

**Sermon: Lost and Found**

New North Church, Hingham

Rev. Steven Aucella

30 December 2018

Based on **1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26, Luke 2:41-52**

For today, the lectionary pairs two complementary passages. As usual, it hides some context, especially in the Samuel passage, but one thing common to both readings is the level of intricacy involved. Neither writer is simply telling a story. Each takes a simple scene and adds layers of meaning on top of it. It's not entirely clear to me that these layers would be obvious at first glance to their original intended audiences, so it's okay if we don't dig through them all the first time around.

The context that we miss in the Samuel passage is that on either side of today's reading, we see that the sons of Eli, the chief priest of Shiloh, were *scoundrels*, literally, 'worthless sons.' They were corrupt; they profited from their work in the Temple; and, worse, they had no regard for the Lord. Sandwiched in between, we have this vignette about young Samuel.

Eli had been hoping that his sons would inherit the family business, but God made it abundantly clear that that was not going to happen. Enter Samuel. He was a gift from God to his mother Hannah, and she returned him to God, also as a gift, in her gratitude. There's a whole back story here with Hannah and her husband's *other* wife, Penninah, who was young and fertile. Hannah was Elkanah's favorite but, as she was infertile, he married Penninah, which means #2, because he needed heirs.

So, Hannah prayed to God for a male child, and, she prayed, that if that happened, she would present him to God as a *nazirite*, which is a person devoted to the Lord for a period of time. Samson was a nazirite. What do you think happened? Samuel was born and Hannah and Elkanah handed him over to Eli at the temple in Shiloh.

Hannah's experience serves as an example of how our relationship with God puts everything else in a different light. Hannah prayed her prayer and God answered it. Her gratitude was overwhelming. She had no other expectations. Yet, God blessed her and Elkanah with more children after Samuel.

In today's passage, we see how they checked in every year to see how Samuel was doing, and every year, Hannah would bring him a new robe, made with love, as he was a growing boy. And as he grew physically, so also did he grow in favor with both God and the people. Exit Eli's sons.

Contrast Hannah and Elkanah watching Samuel become the prophet who saves Israel to Mary and Joseph watching Jesus become Jesus.

At the beginning and at the end of today's Gospel passage, Luke echoes the writer of Samuel: every year, Jesus' parents journey to Jerusalem for the Passover, just as Samuel's parents went to Shiloh every year. And, like Samuel, Jesus 'increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.'

One thing the Gospel reading dredges up are the anxieties of parenting. Mary and Joseph, unnamed in the story, are traveling in a group for safety and for community. It's easy to think that when the festival ended, they thought Jesus was off with some pals while everyone packed up to return home. It's nothing new; they've done this before.

Luke gives us a look at life with a very human Jesus on the cusp of manhood. His adult ministry begins in the very next chapter. But right now, we have a situation:

Jesus is missing.

Imagine that Mary and Joseph came into church today and joined you in your pew. And Jack said to Joseph, "How was your Christmas?" And then Mary launched into, "That kid! First, we lose him at the mall! Then he's lost for three days! Then we find him, and he gives us back talk! Grounded! He's grounded until he's 30, that kid." And Joseph says, "Pretty good, Jack. Thanks for asking."

We've all been there. Lose track of a child for even a few minutes and it's panic time. We lock down malls for this now.

That's the beauty of Luke's writing. He taps into a situation and then elevates it to make the point about where we can find Jesus. Notice what else is going on here. Jesus is twelve. Soon, by first-century standards, he will be a man, and that might be the root of his parent's anxiety – he's beginning to pull away from them and toward his call to ministry. They're getting a first glimpse into their son's real purpose and they have to let him go. In a way, this is similar to what parents go through when we baptize our children into the church: they are no longer ours exclusively.

By the way, when Mary says, ‘Your *father* and I have been searching for you,’ these are Jesus’ first words in Luke’s Gospel: ‘Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my *Father’s* house?’ No, I don’t think she did. But the Temple is very important to Jesus. It turns out to be the place where people see something in him that his parents do not.

Where do *we* find Jesus? In truth, doesn’t he find us, as a good shepherd does, when we’re lost or in despair, or at the end of the rope we’ve played out for ourselves? Or maybe when we just need someone to talk to.

Sitting among the teachers, he *listened* and asked questions; he *understood* and gave new answers. He expanded everyone’s horizons, including his own. He made a new family that had nothing to do with genealogy.

What happens when we take up a new field of study with new teachers? What if your neighbor, a stockbroker, gave up his job and sold everything to buy a pottery wheel and take classes with a bunch of strangers? What would we make of that?

Years ago, when I let it be known that I had applied to Andover Newton, one of our friends looked at me and said, ‘What are you going to when you get bored?’ There’s a lot of skepticism in the world about those who seek after and choose to serve God.

We belong to God first. God chose Hannah and Elkanah and they made a choice for Samuel to serve the Lord. As Samuel grew, he chose to keep at it. He didn’t know it at the time, but Israel needed him.

Mary and Joseph also chose to serve God: they cared for Jesus and they were part of a larger community that honored religious tradition. Jesus honors these relationships too, but his is a different path. The same is true for us when we baptize our children: it’s done with no strings attached. What God will do with us is an unpredictable mystery until God reveals it to us. Both readings today show us that God is already and *always* is preparing for the future, ours and our children’s.

The same holds true for our church. Here at the end of the year, it’s natural to look back and review. But looking forward, who knows what we can expect next? Something new and different, for sure. Either way, God will guide us in faithfulness. God is always preparing us for the future today.

Amen.