

## ***Beginnings and Transformations***

First Sunday of Christmas  
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December 27, 2009  
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26; Psalm 148;  
Colossians 3:12-17; Luke 2:41-52

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

The year is rapidly drawing to a close. Friday will be New Year's Day. And so, for the next few days we'll have to put up with television and newspapers and radio offering us all sorts of news clips and recollections of the good, the bad, and the ugly of this year.

But we too, at some point, will review how we have done and, as a result, we'll probably start thinking about if not actually formulating, our New Year's resolutions. We look to the occasion, don't we, as a real opportunity for a new beginning – out with the old and in with the new.

The gospel we heard read this morning also records a new beginning for Jesus and His family. They had come to Jerusalem, an annual pilgrimage for them, to celebrate the Passover. All was well until the gospel indulges in a "Home Alone" type of account (you know Hollywood has no original ideas, but the gospel provides the best of plots), all was well until in a "Home Alone" type of account, Joseph and Mary discover that Jesus has been left behind; not quite what they were expecting and something entirely new was unfolding.

The same sort of unfolding and surprising beginning occurred in the life of Mahatma Gandhi. He got his start (after he had matured) by graduating from law school in London, England. He became one of the world's most respected spiritual and political leaders after he helped India break free from British rule. After his graduation, he returned to India in 1891 and began his law career. And then, in 1893, he took a one year contract to do legal work in South Africa. In his film, *Gandhi*, Richard Attenborough showed Gandhi as an impeccably dressed barrister on assignment in South Africa. You know the type: spiffy suit, starched shirt and collar, perfectly tied tie.

But things were going to change. Gandhi was going to lose his celluloid collar and perfectly tied tie, because of a critical and formative experience in his life . . . and there were many more to come. Gandhi was to work with Indian middle class businessmen, who had also displaced their celluloid collars and perfectly tied ties, just as Kennedy freed gentlemen from wearing hats. Do you remember?

I suppose our New Year's resolutions can be formative for us as well. Formative, that is, if we can stick with them. For so many of us, our resolutions only last for a short while and then we either forget them or break them. It's particularly obvious

if you ever go to a gym. Every January you can hardly move as the place is packed with countless people frantically working out. But, come February, the crowds are gone and the regulars are there working hard at attaining their fitness goals. Some of us, a few of us, make the commitment and really do the hard work to keep our resolutions and so change our lives.

The change for Mary and Joseph came quite suddenly after their return to Jerusalem. They eventually found Jesus at the temple. He wasn't just hanging out, far from it. He was engaged in intense discussion with the leading rabbi's and scholars who taught and debated in the temple precincts. And here the gospel writer demonstrates his depth of understanding and the breadth of his theology. For the account is constructed in such a way not only to help us understand Jesus' development, but also to set us up and give us a preview of events to come.

The religious leaders with whom Jesus was in deep discussion were amazed at the questions, understanding, and answers of this young whippersnapper. There would be more questions, understanding, and answers provided by Him at a future date, which the scholars and rabbis would not really appreciate.

Perhaps it is that there was a new generation of religious leaders that arose in the intervening twenty years, and perhaps because of that, they had time to figure out some tricky questions with which to entrap Jesus, to nail him. Questions about taxes and divorce, and the ranking of the commandments, and healing on the Sabbath, and dealing with adulterers. My! Sounds remarkably contemporary, don't you think?

It was a frustrated and frazzled Mary and Joseph who, after three days searching, found Jesus in the temple with those scholarly men of faith. The gospel account of that meeting, I think, is completely and heavily sanitized. 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." Teenagers haven't changed. He looked at them and asked, "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. Amazing!

Unbelievable. Had it been me doing what Jesus did, and answering my parents the way He did, I would have been invited by my father to the bathroom where he would have taken down his razor strop from the bathroom door and applied it with vigor to my backside and legs.

But the clincher of the gospel, in my view, the real heart of the gospel, is to be found in the closing words. "Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human understanding." In other words, between the time of his birth and his later baptism and further on into his ministry, Jesus was transformed; it was a lifelong task. He grew up, physically, intellectually, and spiritually, which brings us to the more profound changes in our lives with which we are challenged by this

gospel passage. It might well be a New Year's resolution that we find ourselves striving to keep – that of growing in our understanding and living out of Jesus' teaching. You see, the problem for many Christians is that the pages of the calendar keep getting turned, year after year, but when it comes to their faith, their knowledge, and their understanding, there doesn't seem to be too much (if any) progress and growth taking place.

The problem for many of us is that where we start out with our faith is where we seem content to stay. We are inclined to think, are we not, that where we are now in our faith is an okay place to be, an acceptable place to stay. You see, is nothing like this whatsoever, a living faith is a faith that continues to learn and change and be transformed. Such growth in faith requires change in understanding and in action, no matter how uncomfortable (and we can almost be promised that uncomfortable it will be) that may be.

There are many who pride themselves as living out their discipleship, but they live it out from a frozen point of view, as if they know all there is to know and live as if they are fully mature, when they have so much further to grow but appear to be entirely unaware of the need. And that, beloved, most assuredly is a warning for us all – pastors and students and children and youths and parents alike.

In South Africa, Gandhi began a transformation that was to continue throughout the rest of his life. As did Jesus, Gandhi continued to grow in understanding and faith. And when he returned to India after his one-year contract in South Africa, he encountered members of the anti-British National Congress. He became involved with them and adopted their traditional form of dress – a turban, white jacket and loose trousers. However, as he drew closer to the masses, and especially to the Untouchables, Gandhi chose to wear their chief, and often only, article of clothing, the dhoti, a large white loin cloth.

The changing clothing styles from the elaborate outfit of a London lawyer to that of a field hand or latrine cleaner, shows the interior growth of Gandhi's faith and mind and spirit. You see, Gandhi really was a latrine cleaner. At his compound he insisted on cleaning the latrines, just as the Untouchables would be required to do, and he insisted that others in the commune also do this work, the work of an Untouchable! Gandhi, like every human being, even like Jesus according to Luke, did not spring forth fully mature but grew into his maturity slowly through years of challenging experiences, thought, prayer and study.

So may it be for us.

Amen.

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