First Presbyterian Church December 30, 2018
Rev. Sarah Weisiger 1 Samuel 2:18-20.26; Colossians 3:12-17; Luke 2:41-52

Not What We Expected

Sometime in the late 1730s, a father was striving to raise his son to be a godly man. He taught him to be generous and kind, to share what he had with his playmates. He even constructed elaborate devices to teach him about the mysteries of God.

One time, he took a bunch of cabbage seeds and secretly planted them in a garden bed near his son's window so that the cabbages would grow in the pattern of his son's name. He waited, for weeks he waited, until his son noticed his name writ large in cruciferous vegetation. When the amazed young boy showed it to his Father, they were later able to talk about how, much like his father ordered the cabbage, God in heaven orders the earth.

There were moments, however, when his fatherly teachings were put to the test. One morning the father was strolling in his garden when he realized, to his horror that a beloved fruit tree had been viciously barked, and would likely die. Suspecting what had happened, the father warmly returned to his home and declared that he did not care a bit about the tree, but simply was curious what had happened.

Not long after, his son, who had recently been given the gift of a new hatchet, looked at his father, and, "with the sweet face of youth brightened with the inexpressible charm of all-triumphant truth, he bravely cried out, 'I cannot tell a like Pa, you know I cannot tell a lie, I did cut it with my hatchet.'"[1] To which young George Washington's father cried out in joy with the confirmation of his son's good character and embraced him with gladness, for the heroism of honesty was worth far more to him than "a thousand trees, though blossomed with silver and their fruits of purest gold."[2]

I suspect that I am in good company when I assume that many of you may have heard this powerful legend of our first president before. In fact, for much of our country's history, this very myth was enshrined in the education of every little girl and boy who set foot in a primary school. It is part of the canon of the American story, a story that reveals who we are and what we stand for by teaching us something about the person who led our country to independence.

It is a powerful story.

If only it were true.

In the aftermath of Washington's death, our brand new republic hungered for accounts of Washington's life, anything that might help them better understand this man whom they so revered. Many biographies were commissioned, but none were as far reaching or as indelible in their impact on the American people as the bestselling "*The Life of George Washington*," written by Parson Weems and first published in 1800, a year after the great president's death.

Weems was a master storyteller, and he understood his audience. He also had a goal—to reveal the "true" Washington to a hungry public, one whose entire life was marked by virtue and character. One that provided a model for the youth of a young nation that was still uncovering who it was and what it stood for.

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[1] Weems, M.L. *The Life of George Washington: with curious Anecdotes, Equally Honorable to Himself and Exemplary to His Young Countrymen.* 1808 edition, pg 14.
[2] Ibid.

And so perhaps it was inevitable that he would focus on Washington's childhood, on how pure and virtuous the young George Washington was! Nothing like other great men, whose lives were publicly virtuous but often privately rather disappointing. According to Weems, Washington was set apart for greatness from the very beginning, marked by a virtue so strong and indelible that it carried forward into the larger than life man that he became. A virtue that revealed itself not just publicly, but privately, when nobody was paying attention.

It didn't matter to Weems whether these myths had actually transpired as related—what mattered was the truth that he believed that they revealed. That the man about whom they were told was a different breed, the sort of man who was born for such a time as this, a moment of transition in the life of our country.

Of course, Weems stands in a long tradition of biographers and storytellers who have sought to reveal the truth of important men and women long after they are available to fill in the blanks. World literature is brimming with stories of great men whose childhood marked them as set apart—the Buddha in India, Osiris in Egypt, Alexander the Great in Rome, Joan of Arc in France. So it should not be surprising to us that, in the aftermath of Christ's death and resurrection, the people who had risked life and limb to follow him and spread the good news were eager for more—who was this man that they knew as Jesus? What was he really like?

Early on, stories began to circulate about Jesus' birth and early childhood, stories patterned on the lives of other Biblical greats—Moses and Elijah, and in this case, upon Samuel, the boy judge who ushered in the golden age of the Kingdom of Israel. Many of theses stories we hear on Christmas Eve—stories of a miraculous birth, of a star in the east, of shepherds and magi and angry kings.

But there are others. Stories that would sound strange to our modern ears. A good deal of them are collected and immortalized in the apocryphal Infancy Gospel of Thomas. They reveal a young boy prone to miracle working on the Sabbath from a young age, with the power to raise from the dead, punish the wicked, and outsmart the local teachers. Only one of these stories lives on in our canonical Gospels, and that is our lesson for today.

