

Faith Mennonite Church
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Whose child is this?

1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26; Luke 2:41-52

It's just two days after our celebration of Christmas. We still have the outline of a stable here in our midst, but Gospel-writer Luke moves us quickly from the stable in Bethlehem to the temple in Jerusalem. First, in a passage, we did not read this morning, Mary and Joseph take Jesus to be presented to the Lord. That is when the elders Simeon and Anna bless the baby and parents and prophesy to Mary that her child will live a not-so-ordinary life and that "a sword will pierce your own soul too" (2:35). Then, at age 12, Jesus goes with his family on their annual trip to the temple, a trip that turns out to be the beginning of Mary's heart and soul ache, when the temple takes a hold on her boy that she's not quite ready for.

But our scriptures this morning describe two boys, not just one. First we heard of young Samuel. Samuel was born in early Israel, before the time of kings, when God led the people through a priest. The priest in those days was Eli and the practice of the day was for one of the priest's sons to succeed him. But Eli's sons didn't turn out so well. They were real scoundrels, so God chose Eli's successor from outside of the family line.

Many of us will remember Hannah and Elkanah. In a story-line that is familiar in the early books of the Bible, Hannah is one of two wives. The other, Peninnah, has had several children, but Hannah has not been able to get pregnant and desperately desires a child. During a trip to the holy place at Shiloh, she prayed fervently for a child—so much so that the priest Eli thought she was drunk and tried to kick her out. When she explained her deep desire to Eli, he sent her away with a blessing of assurance that her desire would be granted, and in due time it was. Part of Hannah's prayer in requesting a son was the commitment to dedicate him fully to God's service. And when Samuel was still just a boy, she took him to live at Shiloh with the priest Eli. Today's brief account, which we read, suggests that Hannah saw her son just once a year, when she and Elkanah would visit Shiloh and take Samuel a new robe that Hannah would sew for him.

And so we have two boys, Samuel and Jesus, who lived centuries apart, but whose stories intersect in interesting ways and continue to speak to us today. Last Sunday Ry mentioned that Mary's song, the Magnificat, which she sang at her reunion with Elizabeth, was an echo of Hannah's song when she learned she was pregnant. Both boys had mothers who were very attuned to the Spirit of God. The stories of each boy unfolds a bit differently: Hannah willingly leaves Samuel at the holy place at Shiloh; Mary reprimands Jesus for staying in the temple when it was time to return home. But in each story there is a beautiful interplay of family home and holy place. Each boy is firmly grounded in the love of their families yet each feels equally at home at Shiloh and in Jerusalem.

There are many things that bring satisfaction to a pastor: meeting for coffee and hearing the story of someone who has just begun attending worship...visiting a family who has recently welcomed a child into the world and then blessing those parents and the baby here in the congregation

...being invited into the struggles of persons who deeply desire to follow Jesus yet are not sure what that means in a given situation or relationship...sitting with a family who has just said the final goodbye to a loved one. But I think the greatest joy comes on Sunday mornings when the lights have been turned out in the sanctuary—worship and the education hour concluded—and the children remain, often up here on the podium, some of them taking on the roles of worship leaders. I have to admit that I'm not as inclined toward the running, yet that too has a way of communicating that our children feel comfortable in this space; it too is their home.

Today's message of Christmas is two-fold. First to the youth and children: This is *your* church just as much as it's the church of your parents and other adults. There may be times when it doesn't feel exciting: what we do during our one hour of worship is quite unlike anything you do during the rest of the week. And likely many of our friend don't share this experience. (But hey, how cool is that, that you get to do something unique!) Just as your family car takes you places for many years before you are able to drive, we as the church are taking you on a journey to learn to know God and to follow Jesus. There are probably some things we can do better, that we can learn from the stories of Samuel and Jesus. We don't know exactly what Samuel did at Shiloh to help the priest Eli and I'm not asking you to be my or Ry's personal assistants. But if there are things you would like to be doing in worship or if you have ideas of things you think our church should do, please let us know. We might not be able to do *everything* you'd like, but your Sunday school classes and youth group are good places to shape new ideas. And as you get into middle school and high school and find yourselves with lots of questions about faith and about God, stay here, like Jesus did in Jerusalem and ask your questions. You might be surprised that many of us ask the same questions and also have doubts. We're not here because we have everything figured out, but because faith in a loving God has led us this far and because we need one another to keep following and serving. We need you!

Now to parents and mentors: Don't worry—I'm not going to ask you to leave your children here when you go home today! And I won't reprimand you for sometimes being worriers like Mary. I simply want to remind you that your homes are holy places and the spiritual foundation for your children is something that you create at home. The prayers you pray as a family, the stories and conversations you share, the help you offer to neighbors and friends, these become the soil into which our Sunday morning seeds are planted. Jesus stayed behind in the temple, not because he was curious about a faith that Mary and Joseph never talked about, but because they had encouraged his spiritual life and shaped his desire to know God. Jesus is surprised that his parents didn't know exactly where to look for him: "This is what you've been teaching me!"

Both of our scripture readings ended with similar lines. Of Samuel it was written that he "continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the Lord and with the people" (1 Samuel 2:26). And of Jesus Luke wrote that he "increased in wisdom and in years [stature] and in divine and human favor"(2:52). Both boys were children of human parents who came to develop a deep relationship with their parent God. This is God's invitation to each of us regardless of whether we are currently part of a family unit: to grow in wisdom and to find favor with God and people. We celebrate Christmas as God coming to the world in Jesus so we would know God's deep love for us. Let us continue to grow into that love and to know whose children we are. And if there is anyone among us today who would like to talk about how to begin or deepen your relationship with God, I or Ry or one of the deacons would be happy to journey with you.