

Sermon: The Boy Grew

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles PC, Dec. 26, 2021)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

The older I become, the more I find myself looking through photos of my children when they were growing up. I think distance might have something to do with it, as they were living apart from Daisy and I for the better part of the last year. Pictures of them are stored mostly in digital format, scattered in various hard drives, or somewhere up in the iCloud. I really should take the time to organize them better. From baby pictures to toddlers, of them swimming, playing hockey, tennis or violins. Shots of birthday parties, of outings with us, of them becoming teenagers, getting taller, stronger, and hopefully more mature.

I suspect my inclination to look through photos of my children is shared by many of you, of course not my children but your own. Photos, physical or digital, are a reminder to us as parents that our children, boys and girls, do grow. Photos help us to recall and re-treasure that process, those moments, all over again.

But what if we were to recall their spiritual journey, of growing up in faith? What pictures or stories would help us in that? What significant snapshot of their lives would you want to recall and retell?

This week's lectionary readings, of the 1st Sunday after Christmas give us snapshots of two boys, Samuel and Jesus, growing in both stature and faith. The more I think of Samuel, the more I am fascinated by the image of "a boy wearing a linen ephod" (1 Samuel 2:18).

You see, ephod is a very specific set of garment with adornments worn by priests as they minister before the Lord. Described in detail in Exodus 28 and 39, ephod is a garment made up of gold yarn with a blue, purple and crimson colour. It is finely and skillfully crafted with twisted linen. It must have two shoulder pieces, attached at the two edges. The linen ephod also includes a breastplate, with twelve precious stones set in it, each with a name of the twelve sons of Israel, representing unity of the nation before the Lord.

I am holding in my hand what my two boys made in a summer camp in Vancouver, of colourful stones set in plaster cast. I think this is supposed

to function as a coaster, a coffee mat (they are not too sure). But this reminds me of the breastplate attached to an ephod, except the breastplate would have only twelve stones, three in each row, and four rows down, and it would've been far larger.

Other than the attached breastplate, an ephod also contains two stones, Urim and Thummim, one black, one white, used for casting lots. The description and purpose of Urim and Thummim in the Bible is far less clear, but it would seem to symbolize the divination function of a priest, commonly phrased in the Scripture as 'inquiring of the Lord'.

At the time, Samuel was only a small boy in stature, an apprentice priest learning the trade. Ever since he was weaned from his mother Hannah, he was dedicated to God, left in the sanctuary in Shiloh, to be raised by Eli the priest. We are not sure at what age did Samuel begin to wear the linen ephod, but I imagine whatever the age, it would've been quite a few sizes too large for the boy.

Members of the congregation have all seen me wearing the minister's robe with stole of various colours for different seasons. When I first became a clergy, I had to visit different stores just to find a robe that fits me (as you can see that I'm somewhat not so blessed in height). While I was able to find a not too lengthy robe, stoles of right size are much harder to find.

So whenever I try to picture the boy Samuel, wearing a regular size linen ephod with all the adornments attached, I couldn't help but chuckle. It must've been way too large for him, with sleeves overshooting his fingers, and robe's edge dragging on the ground.

This is where the story in the Scripture, of what Hannah did for Samuel, is so endearing—she made him a little robe and take it to him each year, when she and her husband went up to the temple to offer the yearly sacrifice. Each year, the new robe would get a little bigger, allowing Samuel to be clothed and properly fitted, as he grew and minister before God.

It is a visible symbol of Hannah's love for her first born. Love made visible, love made concrete, and love stitched right into the linen ephod. So Samuel grew up, not only in the presence of the Lord, he grew also in the presence of his mother's love.

Of course, this week's Scripture passage is only a snap shot of that holy man who would grow up to serve God faithfully, as a judge, a priest and a prophet. He would help Israel transition from feudal confederacy to monarchy. He would eventually anoint not only one but two kings, both

Saul and David. I am grateful that the Scripture preserve the story of the boy Samuel. I am grateful knowing that for every faithful servant of the Lord, there is always a journey by which that person came to be.

In this week's other lectionary readings, there is another boy who grew up finding favours in both God and people. We see Jesus as a twelve year old, who had accompanied his parents to Jerusalem for the festival of Passover. Somehow after the festivities, when Mary and Joseph were leaving for home, Jesus was kind of...left behind.

I don't think we should pass judgement on the parenting skill of Mary and Joseph. Pilgrimage in the ancient time is often accompanied by a fairly sizeable group of other travellers, of friends, neighbours, and relatives often for safety reason. So it is not inconceivable that the parents of Jesus would think that he was safe, in the group, probably playing with other children.

Of course, we as readers know that Jesus was not amongst other children, but was in fact sitting in the midst of teachers of the Law, in the temple of the Lord. When Mary and Joseph finally realized their own son was missing, and retraced their steps back to Jerusalem, back to the Temple, they were astonished to see Jesus in deep discussion with learned adults, listening to them and asking them questions. We don't really know what was discussed in that encounter, or how long the discussion lasted, but the Scripture informs us, "all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers" (Luke 2:47)

When Mary rebuked Jesus for pulling a stunt like this, for making her anxious and worry about his safety. Jesus calmly replied, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" (Luke 2:49) Of course, Jesus was not talking about his earthly father's house, but his heavenly Father's. For Jesus, home is not in Nazareth nor in Galilee, but in the Temple of the Lord, in the house of God.

Mary didn't quite understand what Jesus said, but she kept it, ponder over what she heard and what she saw and treasured them in her heart. Having made his point, Jesus returned with Mary and Joseph, to their home and was obedient to them.

It is worth noting that in the Jewish custom as recorded in the Mishnah, 13 is the age when a boy is recognized as an adult, and would be held accountable for his words and actions. And by the way, 12 is the age that a girl becomes an adult. However age 30 is the threshold by which one could officially hold a religious office, such as a priest, a prophet or a teacher. So we really shouldn't be surprised that when we read about

Jesus again in the Gospel accounts, he had reached that age that he could be recognized as a Rabbi.

Two boys who grew up to be men of God, faithful servants of the Lord. The challenge for us as a community of faith of St. Giles, is to see all children, boys and girls, in this community as our own. Correspondingly, to see ourselves as stewards of those most precious gifts that God has entrusted to all of us.

It is not an easy task, as most parents would tell you. Children do grow and have minds of their own. We hope they will grow to find favours in both people and God. We hope they will, at some point, call on our God as their own. We pray they will someday, have that personal relationship with Christ.

If they are lost in any way, our hearts ache and pray that they find their own ways back home, back to God. They may not all grow to become holy people, they may not grow to become faithful servants of the Lord, but there is no doubt in my mind that, we love them all the same.

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