

Those Growing Years

First Sunday of Christmas
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton

Sunday, December 27, 2009
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

I Samuel 2:18-20, 26; Colossians 3:12-17; Luke 2:41-52

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

This sermon was preached in a worship service where Wesley Cullen Hahn, son of Greg and Beth Hahn, was baptized.

Greg and Beth—how did you know? How in the world did you know that today's appointed scripture lessons were tailor-made for a baptism? Well, of course, you didn't know, nor did I, when we scheduled Wesley's baptism a few weeks ago. Because Greg, a staff sergeant in the United States Army, and stationed at Ft. Jackson, South Carolina, would be home on leave for a much-too-short amount of time, today became the day. **That's** why we scheduled it. And today your family and friends and church family gather and celebrate Wesley becoming a beloved child of God.

But the lessons are tailor-made, nonetheless, and may they speak to you as Wesley's parents. May they speak to all of us here about children and good Christian parenting, and about living in a fellowship where God can nurture each of us to grow in faith.

Samuel, the young boy in our first lesson was loved by his parents, Hannah and Elkanah, just as much as Wesley is loved by both of you. Samuel's mother had great difficulty conceiving, so Samuel's birth brought her great joy. Hannah considered Samuel to be a gift from God. And she was right. Children are a gift—no matter the length of their life or the challenges they present to parents and family—children are a gift, as God our creator continues to bestow on our world new life.

You know, we are still in the midst of the Christmas season—even if no radio station is playing carols anymore—and it is this season of the Church where we give thanks to God for the gift of a particular child, the Christ child. Jesus' birth and his presence among us, walking the earth with us, and dying for us—his life was **all gift** from God. In fact, through Wesley's baptism today, we are assured Christ's life is now living **in** and shining **through** Wesley. That reality brings all of us great joy.

But these lessons offer us something more. These few verses of Samuel's story today tell us that our children, however much we see them as gifts from God to us, are not our own. Our children ultimately belong to God.

When at last Hannah did become pregnant with Samuel, she promised she would dedicate his life to serving God—she would send him to the temple at Shiloh to grow up there and learn the ways of ministering at that worship sanctuary.

Samuel in fact became a great prophet, and was led by the Lord God to anoint Saul as Israel's first king. Those things are all detailed in 1st Samuel. Now, Hannah couldn't know all that would happen, but she knew that Samuel first and foremost belonged to God. That understanding determined the way Hannah raised Samuel.

Then consider our Gospel today—this is the only story we have in the Biblical canon of Jesus as a young boy. Mary and Joseph, believing Jesus was simply traveling in their large caravan with the rest of their large extended family, did not initially worry when they didn't see him on the journey home from Jerusalem. When they discover they have lost him, and finally find him back at the Temple, asking wise questions of the religious teachers there, Jesus says to his mother that he must be in his Father's house. Strange words, surely, but words that make clear Jesus first and foremost belonged to God. Mary and Joseph did not fully understand what that could mean, but I am certain that event determined how they would continue raising Jesus into adulthood.

As for Wesley? Greg and Beth, he is **your** flesh and blood. But he belongs to God. And this day God adopts him, calls him into God's family and into a way of being that only God can create and sustain in this world. On this day, Wesley receives forgiveness and the promise of everlasting life that only God can give. Your job as Wesley's parents is to acknowledge that he belongs to God, and let that determine how you raise him. You are being asked so to nurture him that he will always remember he belongs to God, and thrive because of it, and then you are to make an open space for the Holy Spirit to enable Wesley to become what God intends.

So, if our children belong not to us, but to God, and if God is always at work bringing about his intended and glorious future for his creation, then it goes without saying that God has a purpose for each of us, and our children. That also means God has a plan that may be **different** from our plans. Just as Hannah could not know all that Samuel would face when he was an adult—the challenge of being God's mouthpiece for the people of Israel, the tensions he would face as the Israelites clamored for a king to be crowned—Hannah also could not orchestrate each piece of Samuel's life. She could bring to Shiloh a new robe every year for Samuel to wear; she could love him and encourage him and pray for him. But she couldn't live his life for him, nor force him to go in one direction or another.

Mary, too, finds herself in that difficult parenting role. At this point in our Gospel story, she may have wanted Jesus back in Nazareth right then and there to work in the carpenter shop, with a few more chores thrown in for good measure, considering the gray hairs Jesus had just given her! God apparently had other plans for His Son that day—and Jesus followed **those** plans. I have to chuckle at the mother/son dialogue which sounds like a fairly typical parent/pre-adolescent dialogue: Mary saying, "Where have you been? We've been looking all over for you. You had me worried! This is no time to be lollygagging in the Temple." And Jesus responding (but perhaps first rolling his eyes), "Don't you know I need to be in my Father's house?" Things haven't changed in 2000 years.

Greg and Beth—you may dream plenty of dreams for Wesley, and there are indeed things to plan. Like Hannah bringing a new robe for Samuel every year, you two are continually at the tasks of caring for Wesley—clothing, feeding, nurturing. But you may find that God’s plans for Wesley are different from your own. As Wesley grows, and becomes what God intends, he just might surprise you. Perhaps Wesley is tailor-made (or Spirit-made) for teaching children in an inner city school—or halfway across the world. Perhaps he will want to bring health to the sick or create beautiful works of art or be a pastor or youth group leader, or he will coach young athletes. Perhaps he will become a police officer. Or perhaps Wesley will feel called to serve his country, like his own father. To paraphrase something I recently read, it may well be easier to surrender Wesley to God at the baptismal font than it will be to surrender him to God on a day-to-day basis. But such is the surprising nature of God’s plans for us.

Since we cannot see into Wesley’s future, we must be satisfied with what God does for him today, and trust that those promises given in the waters of baptism will shape a faithful life. But that doesn’t mean we simply step back and watch. On the contrary—Wesley, this brand-new child of God, is a member of our church family now, and the best way for him to grow in faith and develop an ever-deeper relationship with God is to be part of a lively, caring, and worshipful congregation. Just as Samuel lived at the sanctuary at Shiloh, and just as Jesus hungered to learn from the teachers at Jerusalem’s temple, Wesley will be surrounded here by all these people of God. Greg, I want you to be assured that, even in your absence, as you serve our nation, this congregation will help Beth fulfill those baptismal promises until the time you can be home again. You might say Trinity is tailor-made for that kind of faith-nurturing—for we understand from our own baptisms, that God has called us into a new way of being. All of us are to clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. We are to bear with one another, and forgive one another as the Lord has forgiven us. We are to love one another, live at peace, and be thankful every day for all the gifts God has given us. It is in this kind of fellowship where each of us, including Wesley, will grow and thrive. Merry Christmas to you all, and thanks be to God. **AMEN.**