by years of research and study.
They tell us that
it is during these vulnerable years,
between when a
child is transformed
from a completely and wholly dependent
individual
into an adult of legal
obligation and responsibility
that the ability to understand metaphor
begins to take root.
For many
this is a time of great awakening,
a multi-year "ah, ha" moment

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when one becomes aware
of deeper, additional meaning
to otherwise simple, ordinary stories.
Metaphor transforms a simple
two- dimensional world
into a multi- dimensional place
filled with texture and richness.
For example:
metaphor transforms the Ten
Commandments
from a list to be memorized
by rote recitation
into God's greater plan
for humanity to live together
with peace and justice towards one
another
and in harmony with a loving Creator.
Metaphor allows the
artist to mix primary colors
to unlock a whole new pallet
of infinite color and beauty.
Metaphor is the Spirit's means
to breath new life
into otherwise suffocating
organized religion.

It was at this very time
at this great junction
in the life of the boy, Jesus,
when he and his parents
made the pilgrimage
south
in a curculios route
to avoid Samaria
round and down the Jordan valley
and up the mountain
to Jerusalem's Temple mount
for the annual celebration of Passover.
This was a family
and extended family event.
Some of the food was still on the hoof
being herded
along with cart and wagon
carrying tent and supplies
for a multi- day adventure
for these relative country bumpkins

to the big city of Jerusalem.
Undoubtedly
cousins played,
aunts planned and cooked,
and uncles talked politics and taxes.
Camped with the swelling
crowds, at, perhaps, Bethany
- a mere stone's throw across the valley -
the family would return daily
to the Temple towering
over the ancient city.

Up the magnificent stair cases
all would ascend,
stopping at times to rest
or to dip in the cool pools of water
placed to give
pilgrims ample opportunity
to wash
to cleanse
to become ceremonially clean
before setting foot
inside the sacred Temple courtyard.
The crowd's pace
would have been slow
and hot.
Parents patience
and tempers would be tested
by squirming children complaining,
"are we there yet?"

At the top of the two grand
stair cases would be
an expansive outdoor plaza
filled with the hustle and bustle of
banking and commerce.
Currency would be exchanged into the
common Temple coinage
(undoubtedly at an inflated rate).
Live animals would be sold by
Temple authorities,
guaranteed unblemished and
raised in a sheltered flock,
to be used for slaughter and sacrifice
to a quiet and unseen God.

Men and boys would queue to the right
Women and girls to the left
to enter the indoor inner courtyard
where the Temple tax would be collected
and the animal would be sacrificed
by a member of the priestly family
standing before
the Holy of Holies
housing inside and out of view
the Arc of the Covenant.
Noise would be hushed
inside the Temple's inner courts;
Holy men would be giving guidance and
council
to those who seek them out
in quiet, reflective whispers
in a darkened room
lit only by the flicker
of candle and lamp.

It was here
that the young Jesus
had engaged in conversation
with teachers from the Temple's court,
asking questions
listening for answers
applying his newly discovered tools of
adolescence
to his budding faith.
It was here
in the midst of the
atonement substitution of animal
sacrifice
- of personal sins in exchange for the
life of the animal -
that Jesus began to construct
a faith built upon history,
tradition, scripture, and experience.

After three days
his mother finds him
undoubtedly frantic
and says to him,
'Child,
why have you treated us like this?
Look, your father and I

have been searching for you
in great anxiety.'
In his mother's eye
he was still a child
unconcerned and irresponsible.
But God was doing
greater things.
He said to them,
'Why were you searching for me?
Did you not know that I must be in my
Father's house?'
But they did not understand what he said
to them.

In three short days
dependence for the child Jesus
had been transferred from earthly
parents
to an adult Jesus
who recognized that his dependence
was now wholly, and exclusively
upon a heavenly Father.
Guidance and direction would come
less and less from Mary and Joseph,
and more and more from God above.

Many of us never make this connection,
and if we do,
it usually comes well into adulthood,
with wisdom and experience.
Some of us might recognize
these same feelings
on the occasion of a death of a parent.
Few, if any, of us
come to this understanding
during adolescence.

Being in "my Father's house"
is more than being under the same roof.
It is about
wherein one places their dependence,
faith,
hope,
and belief.

Consider your own faith history.

When did you enter your Father's house?
When did you become aware
of the reality
that God had already established?
Perhaps you are still in the process
of awakening
of connecting the metaphorical dots
that all of life
ultimately
is wholly and completely dependent
upon our loving God.

For me,
it didn't come with baptism,
confirmation,
or even ordination;
though I suspect this is where
the seeds were first sown.
My awakening really took hold
when I walked
the Valley of the Shadow of Death,
with the death of my father,
with the stark re-evaluation of where my
life was headed,
as a result of juggling too many
responsibilities at one time,
as the result in a change in my health.
It was a wake-up call
for me
to learn that I was no longer dependent
upon my parents;
I was no longer dependent
upon a church bound by appointment
obligations;
I was no longer dependent
upon the popular opinion of
one or the majority.

When I woke to the fact
that my life is lived
completely supported and upheld by the
grace of God,
my life and ministry turned a vital corner,
one that can't be taught
but must be experienced,
one that John Wesley described

in his life
as when his "heart was strangely
warmed"
while walking on Aldersgate street in
London.

Here we stand
perched on the precipice
of a new calendar year.
Let the new year ring!
Let the new year spur
a thankful memory of when we
entered our Father's house.
Let the new year spark
a new and heartfelt desire
to sit and stay awhile
and inquire further.
We sit this day
in a sanctuary built of stone and wood.
Yet, our Father's house
isn't found in these boards, carpeting,
furniture, or candles.
Our Father's house
can only be found
within our hearts.

The Word of the Lord.
Amen.