And I don't know about you, but that leads me inevitably to the question: why did Luke choose to include **this** story? There have been many theories over the years, some more informed than others. Over the past century, however, many pastors have told this tale of the young Jesus with an eye towards humanizing the messiah. In this interpretation, Luke 2 reveals that, once upon a time, Jesus was a child, just like us—something along the theme of "kids grow up so fast these days, don't they? You blink and suddenly they are twelve!" or "He's just like us! He got distracted and scared the pants off his parents! He surely was FULLY HUMAN!"

But if I am honest, this sort of reading is more likely to bring to my mind the tawdry tabloid sections of US Weekly and People, weeklies that are often filled with unflattering and therefore "humanized" photographs of major celebrities. Sermons in this category often succumb to at least one example in which one was either lost by her own parents, or absent-minded left his own child at the gas station. You know the story.

The problem with these readings is that often these stories are told as though Jesus is the equivalent of a toddler with little or no agency. They risk reducing Jesus to a bundle of stereotypes, neutralizing his difference in favor of building connections to the foibles of our own journeys of parenting and being parented ourselves. With the unfortunate consequence that we lose sight of the purpose of telling this story in the first place.

So what is the purpose, then? First of all, the text is clear that Jesus is twelve years old. In ancient Israel, a twelve-year-old boy stood at the threshold of adulthood. A twelve-year-old boy was not yet a man, but not really a child either, and the truth is that he had far more in common with young adults nearing their 20s these days. He was likely preparing to be bar-mitzvah'd, which in his day meant that he would, at thirteen, be considered both responsible enough to perform the tasks of any adult, as well as accountable for his failures.

We also know from this story that Jesus comes from a faithful family. Not everyone made the annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem—it was taken less as a requirement than a strong recommendation—and even then, the law required only that the men be present. And yet Luke tells us that Jesus' whole family routinely made the trip together. Not just Joseph, but Mary and Jesus put down their livelihoods for a journey of many days to celebrate the festival as commanded in the Torah. Which is another way of telling us that Joseph and Mary were good parents. They were raising a son who was connected to the faith of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. Like Samuel in our Hebrew Scripture lesson today, like Weems' George Washington, Jesus came from good, pious people.

And it is here that we get to the real point of this episode in young Jesus' life. Jesus comes from a faithful, God-fearing family, and yet, when confronted with the majesty of the Temple, the very threshold of God's dwelling, Jesus decides that his "first" home is with God. And so he stays there. Against his parents' wishes, he remains in the temple to learn, to listen, to ask questions. The prominent feminist theologian Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza observes that in this moment, Jesus challenges the status quo as he asserts that biological family will always be of secondary importance in relation to the call of God and the spiritual family that God calls into existence, a theme that he will continue to explore in his adult ministry.

This is why Luke includes this story: he wants us to "see" the man who is emerging in Christ. To reveal what was always there, even in the beginning, even before Mary and Joseph could understand what his words might mean.

Truly, we are invited to sympathetic identification with Mary and Joseph and with their deep anxiety at the prospect of losing their child. But we are also invited, alongside Mary, to treasure these words and what they reveal about the Messiah in our hearts. To wonder with the crowds that throng at how much Christ knew and the answers he gave. To look back on these early days with recognition as Jesus comes into fuller focus through his teaching, and later in his betrayal, death, and resurrection.

Much later, perhaps these stories will help us to make sense of a teacher who says that his mother and father are those who do the will of God. Who identifies as family not just his immediate relations, but those beyond the borderlines of blood and religion, extending his own sense of family to include outsiders, sinners, tax collectors and unclean women at the margins. Perhaps we will find the courage to begin considering for ourselves: who might God be challenging us to invite into our family? Who is missing from our Father's House that Jesus would bid come?

I don't have all the answers, but stories like this one can't help but bring to mind connections to our current moment: I cannot help but consider the plight of those whose children are currently lost to them at our southern border, and who despair of ever finding them. It brings to mind many vulnerable teenagers who have left their families to brave dangerous migrant journeys across the forbidding landscapes of Sub Saharan Africa and the choppy waters of the Mediterranean in search of a better life. I cannot put from my mind the images of Syrian and

Yemeni children who cry out to God, asking: are we welcome in the Father's house? Is there room for us, too?

Because that's the thing about stories that are True. They help move us from wondering to relationship, to knowing Christ more fully so that we may begin the lifelong work of, in the words of the letter to the Colossians, "clothing yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience," the very values that Scripture tells us Christ embodied from his early childhood. These values set him apart as extraordinary. They also are likely the very things that made him a threat to the status quo. May they dwell in you richly, so that whatever you do, in word and deed, you do it in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.